Cultural Politics and Chinese-American Female Subjectivity: Rethinking Kingston's *Woman Warrior*

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Asian American cultural studies as part of US minority studies has witnessed an increasing interest in questioning the formation of the ethnic canon and critiquing institutional functions which some specific Asian American literary texts have performed in constituting the curriculum of US literary and cultural studies. In her critique of the canon and Asian American literature, Lisa Lowe argues that Asian American literary expression cannot be adequately evaluated in canonical terms because of its unequal material condition of production, and its contradictions in the canonical sense should be deployed as moments to think about alternative subject formations, cultural identities, and critical positions.1 In a postmodernist sense, Lowe suggests the necessity of developing a new critical framework for Asian American cultural analyses, as well as the importance of intervening in the aesthetics and ideologies of the dominant canon from that vantage point. Meanwhile, in her case study of what she calls the "Amy Tan phenomenon,"2 Sau-ling Wong examines the circumstances which have conditioned and produced Tan's popularity and considers her success as compliance with the changing ideologies and demands of the dominant culture. Arguing that Tan mediates and repackages the Orient for a white readership, Wong calls for a new Asian American canon which should be independent of Orientalist interests and concerns.

As the interest in Asian American canon evolves, critical attention has also turned towards Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, a text which, since its publication in 1976, has not only been the focus of a major controversy and extensive scholarship in Asian American studies, but also earned credit in the academy as
“the most widely taught book by a living writer in US colleges and universities" (Talbot, qtd. in Li, 8). In a recent analysis of *The Woman Warrior*, Sheryl Mylan observes that Kingston unwittingly constructs an Orientalist framework in her book to differentiate herself from her mother and Chinese culture and, in the process, duplicates the ideologies and problematics of the US dominant culture. By the same token, in reconsidering Kingston’s work, David Li suggests that *The Woman Warrior* has served as a means of contesting power between the dominant culture and the ethnic community; its value lies precisely in foregrounding the “representational issues that have accompanied the growth of Asian American creative and critical production” (Imagining 62).

The tendency to reconsider Kingston’s work has also extended to critical studies of Kingston. Tomo Hattori argues that feminist psychoanalytical interpretations of *The Woman Warrior*, as exemplified by Leslie Rabine’s reading of Kingston, are usually preoccupied with an Orientalist unconsciousness which privileges Western cultural traditions and historical developments as the standard, and construes Asian and Asian American social realities only as a psycholinguistic function “within a Western process of psychic, cultural, and no doubt moral redemption” (133). Such an interpretative approach, Hattori concludes, demonstrates the “appropriations of minority culture by dominant US cultural theory” and the failures of critical theory in considering minority discourses in their own terms and contexts (133).

The critique of Orientalist disposition both inside and outside of the text of *The Woman Warrior* has revived the decade-long controversy over Kingston, which was first formulated along the lines of autobiographical accuracy, cultural authenticity, and ethnic representativeness. Often loosely defined as cultural nationalists, Jeffery Chan, Benjamin Tong, and Frank Chin, among others, accused Kingston of distorting Asian American reality on the one hand, and catering to the demand of the dominant culture for exoticism and stereotypes on the other. Chin not only continues to caricature Kingston’s work as “the fake,” but also challenges her very use of the autobiographical form, arguing that autobiography with its basis in the Western metaphysical tradition and the Christian confession would never capture the sensibility or the imagination of Chinese America.
In response, in her early essay, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Kingston shifts the blame to the misappropriation of her book by white reviewers who "call their ignorance our inscrutability," and defends her position by shifting her emphasis on her artistic individuality (56). She contends that her work has many layers and should be read as such without being subjected to any singular vision or dimension of Asian America. Kingston’s articulation of artistic individuality and community plurality has been recognized and supported by both Euro-American and Asian American feminist critics, who consequently construe the controversy per se as a symptom of misogyny in Asian American cultural production.\(^5\)

Given such a background, recent scholarship attempts to straighten out some twists in Kingston’s work and in feminist criticism of her work, and revisits some of the questions which underlie Asian American cultural studies: How should we read an Asian American text without pitting "the woman warrior" against "the Chinaman Pacific?" \(^6\) How should we reconsider the relationship between critical theory and Asian American texts? \(^7\)

In this essay, I want to examine *The Woman Warrior* in terms of a gap between Kingston’s work and feminist interpretations of the work. First, in what political and cultural context has feminist discourse situated Kingston’s work? Second, as she tries to negotiate several discourses simultaneously in her work, which vary from Western autobiography, to a Chinese-American tradition of assimilation narratives, and to Chinese patriarchal tradition, what kind of critique does Kingston produce in relation to all these discourses? Does she effect a critique of patriarchal values and institutions such as family honor and the marriage bond? Third, when she considers Chinese-American culture as an extension of Chinese patriarchal tradition in the US context, how does Kingston approach the institutional racism imposed upon Chinese-American men and women, particularly working-class immigrants, who have been caught in the hard living and working conditions in the ethnic enclave of Chinatown, and whose access to the American Dream has been denied because of their language barrier and their inadequate training for the work force?

In investigating these questions, I argue that Kingston virtually constructs the woman warrior as an antithesis to "the no-name
woman” and, in the process, pits the more successful woman against the less fortunate one in precisely the same patriarchal terms against which she has tried to rebel. In other words, King- ston never critiques patriarchal values or institutional racism. The consequences of this failure are misconceptions about Chinese and Chinese-Americans and produces what Sau-ling Wong calls an Orientalist effect. Moreover, the failure to critique patriarchal values and institutional racism also foregrounds the question of how to consider what Caren Kaplan calls collaboration and collectivity among women across social, racial, and national boundaries, as well as what Chandra Talpade Mohanty defines as the specific historical and cultural context of a third world text?

I. Western Autobiography and Feminist Theory

In his critique of autobiography and literary history, Philippe Lejeune argues that our desire for permanence and autonomy has often been invested and fulfilled in constructing the literary canon, which privileges prototypical texts such as Saint Augustine’s confession in religious terms and Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s discourse on individual subjective experience. In rationalizing and formalizing its norms within prototypical texts, the autobiographical canon tends to exclude and dissociate literary texts from their social and cultural contexts and has consequently functioned as a social institution at different historical moments. Lejeune concludes that any negotiation with such an institutional function would produce a new sense of literary history.

Indeed, in the past few decades, the cultural landscape of the United States has witnessed an emergence of a variety of women’s life writings which have destabilized Western autobiography and its universal subject and revised the autobiographical canon by creating the possibility of multiple critical positions. In her critical analysis of “The Universal Subject, Female Embodiment, and the Consolidation of Autobiography,” Sidonie Smith argues that Western autobiography has served to “power and define centers, margins, boundaries, and grounds of action in the West” (18) and assigned embodiment to the status of the Other which marks women as an “encumbered self, identified almost entirely by the social roles concomitant with her biological destiny” (12-13). Because the discourse of embodiment has mostly been identified with the
excluded and the colorful and since it has the potential of challenging the subject of Western autobiography, Smith suggests that women should deploy embodiment as a trope and a means of “talking back” to the dominant discourse (20).

Caren Kaplan questions the claim of Western autobiography to the universal subject and explores the possibility of alternative canons in American cultural studies which would “include African American slave narratives, diaries, captivity narratives, abolitionist and suffragist personal records, labor activists’ accounts, oral histories of immigration and exile, and modernist fiction” (115). The importance of developing these alternative canons, Kaplan argues, lies in their resistance to the autobiographical canon on the one hand, and, on the other hand, in their potentiality for forming transnational affiliations among women across different social, racial, and national boundaries. To elaborate on her notion of transnational affiliations among women, Kaplan introduces the two key terms of “home” and “coalition.” While Western autobiography conventionally gives priority to the literary construction of a “home” and invests in its place a narrative space of familiarity which would link the individual and the universal, the alternative canons, Kaplan suggests, would redefine the relationships between the personal and the social, between individual and community. Instead of reconstructing “home,” alternative canons are situated politically in a space between “home” and “coalition” and, as a result, operate in a condition of crisis which would call for powerful alliances among the socially marginal groups at different political and historical junctures: “The link between individual and community forged in the reading and writing of coalition politics deconstructs the individualism of autobiography’s Western legacy and casts the writing and reading of out-law genres as a mode of cultural survival” (132).

In emphasizing the importance of collaboration and collectivity among women across social and cultural boundaries, Kaplan utilizes the notion of “transnational” as a means to transform cultural production from the traditional individualized and aestheticized procedures to collaborative and historicized coalitions, which would not only respond to the condition of women in the current global economy, but also gesture to a promise of inclusion of women from different backgrounds. However, since such coali-
tions are based on their resistance to patriarchal power, questions are raised about the discursive forms of patriarchal power in the transnational moment: how are women from different backgrounds affected differently by different patriarchal powers? To put it simply, how do women from different backgrounds articulate their differences in transnational feminist coalitions?

As feminist discourses seek to establish collaboration and collectivity among women across different boundaries, feminist critics tend to read Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* mostly in terms of mother-daughter relationship and matrilineage, Chinese-American women’s literary tradition, and patriarchal oppression of women in China and Chinese-America. In analyzing the mother-daughter relationship, critics discuss both the commonality and difference between the immigrant mother and assimilated daughter as informing Chinese-American female subjectivity and explore the importance of the interrelationship in challenging individualism in Western autobiography. In her essay on *The Woman Warrior*, Wendy Ho argues that “the psychic bonding between mother and daughter through gender, socialization as women, and talk-story traditions is used to work through and express the new psychic landscape of the Chinese American daughter-writer in America”(225). Noting that the mother and daughter influence each other reciprocally and that such an interrelationship defines Chinese-American women’s experience in Kingston’s work, Ho recapitulates the political significance of the narrator’s articulation of her own identity: “As she frees her own voice, she also frees the oppressed women who have haunted and still haunt her” (237).

Invested in the interrelationship between Chinese and Chinese-American women, Kingston’s sense of female subjectivity indeed points to an alternative to the version of individualism in Western autobiography. However, Kingston never challenges the value of individualism per se and actually deploys the discourse of individualism as a means to fight against Chinese patriarchal tradition and to articulate her identity in American culture and society. For example, when stressing the fact that “I” is a capital and “you” a lower-case in English, Kingston highlights the different linguistic formation and cultural signification of “I” in Chinese and speculates that the awkward construction of the Chinese character loses its function in designating any individuality: “I stared at that mid-
dle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it” (193). In fact, as Chen Chua notes, “to say ‘I’ in Chinese is to imply the assertion that one is a human being with a sword, hence a swordsman or swordswoman” (70). Kingston’s appropriation of Chinese words at a superficial level and her approach to individualism indicate the fact that there are different and contradictory discourses at work simultaneously in Kingston’s work: challenge and subscription to Western individualism, resistance to and interpellation by patriarchal values, and desire for cultural assimilation.

Such contradictions in Kingston’s work have often been integrated uncritically into a Chinese women’s tradition by feminist critics. In “The Tradition of Chinese American Women’s Life Stories,” Shirley Geok-lin Lim tries to justify Kingston’s position by suggesting that the author does not have any intention of documenting Chinese-American social experience: “the blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, history and myth, personal story and public document, poetry and prose, casts doubt rightfully on attempts to present it as accurate Chinese American social history” (253). Instead, Kingston, Lim argues, aims to rewrite Chinese-American feminist subjectivity in a way that would transcend Chinese patriarchal tradition: “What marks it as feminist is its persistent constructions and reproductions of female identity, the continuous namings of female presences, characters, heroines, and figures” (261). Lim compares Kingston’s The Woman Warrior with Jade Snow Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter, an autobiographical work which had been acclaimed as the most popular Chinese-American woman’s autobiography before Kingston’s. Lim concludes that Kingston “has not an autobiographical story to tell but a racial and gendered consciousness to intimate and create” (264).

Taking for granted that there already exists a feminist tradition within Chinese-American women’s life writing, Lim fails to examine Kingston’s work in terms of what Foucault calls the mode of existence of the discourse (“Author” 120). Though Wong’s Fifth Chinese Daughter serves as what Lim calls “the mother text to Woman Warrior” (“Tradition” 256), Lim never questions how this specific text functioned in the dominant culture and interacted with the dominant discourse of assimilation when it was first published.
in 1952. Targeting a predominantly white readership, Wong wrote in the third person as a modest Chinese way to highlight her personal struggle between her Chinese silence and her American individuality, between her desire to free herself from Chinese patriarchal restrictions and her effort to prove to her father that her assimilation would enable her to achieve and accomplish much in mainstream culture and society. Wong celebrates individualism as a means of triumph over the limitation of Chinese patriarchal culture and considers her every success, from starting her own pottery business in San Francisco’s Chinatown to giving speeches in Asia on American democracy sponsored by the State Department, as fulfilling her American Dream. In this sense, Wong situates Chinese-American women’s struggle for equality in the process of assimilation, and dismisses any implication of institutional racism in gender oppression of women of color in the US. Ironically, it is Wong’s sociology teacher, a white woman, who reminds her of the pitfall of assimilation and the importance of fighting for racial equality in the United States: “When an individual from a minority group personally succeeds, he too often turns his back on his own group” (164).

In this context, Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* shares the same concern about assimilation and addresses the same questions of individualism in Chinese and Chinese-American women’s traditions. But unlike Wong, Kingston resorts to Chinese cultural tradition for inspiration and discovers the woman warrior as a role model who not only shares a sense of individuality but also competes well with her male counterparts in the military. While it is important to create a speaking subject who can avoid the tragedy of the “no-name woman” and break the silence imposed by Chinese patriarchal tradition, the nature of silence should equally be investigated. David Li observes that silence is not necessarily a Chinese cultural feature in Kingston’s context, but it may be “the aftermath of the exclusion law and the fever of the Red Scare that silenced Chinese Americans” (59).

Kingston’s work has been most commonly read as an exposure of misogyny in Chinese culture and an effort to articulate a distinctive feminist consciousness. For that reason, the “no-name woman” story in her work has frequently been selected in prestigious and influential literary anthologies such as *The Norton Anthology of*
Literature by Women, and discussed as an example of patriarchal oppression of women. While canonization of Kingston’s work promotes collaboration and collectivity in Kaplan’s sense and enhances the visibility of Asian American women writers in American culture and society, interpretation of the story and its context remains a problem. First, since most uninformed readers assume that the story is an authentic representation of Chinese patriarchal culture and society, they never question the mediation by the Chinese-American author or investigate the specific historical and cultural context of the “no-name woman” story. In other words, they often construe the story in terms of the American cultural imagination of China and the Chinese people and thus confirm the US Orientalist construction of China as misogynist and irrational. Second, as readers construct the story exclusively as a Chinese one, they conflate Kingston’s Chinese-American sensibility with the Chinese one and cannot recognize the importance of critiquing US institutional racism. Finally, when privileged as the first-world readers investigating a third-world tragic story, most readers do not realize that both Western imperialism and Chinese feudalism have exploited and oppressed Chinese women. It is precisely in this transnational sense that I will reconsider Kingston’s appropriation of the stories of the “no-name woman” and the woman warrior.

II. Re-situating the Tragedy of the “No-Name Woman”

In the first story of the “no name woman,” Kingston, as the narrator, learns from her mother the tragedy of her aunt who committed suicide after having an affair with her fellow villager and giving birth to an illicit child. As a disgrace to the family, her aunt has since been purposely ignored and erased from the memory of the family members. Kingston’s mother, in using the tragedy as a means to communicate with her adolescent daughter, explains the implication of the story, situates it in a Chinese patriarchal cultural context, and explores its relevance to the daughter: “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (5).

In response to her mother’s message, Kingston tries to reconstruct her aunt’s story in her own terms and to understand the pa-
triarchal rationale behind the tragedy. She first speculates upon what adultery could really mean to her aunt as a Chinese woman, who might have been caught in a cultural dilemma of whether to violate the patriarchal law of chastity or to submit to the patriarchal value of women’s obedience to men. She restructures the story in the Chinese context: “My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family” (7). Such a speculation also enables the narrator to piece together the incomplete story and to construe it as a possible rape.

However, Kingston does not situate the tragedy of the no-name woman or the consequent attack upon the family by the villagers in any historical and cultural context but mystifies these stories and leaves them to the imagination and speculation of an uninformed white readership, who, she knows, would never be able to figure out the cultural twists behind. First, Kingston takes for granted that her aunt as a Chinese peasant woman could not develop any romantic relationship in defiance of the Chinese feudal tradition. In making such a general assumption, Kingston plays a double role here. On the one hand, to an uninformed white readership, Kingston serves as an insider informant telling an authentic story about her own ancestral culture and society. On the other hand, to the Chinese and Chinese-American readership whom she does not target, Kingston assumes the position of a privileged first-world woman in investigating and speculating upon the tragedy of a third-world subaltern who cannot represent herself and has to be represented by the first-world feminist writer. Such a double positioning enables the narrator to identify with the predominant white readership who are constructed as secular, liberated, and privileged in having complete control over their own lives. As Chandra Mohanty puts it, “only from the vantage point of the West is it possible to define the ‘third world’ as underdeveloped and economically dependent” (74). Second, Kingston does not provide any rationale behind the attack of the villagers upon the family. In constructing Chinese peasants as mischievous, inhuman, and irrational, Kingston ignores an opportunity to educate the white readers about an
already misconceived China; instead she fuels Orientalist discourses with a confirmation of their stereotypes.

Most importantly, Kingston fails to explore the tragedy of the no-name woman in relation to modern Chinese history and to US history of exclusion of Chinese laborers and their family members. In *Asian Americans*, historian Sucheng Chan argues that Asian international emigration at the turn of the century was a consequence of Western industrialization and imperialism, which aimed at exploiting human and natural resources worldwide and expanding their markets domestically and internationally. To have access to natural resources and markets in China, Great Britain fought two notorious opium wars against China, and in the first war (1839-42) imposed upon the Manchu government “The Treaty of Nanjing,” which forced China to open its five major ports to foreign commerce, reduce and limit its customs tariff dramatically, pay an indemnity of twenty-one million silver dollars, cede the island of Hong Kong, and grant Western nations extraterritoriality which would make Westerners immune to Chinese law (Chan 7). Soon other Western powers and Japan followed suit and imposed so many unequal treaties upon China that the Manchu government at the turn of the century became literally bankrupt and the people burdened with unbearably taxes.

Considered in such broader political and economic contexts, the villagers’ attack upon the family could be construed as a symptom of the restlessness of a feudal and colonial society which would readily direct its own energy of confusion and frustration towards anything accessible, rather than as a premeditated moment of Chinese patriarchal practice or a ritualistic pattern practiced at the village level in China. Of course, the victim in this case remains the same peasant woman. Furthermore, Kingston as a Chinese-American does not examine the no-name woman’s tragedy in relation to the US history of exclusion, which not only prevented Chinese laborers from leaving and returning to the US freely, but also forbade Chinese women from coming and joining their laborer husbands in the US. “Under such strict conditions,” observes Chan in her study, “the number of Chinese females entering the country each year during the six decades when Chinese exclusion was in effect numbered in the hundreds rather than the thousands” (106). Comparing the settlement history and patterns of the Chinese la-
borders with those of their European counterparts, Chan concludes that exclusion was imposed at a point which "truncated the natural development of the community" when the male laborers could have brought their wives over from China and raised their families in more permanent locations rather than drifting along the ethnic enclaves of Chinatowns across the country.

In this context, the no-name woman's tragedy could be considered a direct result of Chinese feudalism and an indirect result of Western colonialism and US institutional racism. Since her husband left for the US right after their wedding in 1924, the narrator's aunt could not follow him to the US because of various immigration restrictions, and her husband would not be able to return to China for exactly the same immigration and financial reasons. The aunt must live like a widow, and if she had indicated her dissatisfaction to her parents-in-law, that might explain why she is living with her own parents rather than in-laws according to the Chinese custom: "But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me. Perhaps they had thrown her out to deflect the avengers" (8). What Kingston calls a mysterious act might be the prelude to the aunt's love affair with her fellow villager.

Although construed as a passive victim in Kingston's story, the no-name woman demonstrated her own sense of courage, honor, and rebelliousness. Refusing to reveal the name of the villager and to collaborate with the patriarchal rule in the village, the aunt took the blame entirely on herself: "She kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator's name she gave silent birth" (13). In protecting the man, the aunt actually protested her status as a living widow who could not enjoy her family life. When she took the baby with her to the well, the aunt showed a moment of love and hate for the male villager, caring and cruelty towards her baby, forgiveness and revenge on her family: "Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys" (18). By plunging into the family well, the disgraced woman showed her strong but silent protest against oppressive forces and
made sure that her tragic story would become part of the histories of the family and the village, as well as of Chinese-America.

III. Reconstructing the Woman Warrior Story

In “White Tigers,” Kingston searches for solutions to the “no-name woman” tragedy and finds in the woman warrior story an inspiration for Chinese-American women. As a folk story which has circulated in China for almost fifteen hundred years, The Ballad of Mulan describes the titular heroine who, as the oldest daughter in the family, takes the place of her drafted old father and disguises herself as a man to serve in the imperial army and to fight the invading Huns. After ten years of distinguished service and hundreds of ruthless battles, Mulan returns to her home village and resumes her normal life of peace as a woman.11

In rewriting the woman warrior story in her own terms, Kingston combines stories from different sources in Chinese history and culture. She constructs the woman warrior as one who both fulfills her filial obligations to her family and village and cherishes her own dream of love and the world of success. In her analysis of the sources of Kingston’s work, Sau-ling Wong locates three major traditions on which the story of white tigers is based: the popular Chinese martial-arts novels and their equivalents in the Kung Fu cinema; the well-known legend of Yu Fei, a general in Song Dynasty who asks his mother to tattoo his back with the words of loyalty and patriotism; and finally the stories of peasant uprisings in classical novels such as Romance of Three Kingdoms and Outlaws of the Marsh (28-32). To clarify possible confusion about Kingston’s deployment of Chinese cultural sources, Wong concludes that Kingston wrote the story as a fantasy which would aim at building an interrelationship between Chinese and Chinese-American women across time and space (“Cultural” 32).

Indeed, Kingston first defines Chinese women’s heroism in terms of martial arts and claims that crane boxing was invented by women and for women: “Recognizing the presence of great power, she asked the spirit of the white crane if it would teach her to fight. It answered with a cry that white crane boxers imitate today. Later the bird returned as an old man, and he guided her boxing for many years. Thus she gave the world a new martial art” (23). Interwoven into this story are elements of individualism which reflect the per-
sona’s own sense of love and marriage: “I would have for a new husband my own playmate, dear since childhood, who loved me so much he was to become a spirit bridegroom for my sake. We will be so happy when I came back to the valley, healthy and strong and not a ghost” (37). To stretch out her own dream of being a wife and mother, Kingston also romanticizes the woman warrior’s legend and juxtaposes the position of warrior with that of wife: “I hid from battle only once, when I gave birth to our baby. In dark and silver dream I had seen him falling from sky, each night closer to the earth, his soul a star. Just before the labor began, the last star rays sank into my belly” (47).

Though she fleshes out the ballad by borrowing details from Chinese sources and developing a personal dimension of the story, Kingston never challenges the patriarchal values of bringing honor to the family or committing oneself to the cause of the emperor. In other words, Kingston’s rendition of the story never changes the nature of the legend in that her story works within the same logic of the patriarchal discourse of filial piety:

My mother and father and the entire clan would be living happily on the money I had sent them. My parents had bought their coffins. They would sacrifice a pig to the gods that I had returned. From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality. (54)

In celebrating the woman warrior as a success in patriarchal terms, Kingston literally pits the woman warrior against the “no-name woman,” who is a failure in Chinese society precisely because she steps out of the roles of a daughter and a wife defined by the Confucian tradition and seeks love that would challenge the patriarchal rule of chastity and loyalty.

In using patriarchal discourse to describe a female subject, Kingston’s writing strategy fails to produce the effect of what Michel Foucault calls “the reverse discourse,” a discourse which tries to demand its legitimacy by deploying the very same vocabulary and categories under which it was previously disqualified (Sexuality 101). The pitfall in Foucault’s argument is that he overemphasizes the dialectical function of the multiple discursive elements in discourse and thus downplays the unequal balance of power among discourses in a given social and cultural context. In other words,
the dominant and marginal discourses are often related but not necessarily always exchangeable in a dialectical sense. In this light, when she accepts the "no-name woman" as a failure and the woman warrior as a success in patriarchal terms, Kingston cannot effect any critique of Chinese patriarchal values but reproduces their logic in rewriting the female subject. In pairing these two stories of women in terms of success and failure, Kingston sets up a problematic pattern in her work which never questions the implication of patriarchal discourses or discusses sexism and racism as both intersecting and equally oppressive of Chinese-American women in the American context. In the later pairs of stories of Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid, of the narrator herself and the pink-faced girl, Kingston sends out a confusing message about how to rewrite Chinese-American female subjectivity.

IV. Chinese Immigrant Women’s Life Stories

Following the pattern of the "no-name woman" versus the woman warrior, Kingston divides Chinese and Chinese-American women into the successful and unsuccessful, the active and passive, the articulate and inarticulate. Considering the "no-name woman" as a failure, Kingston describes her mother Brave Orchid as a new woman warrior who tries to succeed by becoming independent and by eliminating signs of weakness that are conventionally associated with women, or rather, Chinese women.

Kingston begins by describing Brave Orchid’s glorious past in China. Since she understands the importance of a Western education in partially feudal and partially colonial China, Brave Orchid invests in a vocational school education and studies the science of gynecology. Her ambition pays off when she returns to her home village triumphantly as a doctor and relives the dream of the woman warrior: “She was welcomed with garlands and cymbals the way people welcome the ‘barefoot doctors’ today. But the Communists wear a blue plainness dotted with one red Mao button. My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair” (90).

However, when she immigrates to the United States, Brave Orchid finds that the whole social and cultural scenario is different, and her careful calculation in China no longer counts in the American context. Giving up her medical practice without any choice or
question, she readily redefines her position as her husband's helper in the family laundry business and as a homemaker responsible for raising all six children. Brave Orchid maintains her illusion of honor and glory by working hard and showing an aggressive attitude: "I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. I was on my feet the moment the babies were out" (122). Heavy workloads and harsh working conditions in Chinese laundries in the early twentieth century are well documented in sociologist Paul Siu's *The Chinese Laundryman*. Siu not only analyzes the history, structure, and function of the laundry business in the Chinese-American experience, but also records the inhuman working conditions of and hostile environment toward Chinese laundries in the US. The typical workload for the laundry worker was six and a half days a week, thirteen to fifteen hours a day, as recorded in the case study of the Sam Moy Laundry in Chicago. Business started at 8:00 a.m. but did not close until 11:30 p.m., a time when the workers had supper: "After supper, they all sat out in the yard to cool off before they went to bed. But they did not sleep until 1:00 a.m. It was a heavy meal, a big bowl of soup and large dishes of meat and vegetables. The shopping was done in Chinatown Sunday afternoon" (74).

Caught in the reality of laundry business, Brave Orchid is totally consumed by hard work: "I can't stop working. When I stop working, I hurt. My head, my back, my legs hurt. I get dizzy. I can't stop" (124). Brave Orchid not only works under an instinct for what Sau-ling Wong defines as "necessity," a survival strategy originating from her native land where "scarcity of resources has given rise to a rigid, family-centered social structure" ("Necessity" 5), but also hopes to keep the sense of honor and pride which the story of the woman warrior promotes. She continues to send money to relatives in China and endeavors to maintain the impression among her relatives and villagers that the family is doing well in its business and in the US. Working in the enclave of Chinatown and observing Chinese cultural tradition, Brave Orchid never raises any question about Chinese-American reality: Why were Chinese-American businesses separated from the mainstream economy? Why didn't working class immigrant women like herself get any adequate training for the work force?
In *Strangers from a Different Shore*, historian Ronald Takaki notes: “The Chinese were located in a different sector of the labor market from whites. By 1920, 58 percent of the Chinese were in services, most of them in restaurant and laundry work, compared to only 5 percent for native whites and 10 percent for foreign whites” (240) Like most other Chinese immigrants who lack English and sufficient training for the work force, Brave Orchid cannot practice medicine in the United States but falls into the category of unskillful and incompetent immigrant women workers of color. Inside Chinatown, Brave Orchid has been confined to the heavy work in laundry business; outside Chinatown, her opportunity has equally been limited to low-paying farm labor, and she has to compete with other immigrants of color: “She dyed her hair so that the farmers would hire her. She would walk to Skid Row and stand in line with the hobos, the winos, the junkies, and the Mexicans until the farm buses came and the farmers picked out the workers they wanted” (121). While displaying humor in retelling her mother’s stories of China and of the United States, Kingston never explores the issue of institutional racism in the US context but only briefly mentions incidents that might have racial overtones and implications. Brave Orchid sometimes cannot help complaining, “I have worked too much. Human beings don’t work like this in China” (123).

Although hardly successful herself in the United States, Brave Orchid tries to impose her own standard of honor and success upon her sister Moon Orchid, who has been first disoriented in colonial Hong Kong and then displaced in American culture and society when persuaded to immigrate to the United States. Brave Orchid wants Moon Orchid to confront her bigamist husband and to avenge herself on him for the shame she has suffered for thirty years. Because Moon Orchid is unprepared either intellectually or physically for the moment, such a confrontation proves disastrous in that it exposes the weaknesses of both sisters.

Although the meeting means a fight for her rights and a chance to break her silence of thirty years, the bigamist’s question, “what do you want?”, immediately silences Moon Orchid, bringing her back into her previous mentality and situation. Her only protest is recapitulated in the weak but crucial question: “how about me?”. This is a question rehearsed for thirty years and finally delivered to
the right person. But the effort of becoming a speaking subject is immediately interrupted, and compromised by a reconfirmation of the former deal: “You go live with your daughter. I’ll mail you the money I’ve always sent you” (177).

Unable to consider the situation outside of Chinese patriarchal discourse, Brave Orchid finally demands that Moon Orchid’s bigamist husband buy them a decent meal as compensation for their long trip from San Francisco to Los Angeles, rather than apologize to her sister, who has lived like a widow through her entire marriage of thirty years. This meal confirms Moon Orchid as a subaltern who is neither prepared to fight for justice in the United States, nor able to endure the inhuman working conditions in a Chinese-American laundry. Moon Orchid restages the no-name woman tragedy in the American context: she dies in a California state mental asylum, an institution which removes her from the family’s awareness and experience and relieves her of her miseries and sufferings, in an ironic sense.

From the tragedy of Moon Orchid, the narrator as the second-generation Chinese-American learns the importance of breaking silence and asserting herself as a speaking subject. In practicing her own understanding of a speaking and assertive subject, the narrator targets an inarticulate pink-cheeked Chinese-American girl who never expresses herself in public and always needs protection from her older sister. In forcing the little girl to speak, the narrator repeats exactly the logic that Brave Orchid has imposed on Moon Orchid.

When running into the little girl in the school restroom by herself, the narrator uses force to create a speaking subject: “I could work her face around like dough. She stood still, and I did not want to look at her face anymore; I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough” (204). In fighting silence and weakness as the only enemy, the narrator exposes her own desire and anxiety, and confirms the social pressure of assimilation at her specific historic juncture. The little girl in this situation becomes what Elaine Kim calls “her anti-self, an alter-ego, another Chinese American girl who represents the fragility and softness of the victim as opposed to the survivor” (153). In suggesting what would become of a Chinese-American woman in an American context
and how a Chinese-American woman should cope with American culture and society, Kingston as the narrator does not simply teach the little girl of the social reality in the United States but also validates the logic of the woman warrior in her own version in the sense that women should achieve what the patriarchal society values as important and successful. In other words, being a cheerleader and getting dates in US culture and society is an equivalent to bringing honor and glory to one’s family and village in Chinese culture and society.

V. Towards the Possibility of Rewriting a Transnational Feminist Subject?

In the last chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston rewrites the story of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess who was born in A.D. 175 and abducted by Huns in Northern China. Kingston redefines cultural appropriation as a mode of articulating one’s own experience through the language and thought of another culture. In stating that “it translated well,” Kingston tries to justify her strategy in writing the story of exile and women and rewriting the no-name woman’s tragedy and the woman warrior’s legend.

However, the translation of Ts’ai Yen’s sensibility, which emphasizes her Han ethnicity and her final return to the Central Kingdom, proves inadequate to express Kingston’s own interest and experience as a second-generation Chinese-American who does not want to return to China but lives the American Dream in the US. In fact, Kingston’s translation of Chinese culture directs the attention of uninformed readers from Chinese-America to China and, in that sense, promotes misconception and reconfirms Orientalist stereotypes about Chinese-Americans living as foreigners in the US. As Sau-ling Wong puts it, “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” (“Cultural” 35).

In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz after the publication of The Woman Warrior, Kingston promotes different reading strategies by re-situating her work in relation to mainstream American literature and suggests her efforts at rewriting American literature from the perspective of an Asian American woman:
I directly continue Williams Carlos Williams’ *In the American Grain*. He stopped in 1860 and I picked it up in 1860 and carried it forward. When I was writing “No Name Woman,” I was thinking about Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter* as a discussion of the Puritan part of America, and of China, and a woman’s place.

(“Eccentric” 182)

Alluding to the issues of women and history, Kingston concludes that she “was creating something new” and it was “the American language pushed further” (182).

In comparing “the no-name woman” to the protagonist Hester Prynne of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter* and in emphasizing a new dimension she has created for the American language, Kingston attempts to deflect criticism from those who have accused her of situating Asian American experience outside of an American cultural context and thus perpetuating the stereotypes of Asian Americans as foreigners and outsiders. Furthermore, when identifying the “no-name woman” with Hester Prynne, Kingston also appeals to feminist discourse of collaboration and collectivity among women and invites a reading of her work as a cultural autobiography of Chinese and Chinese-American women. She thus expresses her rhetorical situation: “Now, of course, I expected *The Woman Warrior* to be read from the women’s lib angle and the Third World angle, the *Roots* angle; but it is up to the writer to transcend trendy categories” (“Mis-readings 55). Like her work in general, Kingston’s message here is complicated: on the one hand, she begs for a feminist reading of her work in order to free herself from criticism by Asian American cultural nationalists; on the other hand, she equally recognizes that her book has different discourses at work and may not fit into any specific critical category.

To cultivate different reading strategies, Kingston also identifies herself with other women authors of color in the US when describing her personal friendships with Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko. She discusses their uniqueness in background and experience: “Toni’s and Leslie’s and my aliveness must come from our senses of a connection with other people who have a community and a tribe. We are living life in a more dangerous place. We do not live in new subdivisions without ceremony and memory” (“Eccentric” 184).
Kingston’s efforts to identify herself with feminist discourses and women authors of color have been immediately acknowledged by both Euro-American and Asian American feminist critics. Sidonie Smith, for example, highly commends Kingston’s work: “it exemplifies the potential for works from the marginalization to challenge the ideology of individualism and with it the ideology of gender” ("Filiation" 150). Similarly, Shirley Lim compares the Kingston controversy to that surrounding Zora Neale Hurston whose novel Their Eyes Were Watching God was accused of selling out by some prominent African American male authors, such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, but was later defended by women writers from Toni Morrison to Alice Walker. Kingston’s case has been made to appear analogous to that of Hurston in terms of both subject matter and mode of presentation.

In conclusion, I want to suggest that Kingston does make a great effort to rewrite Chinese-American female subjectivity in The Woman Warrior, but such an effort has been limited by her own vision, which is embedded in contradictory discourses of Western autobiography, US Orientalism on China and Chinese-America, and Chinese patriarchal tradition. In that sense, Kingston’s work actually calls for a new feminist reading and writing strategy which would not only respond to the transnational condition of women in Kaplan’s sense of collaboration and collectiveness but also consider the specific historical and cultural contexts of minority and third-world women’s experiences.

Notes

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1. Lowe argues for the intervening function of Asian American literature: “its aesthetic is not defined by sublimation but rather by contradiction, such that discontent, nonequivalence, and irresolution call into question the project of ab-
stracting the aesthetic as a separate domain of unification and recollection. It is a literature that, if subjected to a canonical function, dialectically returns a critique of that function” (54).

2. Wong analyzes the popularity of Amy Tan’s works as a cultural phenomenon and compares it to other authors before Tan: “The fortunes of once-popular, now overlooked cultural interpreters in Chinese American literary history, such as Lin Yutang, and Jade Snow Wong, suggest that cultural mediation of the Orient for the ‘mainstream’ readership requires continual repackaging to remain in sync with changing times and resultant shifts in ideological needs” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 202).

3. Lim observes, “The first oppositional move, towards cultural nationalism, interrogates Euro-American constructions of Asian American identity as stereotypes, and the silence or assimilationist ideology of earlier writers as complicit with white racist hegemony; it seeks instead to reconstitute an ideally or more authentic Asian American history and literary production” (“Gender Transformations” 100-101).

4. Chin not only challenges Kingston’s sense of Chinese-American identity and community, but also problematizes her use of the autobiographical form as a symptom of subjection to the Western desire. He claims that Kingston manifests the effect of assimilation and westernization, and misinforms her readers about gender and identity configuration in Chinese-American culture: “She takes Fa Mulan, turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universal-ity” (27).

5. Lim takes for granted that Kingston’s work is a feminist text and situates it in the history of Chinese women’s life stories: “In the tradition of Chinese American life stories, Fifth Chinese Daughter would be considered the mother text to The Woman Warrior” (“Tradition” 256).

6. Cheung surveys and analyzes what she calls “the ‘feminist’ and ‘heroic’ impulses which have invigorated Chinese American literature but at the same time divided its authors and critics” (235).

7. Palumbo-Liu notes a discrepancy between critical theory and its reading of minority texts: “Theory may prove its analytical strength by excavating heretofore hidden ‘truths’ of an ethnic literary text, and ethnic literary critics may champion the legitimacy of ethnic literature by finding in it the confirmation of theory, but both may do so precisely by ignoring significant contradictions that inhere in these texts” (161).

8. See note 2. Wong coins the expression “Orientalist effect” to suggest how some Asian American authors try to create a re-assuring affinity between their work and American pre-conceptions of what the Orient should be.

9. Kaplan argues that feminist writing technologies can transform cultural production from individualized and aestheticized procedures to collaborative, historicized transnational coalitions.

10. Mohanty warns us of the danger of employing the notion of the “third world woman” as a singular monolithic subject and calls attention to the necessity of situating the “third world woman” in the specific cultural and historical context.
11. See the untranslated Chinese text *Sources of Ancient Poetry (Gu Shi Yuan: Bai Hua Yue Fu Juan).* Ed. Mei Wen and Yi Cai.
12. See note 7.

**Works Cited**


Hunt, Linda. “I Could Not Figure Out What Was My Village’: Gender Vs. Ethnicity in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*.” *MELUS* 12.3 (1985): 5-12.


