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Talk-Story and Storytelling between China and America in Maxine Hong Kingston's Family Memoirs

Maxine Hong Kingston is the author of two seminal Chinese American texts: *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). These works combine autobiography, folktales, history and fiction to relate the respective stories of the women and men in her family. The crucial narrative technique used by Kingston is talk-story, which derives from traditional Chinese storytelling as well as from Asian American immigrant lore, since the term itself originates from Hawaiian pidgin. Talk-story represents the way familial narratives are passed on from one generation to the other, typically through female relatives. Kingston associates talk-story and the legacy of her Chinese background with elements drawn from American classic authors such as Nathaniel Hawthorne and William Carlos Williams. She also re-elaborates Chinese legends; most famously, the story of Fa Mulan. As a Chinese American woman writer, Kingston thus ultimately constructs a hybrid form of memoir, combining disparate motifs and influences.

Keywords: Maxine Hong Kingston; Chinese American literature; Asian American literature; talk-story; orality; storytelling

The daughter of Chinese immigrants from the Guangzhou area, Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California in 1940 and is best known for her family memoirs *The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). Respectively telling the stories of the women and men in Kingston's family, the books combine familial history, personal recollections, and re-elaborations of Chinese myths, as well as elements inspired by classic American literature. They are hybrid works which introduce storytelling techniques derived from oral narratives and Chinese tradition. While *The Woman Warrior* in particular is considered a fundamental text for the development of

Chinese American literature, Kingston's writing has also been strongly criticized by other Chinese American authors, most famously Frank Chin, in a controversy which was termed a “pen war”—a Chinese expression used to indicate a feud between intellectuals. The criticism mostly centered on Kingston's alteration of Chinese traditions and legends, which according to Chin suggested a lack of authenticity and a reinforcement of ethnic stereotypes, in an effort to target a white American readership with little knowledge of Chinese culture. This perspective ignores the feminist aspects of Kingston's work. As a woman belonging to an ethnic minority Kingston finds herself potentially constrained both by her gender and ethnic identity (Cheung, “The Woman Warrior” 246). Chin also criticized Kingston for writing in the autobiographical genre, which he associates with a Christian-derived style, also in light of early Chinese American authors such as Pardee Lowe and Jade Snow Wong being Christian autobiographers: “[...] the only form of literature written by Chinese Americans that major publishers will publish (other than the cookbook) is autobiography, an exclusively Christian form” (Chin 8). Chin associates Kingston with Christianity even though she is not a Christian. More significantly, her work is difficult to define exactly in terms of genre, and the position that she adopts within *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* is that of storyteller, creating “an identity that reflects an oral, postmodern, and feminist perspective in combination” (Lappas 57).

While the Kingston-Chin debate marked much of the early perception of Kingston's work, shedding light on what constitutes “authenticity” in a Chinese American literary perspective, different dimensions have been emphasized more recently. Silvia Schultermandl suggests that *The Woman Warrior* can be interpreted through a “transnational framework” which highlights the book's diverse and interrelated cultural strands. “The aspect of transnationalism in relation to the literary performances Kingston's memoir undertakes render the question obsolete as to how much of her use of myths and legends draws on real Chinese history and is thus the truth” (Schultermandl 37–38). The discussion on authenticity is further complexified by the growing interest for Kingston's memoirs in mainland China. Some Chinese critics echo Chin's view by pointing to negative portrayals of Chinese men or the distortions of the Mulan story, but others have drawn parallels between Kingston's depiction of early twentieth-century China and similar representations found in Chinese works, “thus indicating the complex positionality of [Kingston's] writing at the crossing between Chinese literature and Chinese American literature” (Dong 53). Mainland Chinese scholarship has also drawn attention, instead, to

the aspects of Kingston's work that can be identified as specifically American or Chinese American rather than Chinese, "revisiting Frank Chin's persistent accusation of other Chinese American writers' 'faking' of Chinese American culture" (Zhao 65). Wenshu Zhao notes that Chin uses literary techniques that are similar to Kingston's, blending separate Chinese myths together and altering the nature of folk heroes. Thus both Kingston and Chin produce texts that are specifically Chinese American, being informed by the experience of immigration and settlement in the United States. Anecdotally, my experience teaching in different Chinese universities showed that Kingston's work, and in particular the "No Name Woman" section of *The Woman Warrior* is a popular reading choice in English departments. My students generally reacted positively to the female-oriented narratives of Kingston and Amy Tan, whereas they found Chin's fiction of limited interest.

More broadly, Kingston's work proves influential for younger Asian American writers. For instance, Celeste Ng talks about the importance of *The Woman Warrior* as the only Asian American book that was accessible to her when she was growing up (Flock). Moving beyond the specific context of Chinese American authors, the Vietnamese American writer Viet Thanh Nguyen stresses the trailblazing quality of Kingston's work, suggesting how it anticipates the presently more common literary trend of combining factual narrative and fiction. According to Nguyen, this approach reflects adequately the complex situation of ethnic authors: "the inadequacy of traditional genres to her lived experience is an expression of how so-called minorities may find traditional genres insufficient, in different ways, to cope with their lives and histories" ("She Showed the Way").

Although the "pen war" between Kingston and Chin belongs to an earlier stage of the history of Chinese American and Asian American literary criticism, it influences the way Kingston's texts are seen. Writing *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* in the late 1970s and early 1980s respectively, Kingston anticipated some trends of autofiction and genre-blending. The use of orality and talk-story in her writings can be seen as part of this pattern. According to Kingston, her texts were classified as non-fiction as a result of an editorial choice (see Wong 30), but she actually deconstructs the conventions of Western-style autobiography by borrowing elements from oral storytelling in her retelling Chinese myths and ancestral narrations. The aim of this article is to analyze the way Kingston uses storytelling devices in her two memoirs, with particular reference to how forms of oral narrative are translated into written text and how the

Chinese tradition of talk-story is reinterpreted in an American English-speaking literary environment.

Narratives and Narrators

Originally, as pointed out by Kingston herself in the 2014 afterword to *The Woman Warrior*, the two texts were conceived as one project, until she decided to separate the narratives by gender, with a female narrator who remains the same at different ages:

[...] the stories fell naturally in two volumes. A feminist passion bound the women's stories together. The years from the Gold Rush to the end of the Chinese Exclusion Act defined the men's lives and their stories. Another reason I had to make two books is that my narrator has two voices. In *The Woman Warrior*, she is a girl, growing about five to fifteen of age. In *China Men*, she has become a grown woman, able to see the world from men's vantage. (251)

In both cases, emphasis is placed on the role of a woman as storyteller and transmitter of narratives, borrowing from the tradition of talk-story. This device allows Kingston to deconstruct the conventional tropes of the autobiographical genre by integrating elements deriving from her ancestral Chinese culture, something that is reinforced by the fragmented structure of the narratives. Bobby Fong points out that Kingston distances herself from the conventions of autobiography by eschewing a linear narrative and concentrating extensively on family members, especially her mother, placing attention on her own experiences only in the final part of *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston as narrator marginalizes herself even further in *China Men* since the focus is not only on the men's stories but also, for much of the book, on an earlier historical period.

In the two texts Kingston constructs herself specifically as a female storyteller, since the transmission of talk-story pertains to a large extent to the realm of women. While *The Woman Warrior* is subtitled "a memoir" and both this work and *China Men* draw from non-fictional familial narratives, a significant element of fictionalization is at stake. The first-person narrator is strongly implied to be Maxine herself; however, she shifts into other personae, assuming for instance the viewpoint of Fa Mulan in the section "White Tigers" of *The Woman Warrior*. In other sections, namely in parts of *China Men*, the narrator recedes to the background, relating what becomes a third-person narrative. Through this blend of

different storytelling techniques, Kingston creates a specifically Chinese American woman storyteller who asserts her voice defying both the Old Country patriarchy and the limitations of the white-dominated American context.

In order to discuss Kingston's work, it is necessary to place it in the context of the broader Chinese American historical experience.

The Chinese American Experience

Immigration from China began in the nineteenth century in the context of the Gold Rush and was prompted by political instability, ethnic tensions and the Opium Wars. Initially, Chinese immigrants saw themselves as sojourners who would eventually return to the motherland. They also famously had a significant role in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, though their participation in this crucial project was erased from public memory (Chang 64). Once this was completed, Chinese immigrants dispersed in cities, creating Chinatowns. Thus, Chinese presence in the United States has a long and pervasive history, but this group was the target of intense discrimination and nativist feeling. As observed by Ronald Takaki, the Chinese labor force was necessary in the United States; however, Chinese immigrants had to be prevented from settling permanently in the country on the basis of a well-established doctrine that saw America as racially homogenous and white:

[The Chinese in America] would be in effect a unique, transnational reserve army of migrant laborers forced to be foreigners forever [...]. Unlike white immigrants such as the Irish, Italians, and Poles, the Chinese would be a politically proscribed group [...]. Long before the Chinese arrived, they had already been predetermined for exclusion by this set of ideas (99–100).

This outlook resulted in exclusion laws targeting the Chinese specifically, impacting in this way the entire community's life, since immigrants from China were restricted in where they could live, were relegated to undesirable forms of ethnically segregated labor such as laundry work and could not create families because of the limitations on the numbers of female immigrants. Anti-Chinese feeling was also expressed in literature and the media, most notoriously embodied by figures such as Fu Manchu, created by writer Sax Rohmer, or the villainous Emperor Ming in the *Flash Gordon* comics and films. The overall perception of the Chinese in the United

States would improve during the Second World War and they would eventually be considered as a “model minority” in the post-war years (Zhou 6–10). Nevertheless, prejudice against the group remains present, something that has been reflected for instance by manifestations of anti-Chinese sentiment or even episodes of violence during the COVID-19 pandemic. This suggests a continuation of the status of “perpetual foreigner,” according to a xenophobic view of Asian Americans (Tessler et al. 636).

Historical elements play a significant part in Kingston’s work. Indeed, Kingston’s own familial history reflects significant moments of the broader Chinese American experience: the male ancestors on both sides of her family were sojourners who took repeated trips to work in the United States before ultimately returning to China; her parents were educated individuals who ran a laundry shop after emigrating to California (Huntley 3). The more general plight of the Chinese in the United States, including salient moments such as the construction of the transcontinental railroad and the promulgation of exclusion laws, also figures significantly in *China Men*.

The context of exclusion, racism and complicated intergenerational history creates a notion of secrecy that allows Kingston to explore different, potentially mutually exclusive tales. She thus emphasizes elements of oral narrative and talk-story.

Talk-story in Kingston’s Work

The expression “talk-story” comes from Hawaiian pidgin, as well as from the Chinese expression 講古仔 *gong gutsai* in Cantonese or *jiang gushi* in Mandarin, meaning literally “to tell a story.” This is an oral tradition developed in a context of widespread illiteracy in premodern China combining, as noted by E.D. Huntley, “family tales and genealogy, history, familial adages and folklore, myth, heroic stories, even didactic and cautionary pronouncements that have been handed down—and embellished—by successive generations within an extended clan” (66). Talk-story is defined thus by Wendy Ho: “[...] through talk-story, a collective politics of memory and desire is negotiated that continually narrates [a family’s] suffering and healing, especially as they are felt in times of trauma, violence, displacement and oppression” (14). While scholars like Elisabeth Croll and Wendy Ho stress the feminine and often private nature of talk-story, Chinese traditional storytelling, which is still practiced nowadays, also has a public dimension and is used to transmit well-estab-

lished Chinese classic stories such as those of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Professional storytelling is considered a different category of performance than drama or opera and, interestingly, it can partially overlap with non-professional forms of oral narration (in spite of being characterized specifically by some kind of monetary retribution): “oral arts which accompany daily life in a non-professional way, like folksongs, worksongs, jokes, riddles, saying, nursery rhymes are thus excluded from the sphere of *quyi* [professional storytelling] though they often constitute elements of the *quyi* genre” (Børdal 3). Kingston incorporates the legacy of this tradition in her texts, giving a written form in English to oral Chinese language.

These elements should be considered within the wider context of oral literature, as defined by linguist Walter Ong, who points out that, in a culture where information is mostly transmitted orally, the narrator or storyteller interacts with an audience, expressing narratives that can be repeated or altered. When a shift to a written culture happens, “the original voice of the oral narrator [takes] on various new forms when it [becomes] the silent voice of the writer, and the distancing effected by writing invite[s] various fictionalizations of the decontextualized reader and writer” (146). This process can indeed be observed in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, as Kingston transposes oral narratives circulating in the Chinese immigrant familial community into writing. Mary Slowik observes that various narrative movements are visible in Kingston's works, which imply not only changing narrators when the stories get passed on from one generation to the other, but also changing audiences. These can be the original listeners in China, their descendants in the United States who might interpret a narrative differently, and ultimately Kingston as an author, rendering in writing the process of intergenerational oral storytelling:

Kingston, the twentieth-century writer, is not simply a child in the rice field frightened by the story, however, nor is she a distant relative at the end of the generational line. She is now an adult re-telling that story, making it again immediate [...] a story breaks out of omniscient self-enclosure because an audience, whose lives are never as final as any story's, continually re-tells and re-interprets the tale, connecting their limited, “first person experiences” to the directives of the oral tradition. (Slowik 74)

The audience of these narratives is thus no longer the Chinese or Chinese American family (where different members might make alternative inter-

pretations of the stories) but the wider English-speaking readership of Kingston's work.

Talk-story appears in different forms in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as the two texts interweave family memories, reinterpreted Chinese legends and immigrant history, establishing a variety of narrators and audiences. The nature and the content of the talk-story changes in relation to the gender divisions of the texts.

Telling the Women's Stories: *The Woman Warrior*

The key figure in *The Woman Warrior* is the narrator's mother Brave Orchid, who trained as a doctor in China. Indeed, she pushes Maxine to the margin of much of the text as a narrating figure. Hence Brave Orchid emerges as the crucial storyteller. According to Sidonie Smith, the mother-daughter transmission of stories and the focus on the narratives of female ancestors occupy a significant place in the patriarchal economy of Chinese American society:

Kingston's mother dominates the life, the landscape, and the language of the text as she dominates the subjectivity of the daughter who writes that text. It is Brave Orchid's voice, commanding, as Kingston notes, 'great power' that continually reiterates the discourses of the community in maxims, talk-story, legends, family histories. (58)

Significantly, the first sentence of the book suggests the sense of secrecy and taboo associated with the act of narrating: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). She proceeds to tell Maxine the story of "No Name Woman," an aunt who conceived a child as a result of an adulterous relationship. The story is set in rural pre-Communist China but bears the influence of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* by focusing on an entire community's vehement condemnation of an adulterous woman. No Name Woman's ordeal serves as a cautionary tale for Maxine, a warning to protect her own honor and her family now that she has started menstruating. Maxine also recollects "[w]henever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (5). The narrative Brave Orchid provides her American-born daughter with is, however, incomplete, leaving Kingston to reconstruct the details of her aunt's life, whose name she doesn't even know. Consequently, she provides different versions of the adulterous affair: in one, No Name Woman is a victim of rape, in another

she is vain and seductive. In the conclusion of the section, Kingston clearly represents her writerly act as a breaking of the familial taboo surrounding her aunt, since the erasure of her name and memory is potentially a bigger stigma than the violent shunning she endured from villagers. *The Woman Warrior* itself thus becomes a form of Chinese and Chinese American storytelling, adding another layer, although in writing and in English, to the ancestral storytelling tradition.

Talk-story is evoked explicitly in the next section of the book, titled “White Tigers.” In stark contrast with No Name Woman’s story of patriarchy and erasure, the central figure of “White Tigers” is Fa Mulan, the titular “woman warrior”: “When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen” (23). The Fa Mulan myth, which has gone through different iterations in Chinese culture since its origin around the fifth century AD, is once again transmitted from mother to daughter, in a way that contrasts not only the cautionary tale of No Name Woman but also the general traditional outlook towards women found in Chinese culture: “[My mother] said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (23). Familial narratives, those drawn from Chinese cinema and different legends, mingle in Kingston’s retelling of Fa Mulan’s story. For instance, in a detail that Kingston’s detractors emphasize, “White Tigers” borrows elements from another prominent Chinese legend, that of the Song dynasty General Yue Fei, whose mother tattooed loyalty oaths on his back (it is Mulan’s mother who does this in Kingston’s version). As noted by King-Kok Cheung, Kingston ultimately appropriates the legend, shifting away its focus from filial piety to self-affirmation, though ultimately in Kingston’s case this happens through writing rather than being a warrior. The critics of *The Woman Warrior* objected to the book’s reinterpretations of Chinese mythology, yet these can be read not as distortions but rather as new versions borne out of a feminist immigrant perspective.

In the following section, entitled “Shaman,” the talk-story narrative centers on the life of Kingston’s mother Brave Orchid, who transmits her experiences as a medical student in China. Similarly to what happened in “White Tigers,” the narrative deconstructs the traditional position of women in Chinese culture by representing an independent and assertive female character. Once again, the element of familial memoir of Brave Orchid’s pre-emigration life interweaves with Chinese folklore, drawing from the tradition of the ghost story. The image of the ghost is obviously

fundamental to *The Woman Warrior*, something that is already suggested by the subtitle “a memoir of a girlhood amongst ghosts.” In the United States, the literal ghosts of Chinese tradition merge into figurative ghosts according to a term (鬼佬; *guilao* in Mandarin or *gweilo* in Cantonese) traditionally referring to white people, as indicated by Maxine herself when she recalls:

But America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe. (114)

In this case Maxine’s fear of “ghosts” is a result of alienation in a predominantly white context, in contrast to which Brave Orchid must confront a literal ghost who attacks her in her university dorm.

While Brave Orchid loses her status as empowered professional woman once she emigrates to the United States, working in a laundry shop, she is set in opposition to her sister Moon Orchid, who comes to America to attempt a reconnection with her currently remarried husband and loses her sanity once she fails to save her marriage. The storytelling element is present here in relation to that of madness as well, as suggested by this observation by Brave Orchid: “Sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people only have one story that they talk over and over” (188). In the final section of *The Woman Warrior*, the focus shifts to Maxine, who implies that she re-elaborates her relatives’ stories, such as Moon Orchid’s, from a writer’s perspective. Comparing her brother’s version of the story to her own, she points out that “his version of the story might be better than mine because of its barenness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up too much room” (194). Thus Maxine’s own storytelling can be read as a reaction to the culture of secrecy imposed by her environment.

The concluding section of *The Woman Warrior* focuses more on Kingston’s own recollections of childhood and growth. However, towards the end of the text, Maxine defines herself as a “story-talker,” concluding the narrative with another reimagined Chinese legend, that of T’sai Yen. Kingston notes of this story that “[...] the beginning is [my mother’s], the ending mine” (245). Like Mulan, but less well-known in the West, T’sai Yen is a Chinese female figure with a legendary status. She is a poet who lived in the second century AD and is most famous for being abducted by a Mongol tribe for twelve years before being ransomed and returning to Han China. She wrote poems about her experiences, expressing home-

sickness for China and alienation, to which Kingston alludes as the “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” One of the verses of T’sai Yan’s captivity poem is “the barbarian reed-whistle came from the barbarians;/Arranged for the zither, the musical pattern is the same” (Frankel 142)—a statement that Kingston almost paraphrases in the final lines of *The Woman Warrior*: “She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well” (248). The sense of exile and homesickness for China in a “barbarian” land, and the merging of alien and Chinese traditions can be seen as a clear analogy for the Chinese American experience and for Kingston’s adaptation of Chinese material for an American English-language text. In *China Men*, Kingston complements the stories of women in her family by relating the male Chinese American experience, using similar narrative techniques.

Telling the Men’s Stories: *China Men*

China Men, the companion piece to *The Woman Warrior*, uses the same combination of disparate elements. Talk-story is also present but is used in a different way. Kingston herself notes in an interview that even the narratives of male ancestors were transmitted by women and thus the position of a female storyteller remains significant. While female figures are less present in *China Men*, a female storyteller is still implicitly present: “There are still women who take on the role of storyteller [...]. A great many of the men’s stories were ones I originally heard from women” (“Talk with Mrs. Kingston” 18). Significantly, when the men use talk-story in *China Men*, it is not in a family context to impart wisdom or tell cautionary tales to descendants. Rather, it takes place between men in order to spread useful information about immigration and life in the United States: “In the talk-story time after dinner, young men gave advice to young men [...]. ‘Mind your own business, and work like an ox.’ ‘Don’t gamble’” (112).

While in *The Woman Warrior* the mother figure directly transmits familial or legendary narratives to Maxine, the father figure in *China Men* is characterized by his silence. The relationship with his past, and therefore with China and Chinese culture and history, is broken:

You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China. You only look and talk Chinese. There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes. Did you cut your pigtail to show your support for the republic? Or have you always been American? Do you mean to give us a chance at being Americans by forgetting the Chinese past? (17)

As a result, Kingston is left to reconstruct her father's past, likening herself to her mother who partakes in talk-story and elaborates narratives: "I take after MaMa [...]. I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (17). Thus, Kingston reconstructs different, mutually contradictory narratives of her father's life in China and his experiences of immigration, in a way that echoes her treatment of No Name Woman's story in *The Woman Warrior*. So, for instance, Kingston evokes the story of an individual referred to as "the father" who immigrates illegally by being smuggled in a crate but then states it is not how her father actually arrived in the United States, since "he came the legal way" (61). Not only does Maxine's own father give little information about his immigration, but the sense of mystery is reinforced by ambiguous legal situations, the result of attempts to circumvent anti-immigration laws. Including different narratives of immigration widens the scope of the text beyond that of Kingston's own family: "By imagining the various ways a man like her father sought entry into the United States, Kingston extends the parameters of family history to encompass the experience of diverse China Men" (Cheung, "Talk-Story" 32).

Personal silence and falsified histories of immigration are parallel to a wider erasure of the role played by the "China Men" in America, most obviously visible in the section dedicated to Chinese immigrants building the transcontinental railroad. As noted by Iris Chang,

the Central Pacific Railroad cheated the railroad workers of everything they could. They tried to write the Chinese out of history altogether. The Chinese workers were not only excluded from the ceremonies, but from the famous photograph of white American laborers celebrating as the last spike, the golden spike, was driven into the ground. Of more immediate concern, the Central Pacific immediately laid off most of the Chinese workers. (64)

Kingston refers directly to this incident: "While the demons posed for the photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to stay. The

Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong [Maxine's grandfather] does not appear in railroad photographs" (162). In this way, *China Men* reconstructs forgotten parts of the Chinese American experience, emphasizing the role Chinese immigrants have played throughout U.S. history.

China Men introduces the stories of the author's male relatives, identified by their familial role and position in America rather than their names, "the father from China," "the great grand-father of the Sandalwood mountains" (who worked in sugar cane plantations in Hawaii), "the grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains" (the aforementioned Ah Goong who participated in the construction of the transcontinental railroad) or "the brother in Vietnam" (Maxine's American-born brother, a veteran of the Vietnam War). This allows Kingston to give a sense of Chinese American universality to the narratives, exploiting the Chinese practice of referring to individuals by familial titles (Cheung, "Talk Story" 33).

As in *The Woman Warrior*, personal narratives are interspersed with legends, such as that of Tang Ao, the protagonist of the early nineteenth-century Chinese classic *Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ruzhen. Tang Ao became stranded in the land of women, and was forced to live as one, including undergoing painful beauty rituals like ear piercing and foot-binding. Kingston places the land of women in North America, implying that Chinese male immigrants to the United States lose their masculinity and patriarchal position. Tang Ao's adventures in the land of women are recast as a Chinese American legend; similarly Western classic texts are reworked with a Chinese American dimension (Cheung, "Talk Story" 26).

Kingston herself has drawn parallels between *China Men* and *In the American Grain* by William Carlos Williams, which is similar to *China Men* because of its fragmented structure with chapters that concentrate on specific key characters of American history, starting with the mythical Viking explorer Red Eric and concluding with Abraham Lincoln who is reimagined fantastically as "a woman in an old shawl—with a great bearded face and a towering black hat above it" (247–8). Like Kingston, Williams uses disparate sources and competing parallel narratives (such as the discovery of the New World by Eric and Christopher Columbus) to construct a fictionalized history of America, drawing from Icelandic sagas as well as introducing figures such as Hernan Cortes and Montezuma. As noted by Huntley,

In the American Grain ends in 1860 with the Civil War, and Kingston commences her version of American history around 1850, beginning *China Men* in roughly the same historical period by overlapping the arrival of the first immigrants with the arrival of the first Chinese immi-

rants with the hostilities between North and Sound, thereby incorporating the stories of her immigrants' ancestors' courage, suffering, and hard work into the narrative of the American nation. (171)

The connection with *In the American Grain*, a book that Kingston expresses admiration for in interviews, points to the Americanness of the literary process she uses and the Americanness of her characters.

Kingston's recreation of famous Western lore goes beyond American culture specifically. In *China Men* she also reenvisions Robinson Crusoe as a Chinese character named Lo Bun Sun, who is shipwrecked like his western counterpart, stranded on an island, and even encounters a Friday figure whom he calls Sing Kay Ng, "Friday" in Cantonese.

Kingston even reworks the Greek mythological tale of King Midas's donkey ears as a supposed Chinese legend, told by Kingston's great-grandfather to other laborers in Hawaii, about a king whose son is born with cat's ears. In Midas' story a servant is incapable of keeping the secret of the king's donkey ears and thus whispers it to a hole he has dug in the ground, prompting the reeds to repeat it. In Kingston's version, it is the king himself who tells a hole about his son's cat's ears. This story inspires the Chinese immigrants in Hawaii to dig a large hole in the ground where they shout secrets and longings. Kingston implies that, as in Midas's myth, the secrets of the Chinese immigrants will be spread by the grasses and wind: "Soon the green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell" (133). This image alludes to the disappearance of the Chinese experience from mainstream American public consciousness as well as to the "secrecy" and silence that Chinese American men are inclined to. The symbolism of the "singing cane" which carries the stories of Maxine's forefathers has been anticipated in the earlier description of Hawaii: "I have heard the land sing [...]. I again search for my ancestors by listening to the cane" (101). In this way, Kingston gives back voices and stories to the "China Men." Moreover, the original Midas story is a cautionary tale about revealing secrets. On the other hand, Kingston's reinterpretation implies that the Chinese immigrants have found a way to ultimately preserve their experiences, which are eventually evoked by one of their descendants. This passage also creates an indirect connection with the opening of *The Woman Warrior* where the narrator's mother warns her to keep No Name Woman's story a secret. In both cases, Kingston gives space to ancestral narratives that have been suppressed or forgotten.

Conclusion

In both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* Kingston constructs herself in the narrative as a storyteller, and specifically as a female storyteller, transmitting stories that have been passed on to her from other women (whether the stories center on female or male figures). This position allows her to transmit familial narratives, revealing little-known episodes of Chinese American history as well as re-elaborations in a Chinese key of American classics. Thus, Kingston creates hybrid texts that combine memoir, fiction and history. Although she writes in English and targets a presumably non-Chinese American audience, Kingston reconstructs techniques drawn from oral storytelling and in particular the Chinese and Asian American practice of talk-story, which takes a new form in the U.S. context.

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