

Maintaining the Past: Cultural Continuity in Maxine Hong Kingston's Work

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SUMMARY

This essay explores the interplay, in Kingston's novels, between criticism (from a Westernized perspective) of traditional Chinese values and customs (e.g. emphasis on filiality, patriarchy, the lower status of women or even misogyny) and the attempt to recover traditional Chinese culture in a social and historical setting (Chinese transplanted in the modern West) where it has been all but lost. It is especially in the author's playful transformation of (traditional) myths that we find this duality at work. Thrown into a state of rupture or discontinuity with her (Chinese) past, the author is always moving toward the recovery of cultural continuity; her "new" artistic-cultural constructions, while at a slight angle to the traditional one, are essentially still congruent and continuous with it.

KEY WORDS

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myth
community

discontinuity
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transformation



One recurrent theme in Maxine Hong Kingston's books is the longing she felt as a girl to be accepted as "American-normal" (WW 87): her efforts to invent for herself "an American-feminine speaking personality" (WW 172), for example, or to develop an "American-feminine" walk: "knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine" (WW 11).¹ One reason for this longing--one reason Kingston felt so self-conscious when the other kids at school talked about getting spankings or being kissed good-night (CM 253)--was the nagging realization that she and her family were "eccentric people" (CM 15), that culturally and ethnically they simply did not fit in the contemporary ranch-house suburbs in which they found themselves living. Like Amy Tan in *The Joy Luck Club*, many of her stories describe her chagrin as a girl at the incongruous old-country behavior particularly of her mother: how she would drag buckets filled with sand into the mortuary where Kau Goong was laid out and begin lighting incense (CM 185), or bang pot lids together during an eclipse "to scare the frog from swallowing the moon" (WW 169). It was because of this debilitating cultural self-consciousness of hers, because of her feeling that she had been displaced somehow from where she rightfully belonged, that Kingston felt such a desperate need to be accepted: "not that I cared about kissing," she explains in one telling passage, "but to be normal" (CM 253).

As one means of trying to cope with such feelings, of trying to reduce the tension between the contemporary

American cultural values to which she was exposed at school and "the invisible world" of Chinese cultural values imposed at home (WW 5), Kingston seems to have adopted the strategy at times of trying simply to repudiate her Chinese cultural tradition, of dismissing it as nothing better than a hodgepodge of repressive, outmoded superstition. Indeed, the contrast could hardly be starker between China as the older generation of emigrants tended to recall it and as it was imagined by Kingston and other members of her generation. For the older generation, China was looked back on as an idyllic realm of perfect peace and tranquility: a place in which the air and flowers smelled sweeter, in which the sky was filled with golden birds, where "promises would come true, time move slower, and life last long" (CM 294). A place, above all else, in which there would be other people like themselves: "Han people everywhere" (WW 98). "Whenever my parents said 'home'," Kingston recalls, "they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment . . ." (WW 99). It was in China that they thought of themselves as genuinely belonging, to China that, even after twenty or thirty years, they still thought of themselves as destined one day to return.

To children of Kingston's generation as they sat listening to their parents' recollections, however, China often sounded like anything but an idyllic place. "We American children heard too," Kingston interjects parenthetically as she recounts the story of a whipping administered as a boy to her uncle Dai Bak, "and [we] resolved not to 'return' to China" (CM 23). Instead of the golden dream that it represented for their parents, the prospect of someday having to "return" to China seemed to the younger generation like more of a nightmare. "In China," Kingston remembers thinking as a girl, "my parents would sell my sisters and me. My father would marry two or three more wives, who would spatter cooking oil on our bare toes and lie that we were crying for naughtiness" (WW 99 and 190). For a girl in particular the prospect of going back to

China held little attraction. In China, if you were a girl, you might be imprisoned for refusing the rich businessman selected for you by your parents; you might be smeared with honey by your indignant in-laws and tied naked on top of an ant nest (WW 190-93). In China, where girls were routinely vilified as "cowbirds" or "maggots in the rice," it was the custom to keep "a box of clean ashes" handy beside the birth-bed "in case of a girl" (WW 86). Even Confucius--"the rational man"--had supposedly reserved to husbands the right to kill a disobedient wife (WW 193).

As an adolescent, in fact, Kingston seems finally to have identified China as a repository for every imaginable variety of cruelty and madness, as a place "where anything happens" (WW 190). In order to preserve the sanity of her "waking life," to make it "American-normal," she learned how to "push the deformed into [her] dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories" (WW 87). It was in China, after all, in that opposite world from "solid America," that babies born without anuses might be left in the outhouse to die of "congestion" (WW 86), that the meat for sale during a famine might turn out to be that of babies bought by the rich people and then re-sold to butchers (CM 177), that people who fed as a matter of course on scorpions, cockroaches, beetles, and crickets, might buy as a special treat into a "monkey feast": sitting around a "thick wood table" spooning out the brains of a still living and helpless monkey (WW 91-92). Repelled by the cruelties associated in her mind with China, by the general lack of logic which she attributed to Chinese culture (WW 202), Kingston turned instead to what seemed to her the exact opposite world of western science and technology. "Give me plastics," she proclaims in one passage, "periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots" (WW 204). With everything cruel or contradictory consigned to that opposite world, to the depths of the unconscious or the depths of the "bottomless well"

located in the family cellar (CM 240), America was left as the repository of everything logical and humane, as the domain not only of plastics and t.v. dinners but also, as a product of the same progressive spirit, of equal opportunity and protection for women (CM 172).

In identifying China as essentially a realm of madness and irrationality, as a world turned upside down (CM 93), Kingston seems to have been following the same basic strategy as the one ascribed by Salman Rushdie to Asian immigrants in England: that of trying simply to jettison their native cultural heritage, to "[float] upwards from history, from memory, from time" (S 91). She seems to have been trying to turn herself into what Thomas Couser describes as a "self-induced exile from her ethnicity" (241). If she was ever going to learn "to see the world logically," she seems to have decided as a girl, she was going to have to leave home in order to do so (WW 204), to find a place for herself "where there [were] Chinese and Japanese but no emigrants from my own village looking at me as if I had failed them" (WW 52). Instead of one particular place on earth, therefore, instead of one specific cultural tradition, she seems to have learned to think of herself as "belong[ing] to the planet," to whatever spot of land she happened to be standing on at the moment. When her mother tries to tell her how different things used to be back in China, how much slower time used to move, for instance, she impatiently denies that there are any real differences between one place and another. "Time is the same from place to place," she insists: "There is only the eternal present, and biology" (WW 105-06). For the specificities of a particular cultural heritage, she seems in a passage such as this one to have substituted the abstracting, universalizing spirit of modern science: what Wendell Berry refers to as "the industrial present, the present absolute" (*People* 193).

As Kingston tells the story, this tactic of trying simply to disavow one's traditional cultural heritage was one shared by

many of the Chinese emigrants to the United States. It is what Moon Orchid's husband has been trying to do with his "American wife" and "American guests" and modern Western medical practice. He has been "living like an American," he explains to Moon Orchid and her sister, so absorbed in his "new life" that all of them back in China have become like "people in a book I had read a long time ago" (WW 153-54). It is also what "Mad Sao" has been trying to do with his American car and his suburban ranch house and his determination--"being very American"--to raise his daughters almost on a par with his son. In order to pay his mortgage and take proper care of those daughters, he has made the decision simply to ignore his traditional filial responsibilities, to "shut his heart" to the pathetic pleas coming from his mother and other starving relatives back in China: requests (among other things) that he sell his daughters "and mail the profits to Mother": "You don't need to save enough money to bring a lot of females. What a waste to bring them all the way back here to sell anyway" (CM 172).

Above all, it is what Kingston seems to feel that her father has tried to do. Unlike her mother, he has no stories to tell about his life in China, no relatives that he sends money back to, no photographs of himself "in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes." "You fix yourself in the present," Kingston accuses him in one passage, exasperated at his morose incommunicability and yet speculating whether the reason for it might not be a desire "to give [his children] a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past" (CM 14-15). Trying to picture for herself what his life might have been like as an immigrant laundry-worker in New York City, she imagines him and his friends trying to transform themselves instantaneously into "modern men" by taking flying lessons, learning to drive a car or motorcycle (CM 66). Dressed in straw hats and two hundred dollar pinstripe suits, she imagines, they must have looked "all the same

Americans" as they strode down Fifth Avenue, catching "sight of themselves in windows and hubcaps" (CM 63-64). So determined was her father to be "modang" that he would not even allow his wife to join him in America until she had gotten an American education. "And don't go to a school for classical literature," he specified: "Go to a scientific school run by white people" (CM 67).

Feeling as she does that she is a citizen of the world rather than any specific local culture, Kingston is understandably skeptical of the notion, fostered by the older generation of "emigrant villagers," that being Chinese is somehow instinctual or inborn. The belief, for example, that "if you are authentic Chinese, you know the language and the stories without being taught" (CM 257), or that when you set foot back in China for the first time—"even just Hong Kong"—your whole life suddenly makes sense: "You find out what a China Man you are" (CM 294). Particularly in describing her brother's tour of duty in Taiwan, his expectation as he ships out that he is going back to where he belongs "by history, culture, deeds, association, and affection" (*Berry*, Standing 58), she makes scathing fun of the idea that there is any special affinity linking a specific people to a specific place on earth. On board ship, for instance, the brother is assured by a "crackpot" Japanese ophthalmology student that once they're back in Asia they'll no longer even need their eyeglasses; "the eyes of ethnic Asians have a naturally faraway focus," the student explains, and in the Far East, unlike America, the blackboards and traffic lights are positioned with that fact in mind (CM 294).

In other passages, Kingston makes fun of the belief, equally widespread among emigrants of her parents' generation, that if you are of Chinese descent, then it is inevitable one day that you must "return" to your ancestral village. "I am to return to China," she says in one sarcastic passage, "where I have never been" (WW 76).

Scathing as she can sometimes be towards the notion of instinctual cultural identity, however, there are also passages in which Kingston seems to endorse the idea, to acknowledge the difficulties involved in trying simply to slough off one's particular cultural inheritance. In describing the smell that emerges when she opens the metal tube containing her mother's diploma from the To Keung School of Midwifery, for example, she comes close to accepting the existence of some sort of pre-conscious racial memory, for she describes the smell as "a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain" (WW 57). In other passages, she refers to the cultural "atavism" which as a girl led her to "add 'brother' silently to boys' names" (WW 12), and, in one of the most startling examples of her characteristic cross-cultural word-play, to the "double binds" which, even as a liberated modern woman, she still feels that China wraps around her feet: to the conflict (among other things) between her liberated Western desire to be independent and self-supporting and her lingering traditional longing to be "loved enough to be supported" (WW 48).

Of all Kingston's stories, the one that best illustrates the difficulties involved in trying simply to slough off the past is probably the story of "Mad Sao." Determined as he is to make himself "typical American, to suppress or ignore the bonds of filial piety linking him back to his old mother in China, he discovers that in fact it isn't as easy as he expected to forget the past—that, in Salman Rushdie's words," the obscured world [keeps] forcing its way back through what-had-been-imposed" (S 92). What happens is that after her death his mother suddenly appears to him in his fancy new suburban ranch house, upbraiding him for his failures of filial responsibility and refusing to be placated until he returns with her to China and goes through the whole elaborate process of a traditional Chinese burial ceremony. Only after he has done that—after he

has "burned mounds of paper relics and paper money," after he has "poured wine into the thirsty earth" and "planted the blue shrub of longevity," after he has "bowed his forehead to the ground, knocking it hard in repentance"--only then is he allowed to go peacefully back "home to America" and resume the "American life" that he has his heart so set on (CM 79).

It is possible to change, a story such as this one seems to suggest, to adapt culturally to a new way of life. But not to change totally or instantaneously, not to impose "a palimpsest on the past" in the manner described by Rushdie in *Shame*: a way of life totally without roots or precedent or cultural justification (S 91-92). Not to effect the kind of radical discontinuity which Wendell Berry argues is the result of modern technological change between the present and the past, the manufactured end product and the raw materials out of which it was made (*People* 193-94). Attractive as it might seem sometimes simply to swallow one of those anti-gravity pills envisioned by Rushdie and go floating blissfully "upwards from history, from memory, from Time" (S 90-91), the fact is that, if it is not to be totally alienating or disorientating, change has got to be cumulative and incremental, that like the "well-crafted table or cabinet" described by Berry it has got to build on and incorporate "parts and relics of its own history" (*People* 193). Contemptuous as he sometimes seems to be of the idea of cultural roots ("Look under your feet. You will not find gnarled growths sprouting through the soles."), Rushdie is even more concerned about "the emptiness of one's luggage" ("I'm speaking of invisible suitcases, not the physical, perhaps cardboard, variety . . .") that can result from cultural displacement (S 90-91).

As a woman, of course, Kingston is even more conscious than Rushdie of how oppressive it can be living in a traditional cultural community like that of her "emigrant villagers." She is even more conscious of the responsibility imposed particularly on the "heavy, deep-rooted women" that

they "maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning" (WW 8), that they give up any thought of individual self-expression or self-realization (Eakin 257). Especially in the story of the No Name Woman, she shows us just how cruel the reaction can be in such a community towards any woman who, in giving way to "the feelings playing about in [her] guts," acts "as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (WW 13).

Sensitive as she is to the potentiality for moral intolerance in close-knit traditional cultures, however, Kingston is also conscious of the human need to belong, of the longing felt by most human beings for some sort of established cultural identity. Thus though she has apparently made the decision herself to live like a modernist in self-imposed exile from her native community, to seek out places "that are ghost-free" (WW 108), it is striking how many of her stories end like Rushdie's with the return of the exile or wanderer back home (Rabine 480): either back to China again like Ts'ai Yen at the end of *The Woman Warrior* (209) or back into the circle of his family like Kingston's brother at the end of *China Men* (304). Even Mu Lan, though she is the epitome of feminist independence and self-reliance, is depicted at the end of her story as kneeling at her in-laws' feet and promising with perfect filial devotion to stay with them, "doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons" (WW 45). It is this re-integration of the rebel back into the community that Kingston seems primarily interested in stressing at the end of "White Tigers" when, re-affirming her sense of identification with swordswomen like Mu Lan, she expresses the hope that "my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" (WW 53).

The only character in Kingston who can never go home again, who is prohibited even in the after-life from participating in the joys and consolations of communal existence, is of course the No Name Woman. And if she functions in part as

a "forerunner" for Kingston in her own incipient adolescent rebellion against oppressive communal pressures (WW 8), she also serves, even in Kingston's sympathetic contemporary revision of the story, as a stark reminder of what it can mean to be "a tribal person alone." Driven from the house by her mortified family, forced to give birth out in the open fields, she finds herself exposed helplessly to the "black space" around her: "a bright dot in blackness, without home, without a companion, in eternal cold and silence." Like Gregor Samsa in a similar state of alienation and depression, she can find comfort only in memories of the domestic happiness that she has now forfeited: only in images of "the family in the evening gambling at the dinner table," or of them "congratulating one another, high joy on the mornings the rice shoots came up" (WW 14). Deprived of its cultural context, of any relationship to traditional meanings or values, even her rebellion seems to have suffered the same fate as those "meaning-drained mementoes" which Rushdie imagines being lugged by emigrants from one country to another (S 91).

Critical though she can therefore be at times towards traditional Chinese cultural values, one obvious purpose of Kingston's work is to try to reclaim a cultural heritage which, in part perhaps because of the instinctive reticence of her elders, in part because of the atmosphere of suspicion and intolerance with which they had to contend in the United States, has been all but forgotten. From the very first pages of *China Men*, she makes it clear that one thing she wants to do in the book, in opposition to her father's frustrating incommunicability, is "to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people" (CM 15). Later, as part of her introduction to "The Great Grandfather of Sandalwood Mountains," she offers the same basic explanation for why she first went "east, that is, west" to Hawaii, why if she could only get a visa ("and-more difficult- permission from my family"), she would also make a trip to China, to her ancestral village

in Guangdong: because she would like to figure out what the motives were that made her people want to "go West and turn into Americans" (CM 87-91). Far from wanting to destroy the past, as Frank Chin has charged (Chin 3), Kingston's goal is to recover a history which, in cases like that, say, of the No Name Woman or the Hawaii sugar-cane workers, has been deliberately excluded from the official or authoritative accounts. Like Rushdie in *Shame* or *Midnight's Children*, she is trying to see to it that the past does not continue to be suppressed, that certain people or experiences are not automatically "onsigned to peripheries by conventions of disbelief . . ." (S 219).

The way Kingston describes her purpose in some passages in fact, it sounds almost as though she thinks she can establish the final truth about the events she is describing, that she can separate the reality once and for all from the obscuring myths and stereotypes. On several occasions in *The Woman Warrior*, for example, she suggests that her purpose in the book is "to sort out" what is a genuine part of Chinese culture from what is incidental: "what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (WW 205). Likewise when she contemplates making a trip to China, the main reason she gives for wanting to do so is to find out the real truth about the country, to compare the China that "is really out there" to the one that she has pieced together over the years from hearsay or propaganda (CM 87). "Did my grandmother really live to be ninety-nine?" she would like to know: "Or did they string us along all those years to get our money? Do the babies wear a Mao button like a drop of blood on their jumpsuits? When we overseas Chinese send money, do the relatives divide it evenly among the commune?" (WW 206). This is the same task essentially as the one that occupies Wittman Ah Sing in the last chapter of *Tripmaster Monkey*: the task of reclaiming the cultural reality from the "externally imposed stereotype" (Kim

199).

Though it sometimes sounds in passages such as these as though she really might believe that she can establish the final truth about Chinese culture, however, there is actually little illusion in Kingston's books that it might be possible to reclaim the past precisely as it had been, "unaffected by the distortions of memory" (IH 10). Or even if that were possible, that one might actually be able to get by for long in the modern world using such a history as one's model or guideline. Like Salman Rushdie or J.M. Coetzee or any of a dozen other displaced, self-reflexive postmodern novelists, she is perfectly aware of the multiplicity of conflicting cultural and political points of view in the contemporary world and of the impossibility, therefore, of ever establishing with any certainty the final truth about anything: how her aunt really did wind up getting pregnant, say, or how her father actually did manage to get into the United States. Like many of those other writers, in fact, she fills her books with deliberate reminders of just how unreliable, how biased or incomplete, her account of a particular event is always going to be: with reminders that in the final analysis it is "no more than one version of all the hundreds of millions of possible versions" (IH 10). Indeed, of all our self-reflexive, decentering postmodern narrators, Kingston might well be the most insistently deconstructive, the one who keeps our attention fixed most sharply on what Rushdie refers to as "the process of filtration itself" (IH 24): the language, the narrative point of view, the implicit cultural assumptions that help to shape and organize a narrative.

Far from trying to establish the "real" truth about her aunt's pregnancy or her father's entry into the United States, what Kingston seems to be trying to do in most of her stories is "to find a usable past" (Lim 237): to identify those parts of the traditional culture which, as she interprets them at least, promise to give her the most "ancestral help" in coping with

the confusions and contradictions of her own everyday existence. In re-telling the story of the No Name Woman, for example, she makes no secret of the fact that, in direct opposition to the purpose with which her mother first told her the story, she is looking in her unfortunate relative for a spiritual "forerunner," for a woman whose life she can see "branching into" her own (WW 8). It is her own frustrated longing for "a private life, secret and apart from [the villagers]" (WW 13) that she is expressing in her aunt's story, her own feeling of stifling spiritual narrowness and intolerance. Even her aunt's cosmetological exercises, her efforts to "[comb] individuality into her bob" or to pluck and polish her forehead (WW 9), are presented as frank reflections of Kingston's own illicit longing as a girl to make herself "American-feminine" (WW 11-12). Not only is Kingston trying to rehabilitate the No Name Woman, to rescue her memory from its patriarchal sentence of oblivion: as her appropriation of the institution of ancestor-worship makes clear at the end of the story, she is also trying to claim her as part of a subversive new line of spiritual descent (Rabine 484), as one to whom she can "devote pages of paper..., though not origami-ed into houses and clothes" (WW 16). Like Wittman at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*, she is laying the foundations for a new cultural community which, though it certainly exists "at a slight angle" to the traditional one, seems in many important respects still to be continuous with it.

Does this really mean that Kingston is trying to destroy the past, though-the fact that in re-telling a story like the one about the No Name Woman, she tries subtly to shift its original moral focus, to make it reflect more adequately the concerns of a contemporary Chinese American girl growing up in California? Does it really mean that she is trying to impose a palimpsest on the past, a cultural concept which, because it has no roots in the traditional culture, serves rather to obscure what has gone before than to incorporate and build on

it? Does it even mean that she is trying to introduce the kind of cultural discontinuities that Foucault associated with genealogy or "effective history"? (Foucault 153-54).

It seems to me in fact that the exact opposite is the case: that what is really striking about Kingston's work is the pains that she takes, even as she goes about "updating" her traditional cultural heritage, carefully to root those changes in that heritage, to give them some degree of traditional justification and precedence. More perhaps than any other recent writer except Rushdie, she has evolved techniques for incorporating into one of her stories those "parts and relics of its own history" which in Wendell Berry's view distinguish the most accomplished products of human art (*People* 193).

It also seems to me that, in adapting "the old sayings and the stories" as she does to reflect a new age, Kingston is doing nothing more than storytellers have always been doing: nothing more than her own mother was doing the day she first told her the story of the No Name Woman or the old Tang dynasty poets were doing when they composed the original version of the Mu Lan story. The fact is that cultural myths are not "by nature, immutable and unchanging" (Chin 29), that if they are to answer the needs of successive generations, they must be subjected regularly to the processes described by Kenneth Burke as "casuistic stretching": techniques whereby one introduces new attitudes and values while ostensibly remaining faithful to old ones (Burke 229-32). The greatest cultural myths are not those which most effectively resist cultural adaptation; they are those which, as Rushdie observes of Omar Khayyam's poetry, can be most successfully "borne across" from one cultural context to another (S 24). It is this process of cultural adaptation that Kingston's books are designed to celebrate, that is illustrated not only by her own creative practice but also by that of many of her characters, including the Hawaii sugar-cane workers when they dig their "ear into the world" and, in imitation of Bak Goong's mythical

king, start pouring out their pent-up grievances (CM 116-18), or the California railroad workers when, in imitation of the legendary mooncake ruse against Kublai Khan, they make use of the "summer solstice cakes" to spread word of their impending strike (CM 140-41).

Perhaps the best example of this effort on Kingston's part simultaneously to transform her cultural heritage and to find a precedent for those transformations within the heritage is her revision of the popular old story of Mu Lan. In telling this story, Kingston makes it clear, first, that she is adapting it from a story originally recited to her as a girl by her mother and, second, that her mother's motive in telling her the story was, as always, to mold her into the modest, self-effacing girl that she was traditionally supposed to become. Among other things, on the one specific occasion that she remembers her mother offering to tell her the story, it was in direct response to her developing spirit of American self-assertion, to her brash announcement one day that she had just gotten straight A's in school (WW 45). In using the story in this way, of course, her mother was being perfectly faithful to its original intention. For in its classical Tang-dynasty form, "The Ballad of Mu Lan" is another of those instruments, like the sacrifice of spirit money to the dead, that is calculated to "maintain the past against the flood," to promote the interests of the community against those of the individual. Far from being motivated by personal ambition, Mu Lan is depicted in the poem as a paragon of self-sacrifice: as a girl who goes off to war in the first place solely in order to spare her aging father, who the whole time she is away continues to think faithfully of her old parents back home, and who when her service is finally completed can think of nothing she wants as a reward except a fast camel to carry her home again.² Never is there a suggestion in the poem that there might be anything the matter with the established order of things, that there might be anything stifling or oppressive about the position tradition-

ally assigned to women, for example.

It goes without saying, of course, that in adapting this story to reflect her own contemporary values Kingston appears in many respects totally to subvert its original conservative and communal emphases. It is perhaps symptomatic of the extent to which she has shifted the moral focus of the story, in fact, that in place of a campaign conducted under the emperor's authority against an outside enemy, the war in which Mu Lan is now depicted as serving should turn out to be a peasants' rebellion in which, having ceased to attend responsibly to his people's needs, the emperor is beheaded in the end and replaced by a peasant in rags (WW 42): "a farmer who [knows] the earth or a beggar who [understands] hunger" (WW 37). Obviously the Mu Lan that we find here is going to be something other than a docile apologist for the established order.

Of all the changes that Kingston has made in the Mu Lan story, one of the most subversive is probably the new emphasis that she has given to Mu Lan's "sex change"--to her ability simultaneously to fulfill her responsibilities as a wife and mother and to excel in a "field" traditionally reserved exclusively for men. In the traditional version of the story, of course, Mu Lan's change in sex-roles is purely incidental, intended rather to emphasize the depth of her filiality than to raise any doubts regarding the established order of things. In glorifying Mu Lan's martial accomplishments, in letting her get married and have a baby without hindrance to her "public duties," Kingston is projecting into the story her own contemporary feminist ideal of what a woman ought to be: "Marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc. Do the woman's work; then do more work, which will become ours too" (WW 48).

Subversive as it obviously is of the patriarchal social order promoted in a work like "Mu Lan," however, a change such as this one is far less discontinuous than a theorist like

Foucault, for example, would probably like to see (Foucault 152-54). Whether the original author intended it or not, Mu Lan's success in taking her father's place raises obvious questions about the legitimacy of the traditional gender distinctions featured in the poem. Among other things, is it really believable, having had the taste that she has of masculine freedom and adventure, that a girl like Mu Lan would still be so anxious to get back to her old position in front of the spinning wheel? Even when she was a girl listening to her mother's version of the story, Kingston recalls, the main lesson that she always derived from it was that she and her friends "failed if [they] grew up to be but wives and slaves," that they must grow up instead to be warrior women (WW 19-20). If in certain respects Kingston has twisted the original meaning of the poem, she has done so mainly by taking advantage of suggestions already subversively present in the work, by seizing on what Hillis Miller refers to as its subversive "counter-doctrine" (*Ethics* 19).

Even more subversive in its implications perhaps is the new meaning that Kingston gives in her version to the idea of "a female avenger." As it is normally used, the phrase simply refers to a woman who wants to "[get] even with anybody who hurt her family" (WW 19). In Kingston's version, it is for this reason primarily that Mu Lan decides to stay with the old couple in the mountains and become a swordswoman--because she hopes in that way to get revenge some day for injuries done to her people (WW 23). It is for the same reason basically that Kingston herself dreams of becoming a warrior woman: because she'd like "to storm across China to take back our farm from the communists" or "rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York or the one in California" (WW 49). In this sense of the term, "a female avenger" seems to be a model of traditional filial responsibility, a woman who is ready to give up everything for the sake of her family or community.

In Mu Lan's climactic confrontation with the fat exploitative village baron, however, a whole new meaning suddenly emerges for the phrase, one which seems in many respects completely to contradict its "obvious or univocal one." This shift in meaning occurs when Mu Lan announces that she is "a female avenger" and the baron, fatally misconstruing her words, begins in a spirit of smirking man-to-man confidentiality to try to reason with her: "Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to get rid of them. 'Girls are maggots in the rice.'" 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters'" (WW 43). These of course are among the same sexist slogans that Kingston herself complains a few pages later of having had to put up with as a girl from her parents and other "emigrant villagers" (WW 46), and though Mu Lan declares explicitly that her main motive in killing the baron is "in payment for [his] crimes against the villagers," it seems questionable whether, symbolically or dramatically, the revenge Kingston is exacting in this passage isn't revenge *against* her family as much as it is *for* them (Couser 234). One indication that this might really be the case is the fact that, just before she decapitates the baron, Mu Lan rips off her shirt, exposing simultaneously both her woman's breasts and the catalogue of grievances carved by her parents into her back. "You've done this," she shrieks at the astonished baron: "You are responsible for this" (WW 44).

What exactly is she supposed to mean by this, however? Does she mean, simply and straightforwardly, that she considers the baron responsible for all these abuses suffered over the years by her people? Or does she mean that, as a symbolic substitute for her parents, as the epitome or embodiment of the whole patriarchal social order, she considers him responsible as well for the scars inflicted by that order on her female flesh? To what extent, in other words, has the tradition of "the female avenger" been transmuted by Kingston into "the personal story of the Chinese American girl

enraged at the misogynist proverbs she constantly hears in the immigrant community"? (Schueller 426)

Though it is obviously intended as a challenge to the established order of things, however, the point that I would like to emphasize about a change such as this one is the care that has obviously been taken to provide it with some semblance of traditional precedence or justification. Perhaps the best illustration of this effort on Kingston's part to maintain cultural continuity is the example just referred to of the scars carved by her parents on Mu Lan's back. As any Chinese school child could probably tell you, this incident has been appropriated by Kingston from the story of yet another revered old Chinese cultural hero named Yueh Fei and then made use of as one means among others of trying to translate the traditional Chinese concept of the warrior woman into intelligible modern terms.

As I've pointed out before, the main source of psychological conflict for Kingston as a girl was the incongruity that she felt between the social and moral paradigms being passed on to her particularly by her mother and the very different realities with which she was confronted in contemporary American society. Since it was impossible actually to take out her sword and gut the obnoxious racist boss who had just fired her, actually to raise an army of "pole fighters" and go storming across China or the United States to take back the property unfairly confiscated from her parents (WW 49), what possible use were the stories that her mother had spent her life "funneling" into her ears? Could that heritage be adapted in some way to serve the needs of a new Chinese American generation (Kim 266) or, uprooted from its native soil and "driven into the mind," was it doomed to the extinction which, in Wendell Berry's view, awaits any displaced cultural heritage? (*Standing* 58). Of all Kingston's efforts symbolically to update or transform her heritage, the most ambitious perhaps is the effort, concentrated in the story "White Tigers,"

to identify the function of her classical Chinese swordswoman with that of the writer: to demonstrate (in Frank Chin's words) that "writing is fighting" (Chin 35).

One method employed by Kingston to provide an appearance of traditional cultural sanction for this identification is the invocation, found everywhere in her books, of Guan Goong, perhaps the most popular and revered of all Chinese cultural heroes. Not only does Kingston make a point, in one passage after another, of identifying Guan Goong as her spiritual ancestor, as "Grandfather Guan" (CM 149-50; TM 319), she also makes a point, in many of these same passages, of referring to him as the god simultaneously of war and theater (TM 216), of war and literature: "Grandfather Guan, our ancestor of writers and fighters, of actors and gamblers, and avenging executioners who mete out justice" (CM 149-50). Revolutionary as it might seem in some respects to think of writing dramatically as a mode of symbolic action, as a possible substitute for literal gutting or beheading, Kingston is obviously at pains in passages such as these to provide a respectable cultural lineage for the idea, to root it in some of the most hallowed ancient Chinese traditions.

Another method employed by Kingston to help establish this connection is the appeal, in the last paragraph of "White Tigers," to what she claims is the authentic Chinese etymology of the word *revenge*: to the fact that "[the] idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.'" On the basis of this etymology, Kingston concludes that, properly understood, revenge consists not so much in the gutting or beheading associated with the traditional swordswoman as it does in the reporting of injustices by writers such as herself: "The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words" (WW 53). Far from representing an extraneous new Western conception, her identification of the writer as a sort of woman warrior is an idea inherent in the Chinese language itself, a possibility that had been waiting for

centuries perhaps for someone like herself recognize it and put it into effect.

Of all the steps taken by Kingston to justify this identification, however, the most effective is undoubtedly the catalogue of grievances carved by her parents into Mu Lan's back. More than anything else, Kingston informs us at the end of "White Tigers," it is these "words at our backs" that she and the swordswoman have in common. "And I have so many words," she adds--" 'chink' words and 'gook' words too--that they do not fit on my skin" (WW 53). Further to emphasize the correspondence between herself and the warrior woman, between the writer and the fighter, she describes the words carved on Mu Lan's back as being "like an army, like my army." Her body she describes as being simultaneously like a text, a record of the abuses endured over the years by her family, and like a weapon, to be used by them even after her death as an instrument of revenge (WW 34-35).

Even more important for the suggestion of cultural continuity that it provides, however, is the fact that, in having her parents "carve revenge" on Mu Lan's back, Kingston is alluding to Yueh Fei, another of China's most revered old cultural heroes. Yueh Fei is remembered by the Chinese as a paragon of patriotism and self-sacrifice, of course, and the words carved by his mother into his back pertained more to loyalty and dedication than to the idea of personal revenge. *Jingzhong baoguo*, they are supposed to have read: "Serve your country with adamant loyalty" (Lau 45). It can hardly be a coincidence, however, that among the words employed in this injunction, one of them should turn out to be the same one used by Kingston at the end of "White Tigers" to equate the idea of revenge with that of reporting a crime: the character *bao* (報). In becoming a writer, Kingston seems to be suggesting with this pun, she is following in the path not only of female evengers like Mu Lan but also--if her people could only acknowledge the fact--of great patriotic heroes like Yueh

Fei. Subversive as her work might at first appear to be of traditional cultural values like filiality, the truth is that in many crucial respects it is still perfectly faithful to those values, that it is still part of the same cultural tradition which in earlier stages of its development could produce a paragon of traditional virtue like Mu Lan or Yueh Fei.

Notes

¹In referring to Kingston's works, the following abbreviations will be made use of: WW for *The Woman Warrior*, CM for *China Men*, and TM for *Tripmaster Monkey*. Abbreviations will also be used for the two most frequently cited works by Salman Rushdie: S for *Shame* and IH for *Imaginary Homelands*.

²For an understanding of the original "Ballad of Mu Lan," I have relied mainly on translations to be found in Lu Shu-xiang's *Gems of Classical Chinese Poetry*, particularly those done by Arthur Waley and Weng Xian-liang.

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