



The Woman Warrior: Interpreting Chinese American Literature from the Perspective of Cultural Identity

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How to cite this paper: Xinyan Cai. (2023) The Woman Warrior: Interpreting Chinese American Literature from the Perspective of Cultural Identity. *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 7(2), 240-243.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2023.02.002

Received: December 25, 2022

Accepted: January 22, 2023

Published: February 15, 2023

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Abstract

Maxine Hong Kingston's novel, the *Woman Warrior*, attracted plentiful critics from the perspective of cultural identity. However, so far researches on *The Woman Warrior* using identity theory have failed to focus on the dynamic interaction between the author and the text, but center on the characters' construction of cultural identity. This paper aims to decipher how the text manifests the author's struggle between distinct cultural identities, namely Chinese and American, and how the author constructs her identity through the process of writing. The technique employed by this paper is mainly close-reading with the aid of identity theories. The results showed that Kingston intentionally identifies herself with Americans, while being unconsciously bound up with Chinese culture. Additionally, accusations towards her such as "Orientalist" is improper. This research is also valuable for later studies on the mindset of contemporary people who are in the face of diverse cultures.

Keywords

The *Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston, identity theory, cultural identity

Maxine Hong Kingston is a prominent Chinese American female writer in 1970s. One of her representative works, *the Woman Warrior*, not only swept over American literary field, but also aroused great interest of Chinese literary critics. Consisting of five independent stories: *No Name Woman*, *White Tigers*, *Shaman*, *At the Western Palace*, *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe*, *the Woman Warrior* exhibits the inner world of a Chinese American girl while struggling between different cultural identities. Consequently, the book especially attracted critics from the perspective of cultural identity. However, most analyses hitherto focus on the characters' construction of cultural identity, but to some extent miss out the interaction between the text and the author. My goal in this paper is to look into how the text manifests the author's struggle between distinct cultural identities and more importantly, how the author constructs her identity through the process of writing, based on close reading of *the Woman Warrior*.

To achieve this goal, I have organized my paper into four main sections, and three of them have sub-sections. In the first section, I provide a background for my research, which includes a brief introduction of the identity theory related, details about the authors' background and some controversial comments the author received. In the second section, I discuss the combination of Chinese and Western literary culture manifested in the text, namely source of the stories and the writing techniques that the author employed. In the third section, I discuss the cultural shock the author experienced and expressed in the text. I conclude with the fourth section.

1. Background

Before I begin the close-reading analysis of the text, I need to provide some background information concerning the theories and the author, and it is to this that I now turn.

1.1 Identity Theory in Literature

According to Oxford English Dictionary, one of the definitions for “identity” is “Who or what a person or thing is; a distinct impression of a single person or thing presented to or perceived by others; a set of characteristics or a description that distinguishes a person or thing from others.” This definition indicates that the word “identity” carries both intergroup and intragroup connotations. In fact, the social identity approach, put forward by Tajfel and Turner in 1970s, comprising social identity theory and self-categorization theory, deals with intergroup and intragroup relations respectively (Hornsey, 2008). In terms of Chinese American group, social identity is an appropriate approach because as an “outsider” inside another group, both intergroup and intragroup relations are complicated for Chinese American group. Compared with psychology, sociology and anthropology, literature wasn’t a traditional field for identity study. In spite of that, over the past few decades, several outstanding methods of literary criticism have grown out of identity theory: analysis of character’s quest for identity; research on the relation between the self and the other; research on the relation between literary discourse and identity; research on the relation between literature and cultural identity (Li, 2012). This paper mainly applies the last of the methods.

1.2 Concerning the Author

Maxine Hong Kingston was born on October 27th, 1940, in Stockton, California, to a family of first-generation Chinese immigrants. Her father, Tom Hong, and her mother, Chew Ying Lan emigrated to the United States in 1924 and 1939 respectively, and Maxine is the eldest of their six American-born children. Kingston’s parents never learned to speak or read English with any degree of fluency, because they continued to live very much within the Chinese community (Lee & Stefanowska, 1998). Kingston, however, received both traditional Chinese education from home and Americanized education from school, and she found the two constantly in conflicts. She was also influenced greatly by the Asian American movement peaking from the late 1960s to mid 1970s which raised the political and racial consciousness of Asian Americans, just as Kingston stressed, “I am an American.” Apart from the racial discrimination she suffered from especially in her childhood, she also felt serious sexual oppression that befell her (Schueller, 2017). The double burden of racial and sexual oppression is exactly the source of her memoir, *the Woman Warrior*.

Maxine Hong Kingston has received great recognition and praise as well as sharp criticism for her works such as *The Woman Warrior*. Chinese American playwright Frank Chin branded her as a “race traitor”, and criticized *The Woman Warrior* for tampering with the authentic literary and mythological heritage of China; Gloria Chun dismissed her as Orientalist who presents a “detrimental, self-hating, assimilationist view of Chinese American”; Shirley Geok-lin Lim stated that Kingston’s “representations of patriarchal, abusive Chinese history were playing to a desire to look at Asians as an inferior spectacle” (Lee & Stefanowska, 1998). Such polarization indeed indicates complexity in Kingston’s works as well as herself, which also inspired me to dig into the text and try to find out the inner world of the author.

2. Combination of Chinese and Western Culture

The editor-in-chief of the Chinese translation of *The Woman Warrior*, Zhang Ziqing, once conducted an interview with Maxine Hong Kingston. During that interview, Kingston talked about how she had transplant Chinese mythology into the field of Chinese American literature. What I discover from the text is actually the combination and overlapping of Chinese and Western elements, with Chinese elements in the majority.

The second story, *White Tigers*, follows the theme and structure of the legend that every Chinese is familiar with: Fa Mu Lan. At the start of the story, the author narrates the legend of “white crane boxing”, namely in the Qing Dynasty, a girl called Fang Qiniang, daughter of a Shao-lin boxer, took a white crane as her master and later invented a new martial art. The author deliberately imitates the legend as the protagonist is guided by a bird into the mountain. The protagonist’s experience in mountain forest is typical Taoist style, her training including fasting and being quiet, which may refer to “Pigu” (stop eating for a period of time) and “Zuowang” (keep still and forget the self) in Taoist methods towards immortality. As she encounters a white rabbit in the forest, this element is drawn from the English novel Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland, but as the story progresses the white rabbit jumps in to

the fire and sacrifices itself to the protagonist, similar to a Buddhist story depicted in Dunhuang frescoes. When the protagonist finally reaches the destination and hunger “start to invent new sights”, she sees two angles who “have high white wings on their back”. Whether the author deliberately arranged this strange meeting of martial arts and angles, or she simply presents her natural flow of imagination cannot be verified, but it must have something to do with the complex and peculiar cultural context the author has grown up with. Another lively example is the drinking gourd. Despite a typical image in ancient China, the drinking gourd is used by the protagonist and her master to watch people and events thousands of miles away or even predict the future, very much alike crystal-ball prophecy in Western tales. There’s another plot that clearly follows the famous Chinese story of Yue Fei. Instead of carving “Loyalty to Serve the Country” as Yue fei did, however, the protagonist’s parents “carve revenge” on her back, indicating a pursuit of revenge similar to 16th century drama in Western civilization.

What I see from these intricate, and even chaotic overlapping of Chinese and Western elements is a recollection of the vague mind of a Chinese American child, an exaggerated reality of the puzzles of a Chinese American adult, and a reflection of the challenges met by the author as she searches for identity. I intentionally choose “combination” instead of “integration” to describe such phenomenon, because the author can’t leisurely build a bridge between distinct cultures as any cross-cultural scholars do.

This doesn’t mean the author didn’t achieve any degree of integration. In fact, a large part of her success should be attributed to that. As Kingston stated in the interview, she was deeply fascinated and influenced by Chinese story-telling style, inspired by which she had strived to achieve a sense of mobility in her stories. Take *White Tigers* as an example, the chapter opens with a relatively objective narration of a legend, followed by the author’s recollection of her mother talking-story. The last sentence of this section, “I would have to grow up a warrior woman”, naturally connects with the first sentence of next section, “The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof”. It seems that the author continues to narrate her personal experiences, which turns out to be a complete imagination, a mythology. This sudden shift appears again as the author finishes the mythology, and starts to narrate her life in American, with “My American life has been such a disappointment”. This narration model share great similarities with Chinese folk storytellers, who always arrange the stories as they want and add supplements whenever they want, regardless of time or space. The audience never question whether stories are logical, rigorous or not, as long as they are still intrigued. Such model allows mobility and variance for any kind of narration, and Kingston’s popularity among Western readers proves successful integration of Chinese culture into Western culture.

3. Conflicts between Chinese and Western Culture

As soon as I discover these numerous Chinese elements in the text, I recognize an overwhelming mixture of tension and clashes explicit or implicit in it. As mentioned above, Maxine Hong Kingston had always felt both racial and sexual oppression on Chinese American female group, and *The Woman Warrior* was in fact deliberately designed to include only women’s story to present the cultural shock from women’s perspective.

The most acrimonious accusation against the feudalistic tradition of old China is presented in *No Name Woman*. Kingston learns from her mother that she once had an aunt who killed herself and her newborn baby by jumping into the family well in China. The woman’s husband had left the country years before, so the villagers knew that the child was illegitimate. The night that the baby was born, the villagers raided and destroyed the family house, and the woman gave birth in a pigsty. The next morning the mother found her sister-in-law and the baby plugging up the well. The chapter, as well as the whole memoir, opens with Kingston’s mother warning “You must not tell anyone”, which also marks the keynote for Chinese culture from Kingston’s perspective. With only fragments of obscure narration from her mother, Kingston has to rely on her imagination in order to restore her aunt’s story (Pri-borkin, 2021). When talking about why she had written *No Name Woman*, Kingston said, “What I’m doing as an artist, a writer and a human being is... I’m gonna give her back her life. I’m gonna bring her to life, and I’m gonna make all of us face her, find meaning for her life. We’re gonna rescue her... she has no name, but I’m gonna give her immortality by writing and making a story that will live forever.” By searching for meaning for her aunt’s life, Kingston is also searching for an important part of her identity that is missing. The result of this search is somewhat unpleasant: she exposes the darkest part of Chinese culture right in front of us, and perhaps affected by that she deciphers some neutral part of Chinese culture in an awkward way. For example, Chinese people’s loud voices are used to “focus blurs”; the round moon cakes, round doorways and round tables symbolize “a family must be whole, faithfully keeping the descent line by having sons to feed the old and the dead, who in turn look after the family”, which to Kingston is viscous cycle and restraint of freedom for individual. She cannot understand why Chinese

must keep silent at the dinner table and accept food with both hands. Failing to resonate with these traditions, Kingston emphasizes that “I have tried to turn myself American-feminine”, and this “have tried” just exhibits the difficulty in securing an identity she encountered all along her growth.

Compared with *No Name Woman*, *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe* is a more direct demonstration of Kingston’s painful psychological state. The chapter opens with her mother telling her that she had cut her tongue so that she wouldn’t be “tongue-tied”. Kingston wondered whether that had worked, because she did “have a terrible time talking”. She said in a documentary, “I write because I need to communicate. I need to make connections with all of the people... to gather a community around me.” It could simply because of her personality, which is quite normal; but it could also a result of cultural conflicts. On one hand, the patriarchal China requires children, especially girls, to stay quiet, and they are never allowed to refute their elders. That’s the reason why many Chinese girls behave shy and quiet, which also accords with what society expects. On the other hand, Chinese-American always talk loudly, even shout to each other, which humiliated young Kingston, and she wanted to escape from such identity and get assimilated into “real” American society. From this perspective, Kingston’s silence is a kind of hyper-correction. “It’s very frustrated and I’m feeling very negative ... going to school and find out that I couldn’t communicate with anybody because I spoke a completely different language from everybody else.” This statement again shows how implicit cultural conflicts become explicit through languages. In the 6th grade, Kingston herself became a bully against another Chinese girl, just because she would not talk, because “now she is very much like me, too feminine, too soft”. She kept the girl in the lavatory after school, and pushed her to talk. This scene is quite weird: a bully forces the victim to talk, pinching her face, only to tell her that she will screw up her life if she remains silent. Such weird scene is, however, heart-wrenching. It shows how these Chinese American girls, as marginal groups in American society, struggle to search for an identity that will not exclude them and to secure a place for their future. As Kingston noted, “At the time I thought that I was saying this to another person but of course I’m giving directions to myself.”

4. Conclusion

As an autobiographical novel, *The Woman Warrior* is a slightly modified recreation of Kingston’s real experiences. The basic structure of the novel relies on numerous Chinese elements and Chinese storytelling model, which demonstrates how deeply Kingston was influenced by Chinese culture and that she had indeed accepted part of it as her identity. However, her interpretation of some Chinese customs and the strong emotion of rebellion indicate that she had fully accepted Western mindset and she identifies herself as an American. In my opinion, Kingston never means to destroy traditional Chinese culture, and the title of “orientalist” is by no means proper for her. To some extent, her unique angle as a Chinese American provides us with reappraise and reflect on our own culture. Decades passing by, the issue of identification of Chinese American now should be totally different from Kingston’s time. However, with deepening globalization and easily accessible diverse cultures around us, many people, even if they’re not emigrants, are suffering from the issue of identification as well. In such context, looking into how Kingston’s mindset is related to that of contemporary people could be meaningful.

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