Engendering Genre: Gender and Nationalism in China Men and The Woman Warrior

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China Men, Maxine Hong Kingston’s book on the history of Chinese-Americans, followed close on the heels of the publication of her much acclaimed autobiography The Woman Warrior. Kingston has said that she first envisioned the two volumes as one book; yet if we view these books as companion works, then it is curious how differently they represent what might be called the Chinese-American experience (Talbot 12). While the first, most obvious divide may be at the level of gender, as evidenced by the two books’ titles, another equally important division takes place at the level of genre. When Kingston allies generic distinctions, i.e., history and autobiography, with particular genders she both explores and exposes that underlying alliance, raising questions about the role genre plays in defining both gender roles and Chinese-American identity. At the same time, she raises questions about the meaning of the public and private in relationship to history and autobiography and how notions of public and private give those genres a gendered status. By locating gender in Kingston’s manipulations of genre and mythology and looking at the gendered categorization of generic forms, we can also locate the place of Chinese-American identity in her conception of gender and genre.

Much of the power of these two works lies in Kingston’s attempt to intervene in and undermine a “master narrative” of history and identity in America. Although Kingston does skillfully parody and disrupt accepted notions of history and autobiography and destabilize those categories with her introductions of gender and race, her ability to escape the boundaries of genre remains in question.

Perhaps the question that must be asked is: How complete is the connection between genre and the ideology that gave rise to it? Does Kingston’s repetition of these genres, albeit in altered forms, merely contribute to reinforcing those forms or, as Judith Butler claims, can there be “repetition with a difference?” In other words, as Gayatri Spivak might ask, “Can the subaltern speak?” Kingston never fully
escapes genre because she must write within and against the constraints of generic forms in order to comment upon them and manipulate them. If she abandons the forms completely, the cultural resonances so crucial to her disruption of hegemonic conceptions of Chinese-American identity, gender and history, would be lost, but her adherence to those forms raises questions about her ability to fully subvert or escape the ideologies that inform those genres.

Whether Kingston speaks without being consumed by the "epistemic violence" of her writing tools, namely language and genre, is my central question. My search is not for Kingston's "authentic" voice hidden within these forms, but an examination of how she engages with and uses these forms to her own ends. By examining Kingston's deconstruction of the opposition between fictional and non-fictional forms, such as autobiography and history, her use of mythology to explore issues of national identity, and her manipulations of genre and mythology through the introduction of race and gender, I hope to delineate constraints of genre and the meaning of the subversion of these forms at the intersection of gender and Chinese-American identity.

Looking at the opposition between these two books' genres proves to be no easy matter, as Kingston rarely lets any clear opposition stand. Instead, what was a matter of black and white, autobiography and historiography, slips away into a hazy area where generic boundaries are difficult to define. Although both books blur the boundaries between the two genres, they do not find a common third term, and instead they present examples of two very different approaches to both history and autobiography.¹

These unstable oppositions are apparent even before one cracks the binding of either book. Although both books now can be found in the fiction or Asian American literature section, the generic distinctions given to them by their publisher betray their earlier distinctions. The Woman Warrior falls under the rubric of autobiography while China Men, a work of history, is categorized as nonfiction/literature. But the books do not remain within the two distinct genres of autobiography and history, much less maintain their mutual exclusivity. Perhaps some of the loudest uproar over The Woman Warrior centered upon Kingston's blurring of the boundary between non-fictional autobiography and a fictional retelling of her life story. She insists on an eccentric voice, telling her memoirs from a highly personal point of view and making no attempt to "objectively" review her subjective, skewed vision of her world. China Men also participates in this transgression of generic boundaries, for this history makes room for fables, myths, family lore and personal accounts as well as official
laws and documents. In both cases, Kingston questions and undermines the status of “truth” and “facts” by questioning the concepts of universality and objectivity.

The problem of generic distinctions appears endemic to Asian American literature, since “ethnic histories” almost always threaten the boundaries between genres, because the term is traditionally seen as an oxymoron. In some senses, all minority writing is considered to be always/already autobiographical. Trinh T. Minh-ha reminds us that, “the minor-ity’s voice is always personal; that of the major-ity, always impersonal” (28; original emphasis). Asian American writing, like much minority writing, is perceived as autobiographical in the sense that writing by Asian Americans is “about” their experience as Asian Americans in a way that Anglo-American writing, with its assumption of universality, is never “about” being white. Thus Michael Fisher, despite his otherwise careful reading of several Asian American novels, claims to research “the range or historical trajectory of autobiographical writing within each ethnicity” while unselfconsciously citing clearly fictional, non-autobiographical works by Frank Chin and Shawn Wong (202). The history of the dominant, unlike that of the minority, is perceived to be universal or unmarked. An ethnic history, following this logic, is a private, personalized history than cannot transcend to the level of the general and the public.

By blurring the distinction between autobiography and history, Kingston at first appears to be repeating and encouraging a common misreading of writings by Asian Americans as always autobiographical. Donald Goellnicht begins his article on China Men saying, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s second (auto)biographical fiction, China Men…” (191), although this book has few “(auto)biographical” markers, (for instance, Kingston rarely appears as a character in the novel, and the stories she tells more closely resemble short stories or anecdotes than biographies). Still, this categorization of China Men as (auto)biographical rather than historical seems, in fact, to be encouraged by the way Kingston crosses genres in this book. Instead of rushing to shore up the distinctions in Asian American writing between autobiography, fiction and history, Kingston chooses a different strategy. In China Men rather than attempting to rid Chinese-American history of the “taint” of the personal or autobiographical, Kingston revises notions of what makes an experience historical, by asking by what standards we decide what can enter into history and the public realm.2

Kingston contrasts the “private” (read: non-representative and therefore non-historical) stories of the “Grandfathers” to the official public (read: objective and historical) documents of the time. For ex-
ample, Kingston follows the story of the “Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains” with a recitation of the restrictive laws against Asian Americans that basically legalized racism. The chapter, which simply recounts the laws, appears midway through the book, yet, as Goellnicht says, “This centric authority of American law is subverted and contested by the ‘eccentric’ or marginal, but richly imaginative stories of China Men that surround it” (197). Her juxtaposition of the two versions of history points out the inaccessibility of that official history in comparison with the “Grandfathers’” story. The narrated, and perhaps fictional, stories of the “Grandfathers” allow a more meaningful view of the history of Chinese-Americans and provide a space in which to write the history that had been left out of the exclusionary laws. This use of official documents also emphasizes the fact that the documents are only available in an already interpreted form, and they do not provide a transparent look into the past. They frame the narrative of the Chinese in America by the stories they leave out, stories such as Kingston’s. Although the documents masquerade as objective, they are not necessarily more true or real than the history we receive through the Grandfathers’ story.

China Men at first appears to be a private family history populated by the narrator’s grandfathers, but soon it becomes clear that she has more grandfathers than is biologically possible. While the “Grandfathers” are individual people with their own personalities and personal histories, they also are a type or a generic forefather whose story is representative of many Chinese-American immigrants. Kingston gestures towards a history of Chinese-Americans in America that is beyond her family history, yet the quirkiness of each individual characterization prevents the creation of a single individual who represents the norm of Chinese-American experience. One cannot gauge the authenticity of one’s family by measuring how closely one’s history conforms to the stories. Kingston tries to create a new definition of history for Chinese-Americans by foregrounding the individuality of the stories, yet the book also documents their role in history as Chinese-Americans.

Homi Bhabha has asked “Whether the emergence of a national perspective—of an elite or subaltern nature—within a culture of social contestation, can ever articulate its ‘representative’ authority in that fullness of narrative time” (295). This difficulty in both being within a “culture of contestation” and trying to speak with authority is reflected in China Men by the placement of the “Grandfathers” as both the object and subject of a national identity. While they may be acting as subjects by expanding the definitions of Americaness, they also act as objects of that nationalistic discourse so that they may speak as
Americans, thus gaining a “representative authority.” Their history cannot be separated from the “public” national history of America. In this way, Kingston simultaneously claims a “representative authority” for her history in the service of creating a space for Chinese-Americans in Anglo-American history while remaining “within a culture of social contestation” by refusing to fall back upon notions of authenticity and origin. The experiences of the book’s characters do not stand apart from history, just as what we know as history is caught up in social, cultural, and “private” perceptions. This book asks us to question what facts we deem real and what experiences are “historical” and, in so doing, makes explicit the connection between individual identity and history without reverting to the paradigm of history as a point of origin.

The attack on Kingston over the autobiographical status of her book The Woman Warrior is well known. Frank Chin, perhaps Kingston’s most well known critic, describes Kingston’s transgressions by saying, “[Her] elaboration of this version of history, in both autobiography and autobiographical fiction, is simply a device for destroying history and literature,” because Kingston does not “accurately” portray the experience and history of Chinese-Americans (3). To her critics, Kingston violates the commitment to “factuality” that the name autobiography implies and, in doing so, confronts two differing traditions of autobiography. She challenges, on the one hand, the non-fiction appellation of autobiography, and, on the other hand, the anthropological information retrieval concept of ethnic autobiography.

The anxiety over Kingston’s book centers upon the role of and expectations for ethnic autobiography. Kingston writes against a tradition of Chinese-American autobiography that gave an ethnographic treatment of Chinese-American society. As Sau-ling Wong says, with a great deal of irony, in “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour,” “Ideally, an ethnic autobiography should also be a history in microcosm of the community, especially of its suffering, struggles, and triumphs” (Multicultural 258). Autobiography has a long history in Chinese-American writing, beginning with early “conversion” narratives prompted by Christian missionaries, and many of the better selling, earlier works do fit into Wong’s pattern. In her article about the reception of her book, Kingston notes the tendency of critics to review her book on the basis of how good a “tourguide” she proves to be, judging her by how well she recreates the “mystery” of Chinatown and how “authentically” she displays its exotica. The concern over Kingston’s book relies on a notion of ethnic autobiography as a learning tool for the projected white audience.
would seem to be a failure if ethnic autobiography is to be read as a type of ethnography, but her success lies in a reworking of this tradition.

This, then, is the tradition within and against which Kingston is writing. Yet instead of a total rejection of the ethnographic impulse in ethnic autobiography, *The Woman Warrior* does, in many ways, uphold the concept of ethnic autobiography as an exploration of what it means to be a Chinese-American. At the same time, Kingston still insists upon the singularity of her view and does not attempt to speak for all Chinese-Americans nor represent them completely. In the book she admits that she cannot speak for Chinese-Americans because she is not even sure what exactly is the Chinese-American experience.

In the book, the narrator’s isolation from other members of her community does not allow her to hear the stories of others to provide a scale by which to measure her own experience. The narrator tells us that she could never tell if what she was experiencing was typical of Chinese-Americans or simply a family eccentricity, so that when she leaves her hometown she must read anthropology books about China to look for hints about her life. Her alienation is so complete that she must read books written by outsiders to find out about herself and try to find a self that she can recognize. This ironic situation prevents the protagonist from taking a position of absolute or sole authority on Chinese-Americans or acting as a source of information retrieval, since she learns about Chinatown from books instead of the “ultimate” referent of experience. She cannot act as the symbol or representative of Chinese-Americans for the outsider who wants to learn about the “true” culture of a Chinatown since her experience is so personalized. Kingston must expand the boundaries of ethnic autobiography in order to explore her identity as a Chinese-American and create an alternative authority rather than formulating a complete definition of that identity for the imagined outsider reader.

Kingston also plays with other conventions of autobiography, conventions that are not limited to ethnic autobiography. As I mentioned earlier, autobiography is often assumed to be factual and empirically true. In the book, the clear distinctions between fiction and non-fiction are not made so; what the protagonist recounts as her subjective experience may or may not exist in an “objective” account of her life. Yet the truth of her life is more clearly represented through the fictions she tells since she lives in a world where her own reality is bound up with half truths and fictions. In a telling scene in *China Men*, Kingston and her sister remember the same event completely differently, and they never find out which version was true, yet for
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each of them her own memory was true. The narrator has had to create her own reality and says, “She [her mother] tested our strength to establish realities” (Woman 5). When the protagonist narrates her life, she must include the non-truths that make up her reality; sticking to empirical truth would falsify her experience.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the convention of the singular individual in autobiography is also dismantled, and the author plays with the assumption of the centrality of the individual in autobiography. The typical American autobiography, with *Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin* as its archetypal example, emphasizes the theme of individual struggle and triumph, often in the face of community resistance. *The Woman Warrior* concerns itself less with the individual character of the narrator than with her place within a social structure. In fact, the book’s protagonist never actually gets named, questioning the immediate identification of the protagonist with the author and allowing the protagonist to participate in the narrative as a character rather than claiming the ultimate authority of authorship.

The story does not function as a tale of individualism. Rather it details her search for her place within the community and her family and the meaning of her identity as a Chinese-American. The story of the protagonist is intertwined with her relationship with her mother, and *The Woman Warrior* tells the story of the protagonist’s mother and is as much a story of her relationship to her mother as it is “about” the protagonist. Kingston, by emphasizing the social aspect of an individual identity, broadens the scope of autobiography to include the constant negotiations with different social structures that make up the shifting ground of ethnicity. As Michael Fischer tells us, “Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic…” (195). Ethnicity, in *The Woman Warrior*, cannot be understood as an individualist experience but has meaning only within a social context. It resides within a social dynamic. The book’s protagonist says, “[We] have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits into solid America” (Woman 6). Ethnicity, and by extension Kingston’s identity, is constantly being created through the competing discourses of the emigrant’s “invisible world” and “solid America.”

A close examination of the function of mythology in *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* makes clear the breakdown of generic distinctions and the performativity of ethnicity in those books. While Kingston’s use of mythology has raised objections from other members of the Asian American community, her manipulations, or distortions, of those myths enable her to question the basic assumptions of
the generic forms of history and autobiography. The use of myth helps her to find a way to write Chinese-Americans into American history and to search for her own Chinese-American identity.

As I mentioned earlier, Kingston undermines traditional notions of history by questioning the meaning of objectivity and neutrality in the narrative of history. By inserting Chinese-American mythology and Chinese-American people into Anglo-American history, Kingston does not merely augment the existing history. She also exposes the mythological roots of Anglo-American history, putting its claim to objectivity and truth into jeopardy. Richard Slotkin calls myth "the primary language of historical memory" which functions to "assign ideological meaning to that history" (70). Yet myth, like history, is a symbolic production that acts like a transcendent truth by effacing its ideological use value. In Slotkin's elegant aphorism, "[Myth] transforms history into nature" (80). Myth is the narrative that gives meaning to history, that allows history to function as truth rather than as just another story.

In her story in China Men entitled "The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun," an auditory pun on the story of Robinson Crusoe, Kingston exposes the ideological underpinning of the traditional story. Like Robinson, Lo Bun Sun is a shipwrecked pirate, and the story is a familiar one, but the use of a Chinese name is different enough to defamiliarize the story and cast it in a new light. The story depends upon the assumption that the sailor is white, so that it can plug into the myth of the Great White Adventurer civilizing the "native." However, when the two characters are both "natives," the naturalness given to the story by the power of myth is lost, and the story appears both ludicrous and brutal. Kingston's re-visioning of the Robinson Crusoe story demonstrates the ability of myth to naturalize and normalize to such an extent that the gaps and fissures in a story that should mark the fault lines of the "master narrative" are glossed over. The gaps that mark where certain histories were left out disappear behind the familiar myths of Anglo-American history.

Kingston reveals and reopens those gaps by reinstating the Chinese-Americans who were erased from Anglo-American history. She does not reject the notion of a Chinese-American history along with all history but emphasizes its constructed nature. In fact, she uses the American mythology of the West to help her write Chinese-Americans into the history of the frontier. Linda Hutcheon characterizes the postmodern relationship to the use value of the past when she says, "It puts into question, at the same time it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real" (92). After showing how mythology enters into history, Kingston does not abandon the project
of history but, instead, attempts to create a new mythology for Chinese-American history. Kingston depicts a certain “heroic dominance” in terms of the land. The first job of the character Ah Goong is to fell a redwood and, in the end, he conquers the mountains through which he has to tunnel. Kingston firmly places the Chinese in the American landscape and enumerates the ways in which he has participated in forming and creating that landscape in order to further her goal of “claiming America” and creating a Chinese-American history and identity. It is crucial to note that their part in the building of America is couched in legendary and epic terms, unlike the “factual” empirical tone of traditional history books. Kingston exploits rather than naturalizes the power of mythology in her histories.

The Woman Warrior describes a very different relationship between the female protagonist and mythology than is found in China Men. The former focuses much more narrowly upon Chinese myth rather than exposing the mythology of Anglo-American history. After the short first chapter, Chinese myth forms a frame around the account of a Chinese-American girl’s childhood in a small town Chinatown. The mythical figure of Fa Mu Lan, “the girl who took her father’s place in battle,” haunts the book and her childhood (Woman 24). Like the myths of China Men, the story of Fa Mu Lan offers a chance of escape, not the “China men’s” escape from historical obscurity but an escape from the anonymity that is her gender’s fate. The protagonist remembers her mother’s stories and says, “She said I would grow up to be a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (Woman 24).

Much of the controversy surrounding The Woman Warrior revolves around the issue of Kingston’s revision of classical Chinese myth, yet this very revision is the means by which she can write her own history. Through her rewriting of Chinese myth she can include her own voice within a Chinese—and, since she learned these stories from her mother in America, a Chinese-American—tradition. The protagonist of The Woman Warrior inserts herself into the stories of Chinese myth and, thereby, participates in the narrative of the community. She rewrites Fa Mu Lan in such a way that Fa Mu Lan speaks with her voice, and she can identify and recognize herself in the stories of Chinese America and claim a Chinese-American identity. Unfortunately, she is left with the problem of getting others in the community to recognize her version of the myth and confirm her voice and place within the community, a difficulty I will discuss later.

Thus, in the words of Homi Bhabha, Kingston “acknowledges the status of national culture—and the people—as a contentious, perfor-
mative space of the perplexity of living in the midst of the pedagogical representation of the fullness of life” (307). Kingston negotiates between a fixed, complete, “pedagogical” definition of Chinese-American culture and her lived experience of national identity, an identity that is continually being defined, redefined and “performed.” The main character now has a history and a legacy that gives her authority to act as more than a “wife and slave,” but, by not effacing her participation in the act of creating that history, she avoids the trap of origins and the trap of biological determinism. So while the main character still “could not figure out what my village was,” she was able to carve out a space for herself through the act of narrative by making her “village” the world of Chinese myth (Woman 54). Unlike the work done with myth in China Men, the protagonist’s involvement with myths does not rework Anglo-American history, but, instead tries to find her a place within her family and community not only as an individual but also as a Chinese-American.

The Woman Warrior and China Men both challenge assumptions about the nature of history and myth in the Anglo-American tradition, yet their similarities cause their differences to stand out in bold relief. China Men subverts notions of a seamless, “factual” history, untouched by either mythology or particularity, in an effort to write Chinese-Americans back into the history of America. The Woman Warrior examines and undermines similar concepts, yet the protagonist never succeeds in fully reconciling her gender and her identity as a Chinese-American and never enters into “history” like the “Grandfathers” in China Men. Thus, her ability to speak as a national remains threatened, since nationalism is not a quantifiable trait but exists in a fluid relationship to society, and her identity as a Chinese-American is tenuous as long as her place within the community does not allow her view to be as “universal” as any other voice. Her struggle has a different location from the struggle in China Men. The two books explore different boundaries between myth and history and the public and the private, highlighting the difficulty of finding an identity that encompasses both nation and gender.

In Sau-Ling Wong’s discussion of the intersection of nationalism and gender for Chinese-Americans, she coins the term “ethnicizing gender,” contrasting it to gendering ethnicity. The assignation of gendered characteristics according to ethnicity is a familiar trope, but Wong proposes a flip side to this analysis. Instead, the enactment of gender leads to an ethnic labeling. In America a strict gender demarcation of Asian ethnicities as feminine, as opposed to the more masculine “Americans,” operates to bind notions of gender to ethnicity and nationalism. In Wong’s example of Chinese-American immi-
grant writing she says, “Thus the characters’ actions, depicted along a spectrum of gender appropriateness, are assigned varying shades of “Chineseness” or “Americanness” to indicate the extent of their at-homeness in the adopted land” (“Ethnicizing Gender” 114).5

In China Men the crossing of the boundaries between the public and private spheres has implications in terms of the gendered connotations of those two terms. The conception of Chinese-American history as essentially private as opposed to the public Anglo-American history also genders that history feminine since the private sphere has long been associated with the female. By bringing the “private” Chinese-American history into the public sphere, Kingston moves its story into the traditionally masculine public sphere of American history. In China Men, the claim to a Chinese-American identity and history necessitates this move from the feminine private sphere into the masculine public discourse. Since, in Wong’s formulation, American ethnicity, as opposed to Chinese ethnicity, means masculinity, the assertion of the place of the Chinese in America is, by definition, also a move towards confirming Chinese-Americans’ masculine “Americanness.”

This is not to say that Kingston whole-heartedly embraces a masculine ideal for Chinese-Americans. The ambiguity of her response to this split between a “feminine Chineseness” and a “masculine Americanness” may be best exemplified by China Men’s opening chapter, “On Discovery.” The short chapter resembles a fairy tale about a man named Tang Ao who sails to the Gold Mountain, which is another name for America, where he is captured and dressed and treated like a woman. At first glance this seems merely to be about the trauma of the feminization of Chinese men who came to America, yet the story also is concerned with the suffering of Chinese females. Tang Ao’s ear piercing and painful foot binding were both practices of Chinese women, and the story appears to be as much about the constraints of women’s roles as the “emasculinization” of Chinese men in America. Still, despite Kingston’s recognition of the pain of fulfilling these gender roles for women, she still celebrates a masculine ideal to counteract the stereotypes of Asian males and to assert their “Americanness.” Although Kingston often maintains a playful tone, the irony of aspiring to a masculine ideal that ultimately traps Asian American males cannot seem to overcome the immediate appeal and power of that ideal.

This re-writing of American myth and history to create a masculine, and therefore Chinese American, ideal for Chinese men raises difficult questions about the role of Chinese-American women in this new history. While it is true that due to exclusionary laws women
were largely absent from early Chinese-American history, the images and terminology that Kingston uses in relation to the land do not leave a space for women trying to find their voice in this history. While one might argue that it is unfair to hold Kingston responsible for articulating a female voice in a book specifically focusing on Chinese-American males, the question remains as to why Chinese-American males and females must speak their history through different genres and with a different vocabularies. Kingston, through the character Ah Goong, configures the land as something to be conquered and overcome. He has a highly erotic relationship to the whole landscape and, in one unforgettable scene, is so overcome by the beauty of the scenery that he ejaculates out of a hanging basket into a valley yelling, “I’m fucking the world” (China Men 133). This type of language, that sexualizes and feminizes the land and puts it in terms of possession, is characteristic of a great deal of the writing about Western expansionism and the Frontier. Not only is it troubling in terms of the environment, but it raises concerns about finding a place for women when this male centered language underlies Kingston’s version of Chinese-American historical myth.

While Kingston treats these visions of Chinese-American masculinity with irony and humor, she does, nevertheless, celebrate them as symbols of Chinese-Americanness. She juxtaposes Ah Goong’s view of Chinese men as “pale, thin Chinese scholars and the rich men fat like Buddhas” and the positive ideal of “these brown muscular railroad men” (China Men 142). Ah Goong tells himself, “He was an American for having built the railroad” (China Men 145). By participating in this visible, public part of American history, by “fucking the world,” and by becoming an American masculine ideal, Ah Goong can claim a place as a Chinese-American, but where does that leave Chinese-American women? Perhaps a partial answer can be found in the relationship of a woman to nationalism in The Woman Warrior.

In the controversy surrounding The Woman Warrior, one of the most often heard accusations charges Kingston with an alliance with white feminism and denying the cause of Chinese-American nationalism. Her detractors read her criticism of Chinese and Chinese-American men as another display of pandering to a white audience and a betrayal of Chinese-Americans, more specifically Chinese-American men. The strong reaction to Kingston’s book recalls the injunctions of the ethnicizing of gender described by Wong. Wong analyzes a short story by Yi Li and says, “In Huang’s eyes, strength in a Chinese woman is not only unwomanly but tantamount to ethnic betrayal” (“Ethnicizing Gender” 117). Since Americanness translates into masculinity, Chineseness for Huang suggests femininity, and a
Chinese woman's deviance from prescribed gender roles connotes an abandonment of femininity and, by extension, Chineseness. Within this logic of ethnicity and gender, *The Woman Warrior* tells the story of a woman who rejects her feminine roles and thereby rejects her identity as a Chinese-American.

*The Woman Warrior* can be read as Kingston's attempts to reconcile the opposition between feminism and nationalism through her reworking of the genre of autobiography. Jean Franco argues that the study of gendered subjects who exist in the periphery and "off center" forces us to alter hierarchical thinking and "challenges the often unexamined assumptions that yoke feminism with bourgeois individualism" (xi). Kingston does challenge those assumptions and deviates not only from the convention of ethnic autobiography but also from the "bourgeois individualism" of many feminist autobiographies. Rita Felski in *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* plots what she sees as the usual trajectory of feminist autobiography and relates it to the masculine tradition of the *Bildungsroman*. In feminist autobiography of the 1970s and 1980s, according to Felski, women move from the private to the public sphere and break away from their place in patriarchy, emphasizing "internal growth and self-understanding rather than public self-realization." In contrast, the protagonist in *The Woman Warrior* eventually moves away from the Chinese-American community, "out of the hating range," but her purported goal is always directed towards the community. Her search for self-understanding and for her identity is invested in a recognition by the community since her identity cannot be fully realized outside of a social relationship. By insisting on a feminist view while maintaining the centrality of community, Kingston attempts to link feminism with community and nationalism rather than individualism.

By incorporating issues of nationalism and community into the autobiographical form, Kingston further complicates the public/private divide suggested by that form. Autobiography, often seen as a private form of writing about the individual, seeps into the public arena in *The Woman Warrior* as I noted above. Notions of the public and private shift from those in *China Men*. In *China Men* I defined the public as the Anglo-American discourse as opposed to Chinese-American history that was, by that definition, private. But in *The Woman Warrior*, that world of the private sphere shrinks even smaller. While Chinatown may represent a private world to the "public" world of the American metropolis, in this book Chinatown is the public world that shapes the protagonist's "private" or personal identity. The dichotomy of the public and private becomes even more vexed because of the uneasy place that the protagonist in *The Woman
Warrior occupies within the Chinese-American community. Rather than viewing that community as her private sphere, the community also functions as the public sphere to the much tighter circle of her family. Instead of grappling with Bhabha’s question about “representative authority” as an oppositional force within dominant culture, the book’s protagonist must struggle with her ability to even speak as a Chinese-American in her own community.

Before the protagonist can participate in the public debate over Chinese-American history, she tries to find “public” recognition as a Chinese-American within her community. Once again she attempts to negotiate this public/private divide with a manipulation of genre.

Jean Franco tells us that, “nationalism demands new kinds of subjects invested with authority to define the true and the real” (xviii). The protagonist of The Woman Warrior attempts to obtain this authority through the interruption of the genre of autobiography with mythology. By interspersing the autobiographical sections with mythology, Kingston stresses the importance of myths in creating the narratives of our daily lives and the necessity of new stories to tell ourselves. Only through a fantastic rewriting of the myth of Fa Mu Lan can the protagonist reconcile the opposition between feminism and nationalism. By rewriting the fable, she creates a Chinese myth that allows her to subvert gender roles and still be a national hero. Through Chinese myths she begins to realize a Chinese-American identity and says, “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them” (Woman Warrior 62).

That recognition never fully arrives so she cannot be “invested with the authority to define the true and the real,” and she cannot re-define nationalism along the lines of her invented heroine. As we are reminded by the mother in the first chapter, one does not exist without recognition from the community. “You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (Woman Warrior 5). She remains distanced from Chinatown in a world where, “the colors are gentler and fewer, smells are antiseptic. Now when I peek in the basement window where the villagers say they see a girl dancing like a bottle imp, I can no longer see a spirit...” (Woman Warrior 238). Still, the last pages perform a fictional resolution, and she tells her mother’s story, “The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (Woman Warrior 240). She shares a story with her mother and, by writing the ending, she makes it her own and writes herself into a communal myth. In the final utopian moment we can imagine that her story, like the songs Ts’ai Yen brought “back from savage lands,” can be understood by her childhood community since “It translated well” (Woman Warrior 243).
In the end, Kingston never gives us the ultimate solution to the conflict between nationalism and gender. Despite her attempts to subvert or write alternatives to the many master narratives of Anglo-American history, Chinese-American nationalism, feminist autobiography, and Chinese-American autobiography, among others, she can never completely escape those narratives. While she decenters these narratives and calls into question the gendered assumptions that enable them to function, she still remains inscribed within their discourse and writes in reaction to those discourses. Nevertheless, Kingston's project cannot be read as either a complete failure nor a complete triumph. Her manipulation of generic forms opens up a space for her to explore Chinese-American identity and to imagine the different shapes it can take.

Notes

1. Here I wish to invoke Judith Butler's Gender Trouble. Kingston "troubles" and problematizes the categories of genre and, by "making trouble," forces us to reconsider genre.

2. I am not characterizing Chinese-American communities simply as "private" as I hope to show by my use of quotation marks. Instead, I will argue in this essay that notions of public and private are constantly shifting depending upon a similarly shifting positionality.

3. See Jade Snow Wong's Fifth Chinese Daughter, Pardee Lowe's Father and Glorious Daughter as popular examples of early Chinese-American autobiography often classified as "tourguides."

4. See Donna Haraway's Cyborgs, Simians and Women for a discussion of situated knowledge. She formulates a model of identity that accepts a type of situated knowledge that does not lay claim to any universal knowledge and accepts the subject's inability to know itself completely.

5. Wong talks about the function of these assignments of gender and ethnicity in terms of sexuality, but it would also be useful in analyzing the relationship of genre to gender and ethnic identity.

6. In an effort to keep a steady supply of cheap labor while also preventing the Chinese from settling in America, a series of laws prohibiting the immigration of Chinese women were enacted. These laws were passed to encourage the laborers to eventually return to China or face a future of bachelorhood.

7. See Annette Kolodny's The Lay of the Land for an in-depth discussion of the relationship between feminine metaphors of the land and colonialism.

Works Cited
