Cross-Cultural Wordplay in Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men and The Woman Warrior
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It only seems natural, considering the tortured experience she reports with language, that even in an age noted for the stylistic self-consciousness of its writers, Maxine Hong Kingston should turn out to be one of the most self-reflexive, most language conscious writers. She is preoccupied on almost every page of her books with some little peculiarity of usage or pronunciation, with some little worry about verbal propriety, some discrepancy in tone or texture between different languages. Because it has been uprooted from where it belongs "by history, culture, deeds, association, and affection," Salman Rushdie argues, the "migrant intellect" always tends to "[root] itself in itself" rather than in some objective reality (Homelands 280), to regard the world more as a construct or artifact than as the objective point of reference postulated by critics Wendell Berry or Yvor Winters. Whether it is true of every displaced writer that his main interest is in "the making of a word-world in which his word-self may be at home" (Standing 7), it certainly seems to be the case with Kingston that the emphasis in her books falls primarily on "the process of filtration itself" (Homelands 24), on the cultural or linguistic codes by which experience is mediated in a particular culture. More than any other writer (except perhaps Rushdie himself), Kingston seems to reflect the self-referential literary techniques characteristic of what Linda Hutcheon refers to as "historiographic metafiction" (105-23).

Specifically, it is cultural and linguistic differences that seem to preoccupy Kingston, that she keeps coming back to over and over again in her books. Right at the beginning of China Men, almost in passing, she notes how, as a girl growing up in California, she first started to become conscious of such differences, to notice that "outside the family, things [had] other names" (12). Incidental as this observation seems to be at the time, it introduces a central theme of China Men of Kingston’s other books as well: the difference between her father’s speech and her mother’s (201), between one Chinese regional dialect
and another (102), between the cultural habits of the older generation of Chinese emigrants and the younger (201-07). So important are these differences, Kingston explains, that people literally cannot even see facial expressions that are ethnically different from their own (112), they cannot even hear a language with which they are unfamiliar (93, 205).

Of all these cultural and linguistic differences, of course, it is the one between English and Chinese that concerns Kingston most, a difference she keeps coming back to with the greatest insistence. Most of the time when she pauses to savor a specific word or expression, her purpose is to register a difference in texture or tone between those two languages, to emphasize the richer metaphoric quality of Chinese, or perhaps, to point out the absence in English of all the “crags, windows, or hooks” to be found in Chinese writing; “No pictures. The same a, b, c’s for everything” (247). Being made up of the radicals for field and heart, she explains in one such passage, her father’s name Think Virtue “looks like two valentines” in Chinese—“and is not as cerebral as it appears in English” (29).

One obvious way in which her preoccupation with language differences is reflected in Kingston’s work—and in which the tension produced by such differences is symbolically addressed—is in the wordplay. Perhaps because like them she has also had the experience of coming “unstuck,” of having “floated upwards from history, from memory, from Time” (Shame 91), Kingston seems to have the same fascination for metaphors and puns, to share the same linguistic “double perspective” (Homelands 19), as expatriate writers like Joyce or Nabokov or Rushdie. Among the anecdotes that she relates about her childhood or about her emigrant ancestors, for example, a surprising percentage are like the story about the “Hit-lah” moths (China Men 12) or about Say Goong and the “heavenly chicken” (China Men 165-66), like the one about “Sook-ah” and the bag of sugar (China Men 111) or “the ear into the world” dug by the Hawaiian sugar cane workers (China Men 117): stories that depend, either in Chinese or English, on a simple pun. One of the most striking examples thematically is the identification of her grandfather (“Ah Goong”) with the Chinese “God of War and Literature.” “Guan Goong,” she calls the god in one important passage: “Grandfather Guan, our ancestor of writers and fighters, of actors and gamblers, and avenging executioners who mete our justice” (China Men 149-50). Along with her symbolic merger of Mu Lan and Yueh Fei in The Woman Warrior, this is one of the pivotal points in Kingston’s work in which she identifies her vocation as a writer with that of the woman warrior, where she tries to translate her traditional Chinese cultural heritage into con-
tries to translate her traditional Chinese cultural heritage into contemporary Western terms.

Of particular interest are examples of wordplay such as this one that seem to involve cultural similarities and differences. These seem to bridge the gap separating American and Chinese culture. One thing Kingston is always emphasizing in her books is the incidental parallels or analogies between Chinese and English: expressions like “long-winded” (China Men 193) or “my heart and my liver” (20) or “brain wash” (183), or puns like the one attributed to the Chinese border-guards searching a cartload of potatoes for stowaways, for “eyes among the eyes” (184). It is when it involves coincidences such as these, when it is being used to assimilate the two opposed cultures, that Kingston’s wordplay really begins to get interesting such as when she complains about the figurative “double binds” that China still wraps around her feet (Warrior 48), or when her father refers to the gypsy con-woman who has just swindled him as a “gypsy bag,” as a “smelly pig-bag” or “bag cunt.” In referring to the woman this way, Kingston makes a point of explaining, her father is punning, interculturally, on a “Cantonese word that sounds almost like ‘grandmother, po’”—a word which, while it refers explicitly to “a female monster that looms and sags,” was habitually used in their family to describe two huge unopened bags that the children used to climb on in the storage room, “Black Bag Po and White Bag Po” (China Men 13). Even more interesting thematically, is the passage in which Kingston refers to her family as “eccentric people” because, as she implies, they no longer live in China, in Zhongguo or “the Center” (14-15).

Besides puns such as these that actually play between languages or cultures, there are others which, though restricted only to one language, nevertheless serve to translate from one cultural tradition into the other, reducing the tension separating Kingston’s Chinese cultural heritage from her American one. Most notable in this respect, is the appeal in the last paragraph of “White Tigers,” to what Kingston claims is the authentic Chinese meaning of the word revenge: to the fact that “[t]he idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’” Relying on this etymology, on this ambiguity in the character bao, Kingston proceeds to equate her own role as a writer with that of the traditional Chinese swordswoman, to make the claim that “[t]he reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (Warrior 53). In this way, she is able to adapt a traditional Chinese cultural paradigm to an age in which literal gutting and beheading have become impossible, in which there are no longer any of the magic beads or water gourds or wise old mentors
longer any of the magic beads or water gourds or wise old mentors featured in her mother’s swordswoman stories (49).

Kingston’s preoccupation with language differences hardly seems surprising, of course, when we consider the “bifurcated reality” in which her generation of Chinese-Americans grew up (Ruberstein 166), the “invisible world” which their emigrant forebears had “built around [their] childhoods…” (Warrior 5). Even thirty or forty years after they had arrived in the United States, Kingston tells us, members of the first emigrant generation often had still not adapted to the new cultural conditions. Many of them still thought of China as being their real home, and when it came to bringing up their children, they tended to pass on attitudes and values appropriate more to a Guandong fishing village than to contemporary American life. “Whenever my parents said ‘home,’” Kingston recalls, “they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment…” (99).

In Kingston’s own family, it was her mother who apparently had the hardest time adapting, who went on all her life behaving as though they still lived back in that little Guandong village of theirs, as though that were the reality to which her children would eventually have to adjust. “Not when we were afraid,” Kingston recalls, “but when we were wide awake and lucid, my mother funneled China into our ears: Kwantung Province, New Society Village, the River Kwo which runs past the village” (Warrior 76). The purpose of her mother’s stories, Kingston points out, was always strictly pragmatic: to warn about some danger in life and to help her children “to establish realities” (Warrior 5). The only trouble was that instead of being about the contemporary American culture in which the children were actually growing up, the realities established by her stories were usually those of a remote corner of China which in all likelihood they would never even have the opportunity of visiting, even if they had been forced to memorize, syllable by syllable, the exact directions for getting back there (China Men 183, Warrior 76).

The result of this upbringing for Kingston and her generation was that they grew up feeling like “eccentric people,” like someone who has been displaced from “the Center” (China Men 15). No matter how thoroughly modern they might convince themselves they had become, no matter how well they might have learned to “slop and shuffle” inside of bowing, to “lean crooked on one foot like an informal American punk” (188), in their hearts they still knew that they would always be Chinese, that nowhere else on the face of the earth would they ever feel at home except China. Poking fun at this conviction, Kingston explains in one sarcastic passage how, when her brother was transferred to Taiwan during the Viet Nam War, he shipped out
in the naïve expectation that he was really going back home again, that in Taiwan he “would find like minds, and furniture that always fit his body.” He expected the air and flowers would smell sweeter; the sky would be filled with golden birds; “promises would come true, time move slower, and life last long.” Even his myopia would disappear, according to a Japanese ophthalmology student whom he met on board ship, because in the Far East blackboards and traffic signals were all set with the “naturally faraway focus” of Asian eyes in mind (294-95).

For Kingston’s brother, of course, his tour in Taiwan turns out to be disillusioning. Discovering that he is still a “Ho Chi Kuei,” that he is no nearer to being accepted than he ever was, he decides that Taiwan must not be “the Center” after all, that like the United States, it is a nation merely of “emigrants, rejects, and misfits” (China Men 301): “a decoy China, a facsimile” (China Men 294). What he was supposed to discover, however—what every overseas Chinese is supposed to discover when he sets foot in China for the first time, “even just Hong Kong”—was that his whole life suddenly made sense, that his youth “had been a preparation for this visit…” (China Men 294). He was supposed to discover for the first time what it really means to be Chinese: “what a China Man” he really was. Similarly, Kingston tells us in another connection, if you are “an authentic Chinese,” then you aren’t supposed to have to learn the language or the proverbial stories: you are supposed to know them instinctively “without being taught, [to be] born talking them” (China Men 256).

Brought up as Kingston was, in what Amy Ling describes as a “between-world condition” (153), it was probably inevitable that Kingston would have trouble establishing a coherent cultural identity for herself, that she would find herself bewildered as she read by the difference between the Chinese “I” and the American one, wondering if it was “out of politeness that [the Americans] left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked” (Warrior 166). According to Rushdie, in fact, that is something “exiles or emigrants or expatriates” always share in common: the fact that for them “identity is at once plural and partial” (Homelands 15), that they are “capable only of fractured perceptions” (12). It is precisely for this reason, he maintains, that displaced writers are so well-qualified to speak for the present age, because more thoroughly than most of the rest of us, they have been forced by their cross-cultural experience to accept the contradictory, multifarious nature of contemporary reality, to recognize how limited and arbitrary, how inadequate to experience, any particular language or culture always is (280).
Whether it is really true, as Rushdie claims, that displaced writers are invariably more suspicious than the rest of us of “all total explanations, all systems of thought purporting to be complete” (*Homelands* 280), it certainly seems to be the case for Kingston. If anything, in fact, she seems to be even more skeptical than Rushdie himself regarding our capacity to “perceive things whole” (12), to restore the past “as it actually had been unaffected by the distortions of memory” (10). She seems to be even more conscious than he is of the tentative, unreliable nature of her own narrative, of the need therefore to focus attention self-reflexively on “the process of filtration itself” (24). It is as one means of accomplishing this task, in fact, that I think her cross-cultural wordplay must ultimately be understood: as one means among others by which the “categorical rigidity” of language can be dramatized and overcome, by which a text can self-consciously refer to (and therefore begin to transcend) its own formal, linguistic, and cultural limitations.

It is characteristic of a Kingston story, of course, that it always incorporates an awareness of its own formal limitations, that it never makes the mistake described by Frank Kermode of falsifying life “with patterns too neat, too inclusive…” (130). Indeed, Kingston is always at pains to remind us that, far from being definitive or complete or exhaustive, her account of events is never anything more than “one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions” (*Homelands* 10). The minute she finishes the story of Moon Orchid and her trip to Los Angeles to confront her errant husband, for example, she turns around and begins to deconstruct it, admitting (among other things) that for the pivotal scene in the story she was not even present when it occurred, that she has had to rely for her information entirely on the account her brother later gave to one of their sisters. To emphasize how little she really does know about what went on in Los Angeles, how much of what she has been telling us is a matter rather of inference or conjecture than any real knowledge, Kingston actually reproduces, word for word, the conversation on which the story was originally based, speculating as she does so on whether, “because of its bareness, not twisted into designs,” her brother’s “version” of the events might not have been superior to hers after all, more accurate or honest or straightforward (*Warrior* 163).

This practice of offering alternative versions for every story and alternative explanations for every set of events is one that seems to appeal particularly to Kingston as a means of emphasizing the inadequacy to human experience of any one language, any one moral or cultural or political point of view. Having given one explanation of how her father first arrived in the United States, for example, by hav-
ing himself nailed into a crate and smuggled onto a ship in Havana (China Men 49-53), she proceeds at once to dismiss that account ("Of course, my father could not have come that way. He came a legal way...") and to offer a completely different one, about the weeks spent waiting in Angel island barracks, the grueling interrogations by "Immigration Demons" (53-60). Which of the accounts is really the truth we are never told for sure. On the contrary, there are suggestions elsewhere in China Men that perhaps neither of them is true, that Kingston's father might actually have been born in San Francisco (151, 237) and that everything we have been told about him in "The Father from China" might be a fabrication: no Imperial Examinations, no "crying bride," no village school-teaching job.

That basically is what every Kingston story turns out to be like: tentative, experimental, trying out first one version of events and then another, first one cultural point of view and then another. In the "No Name Woman," for instance, Kingston is at first adamant that her aunt could not possibly have been "the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex," that if she committed adultery, it could only have been out of blind, unreflective obedience, because as a traditional Chinese woman she had been conditioned all her life always to do exactly as she was told (Warrior 6-7). Suddenly, a page or two later, we find her considering precisely the possibility that she has just dismissed: that, possessed by the same "rare urge west" as her men folk, her aunt might indeed have done what she did out of love, for no other reason that because "she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulders and straight at the hips."

Not that she was likely to have been "a wild woman," of course, or "free with sex": "I don't know any women like that," Kingston concedes, "or men either" (Warrior 8). But even if some possibilities might have to be dismissed because they are inconsistent with common sense, there is still no limit to the number of possible versions, to the ways in which, depending on one's particular moral or political or cultural perspective, the story of the No Name Woman might conceivably be rewritten. Similarly, of course, there are no a priori limits to the aunt's behavior or motivation: no way of saying, just because she was Chinese or a woman, that certain feelings or behavior would have been impossible for her. As a human being, endowed with imagination and moral freedom, it is always conceivable, as Kingston puts it, that she could have "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" that she could have made the decision suddenly to "let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years [to go] toward what persisted" (Warrior 8).
Besides Kingston’s own versions of events, there are also suggestions in many of her stories of older, more traditional versions. In the “No Name Woman” or “White Tigers,” for example, it is easy to figure out how different in social or moral implication on her own version of the story must be from the one originally passed on to her by her mother. In other stories, including those of Tang Ao and Lo Bun Sun and Mu Lan, the “original” version is so well-known that her readers can be depended on to supply it for themselves, to appreciate the ways in which, for her own particular moral or political purposes, Kingston has subtly shifted the original focus. In “White Tigers,” vestiges of the traditional Mu Lan story have actually been preserved, incongruously, in Kingston’s own “updated” version, suggesting that, rather than being definitive or authoritative, that version is simply another step in an on-going process of cultural revision and reconsideration. The awareness of conflicting versions is reflected even more clearly in “The Ghostmate.” Beginning with the stipulation that its hero “may have passed the Imperial Examinations...or failed,” that he “may not have been a student at all but a farmer at market overnight—or an artisan...” (China Men 74), that story is written almost entirely in the conditional mood: one explanation being offered of what probably would have happened if the hero was a student, another if he was a cobbler or a potter or tailor (76-78).

In many of her stories, of course, there is a good practical explanation for the variety of conflicting versions: the fact that it was impossible in many cases to determine for sure what actually had happened. Not only did Kingston have to rely in almost every story she tells on a second- (or third- or fourth-) hand account for her information—on what her brother told her sister about Moon Orchid in L.A. or what her grandfather told her mother about the building of the railroads (China Men 127)—she also had to be content in most of them with the instinctual secrecy and taciturnity of the older generation of Chinese emigrants: with their reluctance ever to divulge their true names (Warrior 5, China Men 242) or to sign “anything unnecessary” (Warrior 167) or to disclose precisely where or when they were actually born (China Men 15) or—in her mother’s case—to tell any but “the useful parts” of a story (Warrior 6). “Don’t tell,” Kingston’s parents were always cautioning her as a child, although in most cases she had no more idea than anybody else what it was she wasn’t supposed to tell (Warrior 183).

Even for the different religious festivals and ceremonies, there was rarely any effort by the adults to explain what was going on. Her mother would simply hand them “strips of white paper the size of dollar bills” and instruct them to throw them out the car window
(China Men 186). Or having set the table with chop sticks and wine cups “too close together for us to sit at,” she “would pour Seagram’s 7 into the cups and, after a while, pour it back into the bottle again. Never explaining.” “If we had to depend on being told,” Kingston observes of Chinese cultural traditions, “we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (Warrior 185).

It was precisely because of this “perplexing network of linguistic prohibitions” (Eakin 269), Kingston tells us, that she first began to make up hypotheses of her own for what was going on, for why they were scattering the strips of white paper from the car windows or why they were stopping on the way to the cemetery at all the places their Uncle Kau had liked to visit when he was alive (China Men 186-87). In her father’s case, she is especially insistent about this connection, introducing her hypothetical account of his life only after she has made it clear what a morose and uncommunicative man he always was, how frustrated she felt as a girl because he would never tell them anything about his earlier life: “No stories. No past. No China” (China Men 14). “I’ll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words,” she proposes, “and you can tell me that I’m mistaken. You’ll have speak up with the real stories if I’ve got you wrong” (China Men 15). It is this lack of information that Kingston is emphasizing when she offers a second or third conflicting version of one of her stories. Indeed, many of her stories are written in direct response to a ban of silence, such as the one imposed by her family on the No Name Woman (Warrior 16) or the one imposed by their white overseers on the sugar cane workers in Hawaii (China Men 100-04).

This practice of providing alternative versions of a story is only one of the methods employed by Kingston for rupturing the cultural or artistic unity of her work, for establishing what Kenneth Burke refers to as “perspective by incongruity” (Permanence 89-96). Kingston is also a master of the technique Rushdie advocates most highly for coping with the cultural contradictions of the modern world, that is mingling fantasy and naturalism in one’s work, of juxtaposing traditional and modern cultural elements (Homelands 19).

One obvious use of this technique by Kingston is in the way she alternates in her books between more or less realistic modern stories and non-realistic traditional ones; for example the way she follows a story about emigrant sugar-cane workers in Hawaii with one describing the nine circles of Taoist hell (China Men 199-21) or one of her mother’s stories about legendary Chinese swordswomen with an autobiographical account of her own protest of traditional Chinese sexist attitudes (45-53). Even within the same story, however, there
are often suggestions of a conflicting moral or cultural point of view, reminders that, regardless of how complete or definitive a story might appear to be, there are always vast areas of human experience that have been left completely out of account. In “White Tigers” and “No Name Woman,” for example, there are occasional parenthetical comments that one can imagine coming only from the mouth of “an informal American punk,” which in one brief sentence manage to suggest a world or attitudes and values totally antithetical to the traditional village culture in which the story is set. A good example of this “double repertoire” (Couser 230) is the remark that occurs after the description of the No Name Woman’s excruciating depilatory exercises: the cryptic hope “that the man [she] loved appreciated a smooth brow, that he wasn’t just a tits-and-ass man” (Warrior 9).

Even closer to Rushdie’s technique of casually introducing demons or angels into a novel about contemporary Pakistan or “Proper London,” however, is the variation on this method that occurs when an element of traditional Chinese culture is abruptly introduced into an incongruous Western setting, such as when Kingston’s mother begins dragging buckets filled with sand into the mortuary where Kau Goong is laid out and lighting incense (China Men 195), or when the ghost of Mad Sao’s mother appears suddenly in the kitchen of his modern American ranch house and begins upbraiding him for his failures of filial responsibility (China Men 176).

Though it certainly serves the purpose suggested by Rushdie of building “a new, ‘modern’ world out of an old, legend-haunted civilization” (Homelands 19), one thing that this technique also seems to make clear in Kingston’s books is the inadequacy of traditional Chinese attitudes and values to the realities of contemporary American life. This inadequacy can be seen most clearly perhaps in the behavior of Kingston’s mother, who, fifteen or twenty years after arriving in the United States, was still capable of admonishing her daughter to behave herself sexually because, as her version of the No Name Woman was intended to demonstrate, “the villagers are watchful” (Warrior 5). Based on a mythical Chinese precedent with little obvious relevance to the actual situation in question, her advice to her sister about her approaching confrontation with her husband seems particularly ill-conceived, misleading, and disastrous in its consequences. “You are the Empress of the East,” she tells her, “and the Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth’s Emperor in the Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor” (143). The inadequacy of Brave Orchid’s cultural assumptions, of her entire moral worldview, becomes increasingly obvious as the story unfolds. “Those are
"your children," she advises her sister at one point, referring to the offspring of her husband’s second marriage: “[They] will go to their true mother—you...” (Warrior 125). She urges her sister to march boldly into her husband’s house in suburban Los Angeles and demand what in traditional Chinese society would have been her rightful place. “You must be Little Wife,” she is to inform her American counterpart: “I am Big Wife” (145). Of all the characters in Kingston’s books, the only ones that seem more cut off from reality than Brave Orchid does in this scene are the certifiable madmen and women, the Uncle Buns and I Fus and Crazy Marys.

It is in order to correct for this inadequacy in her mother’s worldview, of course, in order to reduce the tension in her life between her Chinese cultural heritage and the American reality in which she was forced to live her life, that Kingston first undertook the task of revising—or “revoicing”7—her mother’s paradigmatic moral fables: that she set about transforming the No Name Woman from a negative into a positive role model, for example, or transforming Fa Mu Lan from a paragon of traditional filial piety into an exemplary modern woman able to combine career goals with childrearing and marriage (Warrior 48).

If there is an emphasis in Kingston’s work on the inadequacy of her Chinese cultural heritage, however, that is only because she suffered more severely from those inadequacies as a girl growing up, particularly from the sexual bias of traditional Chinese culture. The fact is that no culture can ever be entirely adequate to “the complexity, the cross-graining, of real experience” (Studying, 35) and that when Kingston introduces chocolate chip cookies into a traditional martial arts story, when she introduces a bucket of incense into a modern American mortuary or a “hungry ghost” into the kitchen of a suburban ranch house, she is exposing the limitations and abuses not only of traditional Chinese values but of American ones as well. She is subjecting both cultures to the process referred to by Bakhtin as “objectification”: the process of highlighting one culture’s limitations (“the peculiarities or its world view, its specific linguistic habitus”) by exposing it to the incongruous perspective of a second one, transforming it from “the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality” (Bakhtin 61).

Particularly in the story “White Tigers,” Kingston makes it clear that the vengeance she craves as a literary woman warrior is not only for the sexist abuse she suffered as a girl from the Chinese emigrant community but also for the racial bigotry she has had to endure from
white American society. “The reporting is the vengeance,” she writes, playing on the two meanings of the Chinese word bao—“not the be-heading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words—‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words too—that they do not fit on my skin” (Warrior 53). If stories like “No Name Woman” or “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” emphasize the silence imposed by traditional patriarchal societies on women, the emphasis in other stories, including particularly “The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains,” is on the silence imposed in American culture on minority ethnic groups. The symbolic vengeance that Kingston wreaks in “White Tigers” encompasses both forms of repression.

One indication that it is culture in general whose limitations and abuses Kingston is interested in exposing is the fact that, in addition to the stories that she translates from Chinese into Western cultural terms, she also takes the opposite approach at times of translating a well-known Western work into Chinese: of transforming Robinson Crusoe, for example, into a shipwrecked Chinese sailor living off tofu and bean sauce and trying to figure out how to replace “the Four Valuable Things: by utilizing rice stalks and goat hairs” (China Men 227-29). The effect of refracting a story in this way through the prism of an alien culture is not simply to defamiliarize the particular story itself but also, more generally, to jolt its readers loose from their habitual cultural moorings, to remind them by means of the incongruous cross-cultural substitutions of just how arbitrary and restrictive any specific system of cultural “filtration” must inevitably be. Comparable “headstandings” occur in Rushdie’s novels when he shifts suddenly from the Christian to the Hegiran calendar (Shame 7) or when he introduces us to a culture that reads from the right to the left, that locates “Hell above, Paradise below” (Shame 17).

The conflict between American and Chinese cultural values isn’t the only one that Kingston is troubled by, of course, or that she takes steps in her books to resolve. On the contrary, considerably more critical attention has been paid to her handling of the male-female dichotomy. What is important from my point of view, however, is that, in all the examples of “destructive binary logic” (Schueller 428) that she addresses, she makes use of essentially the same technique as she does in dealing with the East-West antithesis—the same techniques of symbolic merger and transformation that Kenneth Burke spent his career trying to identify and promote (Grammar xix).

For example, just as she translates back and forth between Chinese and English cultural terms as a method of subverting that opposition, so likewise does she rely primarily on “translation” as a means of overcoming the male-female dichotomy, on stories about characters
who, to one extent or another, "[cross] over the boundary into the other gender" (Rabine 475). Of all the characters in Kingston who have been "borne-across or trans-lated" in this way, the story of Tang Ao is perhaps the best illustration of how an incongruous cross-sexual shift can be used to provide what Kenneth Burke refers to as "perspective by incongruity" (Permanence 69-96), to dramatize a social attitude or practice which, confined to its customary usage, might scarcely be noticed at all. Only when it is a man suddenly who is having his ears pierced and his eyebrows plucked, when it is a man being oggled at the banquet table because of his "dainty feet" and swaying hips (China Men 3-5), do we see such practices for the indignities that they obviously are.

Not only does Kingston contrive by means of this and other (more subtle) "border crossings" to reduce the tensions inherent in the male-female social dichotomy, she also manages to remind us, yet again, of "the complexity, the cross-graining, of real experience" and of the inadequacy as a means of coping with that complexity of any antithesis as rigid and blunt as that between the masculine and the feminine. For in imposing on "the heavy, deep-rooted women" the primary responsibility for preserving "the past against the flood, safe for returning" (Warrior 8), that antithesis has the effect of denying to them most of the impulses and desires, most of the sources of human satisfaction and accomplishment, traditionally permitted to men. It is in her attacks on "crusted distinctions" like this one, it seems to me, that the promise of Kingston’s cross-cultural wordplay is most fully realized, that the inadequacy of language to human experience is most effectively demonstrated.

Notes

1. I realize that there is plenty of evidence in Kingston’s books to contradict the view of Brave Orchid presented here, that she is portrayed in many stories as independent, resilient, capable of heroic acts of adaptation and adjustment. I am also aware that in Chinese she is connected by her name (Lan, or Orchid) directly with the woman warrior Mu Lan. As an explanation for the incongruity, I agree with Leslie Rabine that this is yet another example of Kingston’s deliberately undermining any specific version of reality, including her own (486).

2. According to Leslie Rabine, the brother follows a pattern common to most of the emigrant Chinese men in Kingston’s works, that of turning gradually away from China and towards America as their home (480).

3. In Elaine Kim’s view, it is characteristic of almost all American-born Chinese that they suffer from “dualities and contradictions” of this sort (207).

4. The phrase actually used by Kenneth Burke is “the false rigidity of concepts” (Attitudes 312).
5. The most obvious example is the fact that, though it is contradicted by just about everything else in her story, Kingston still has Mu Lan volunteer for the army ostensibly in order to save her father from having to serve (Warrior 34).
6. See note 1 for my “discounting” of this particular “version” of Brave Orchid.
7. According to Thomas Couer, “Kingston appropriates and revoices the tales an texts of her girlhood in a way that challenges or deauthorizes the discourse of the cultures...that threatened to condemn her to silence or marginality” (231).
8. As Iosbel Grundy has pointed out, “The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun” is only one of many “translations” in Kingston’s work from Western into Eastern cultural terms, the other most striking example being the translation of King Midas (or his queen) into an ancient Chinese king “who whispers into a hole in the ground the secret that his son has cat’s ears...” (123).

Works Cited