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## **Transculturation : writing beyond dualism**

Cheng, M.

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## Chapter 6

### Ambiguity in *The Woman Warrior*

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When Maxine Hong Kingston's first novel *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, it was immediately maneuvered into an ambivalent position. The novel was both acclaimed (it won the 1976 National Book Award), and bombarded as a fake reproduction of Chinese literary and historical stories. Sau-ling Wong compares the work enthusiastically to Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* ("Chinese" 50). Amy Ling appreciates the literary boldness, power, and beauty of the work ("Chinese" 235), but the same boldness is arrested by another critic, Frank Chin, as "boldly fake" in order to cater to a white Orientalist audience ("Come" 3). Chin charges Kingston's appropriation of Chinese history, culture, and childhood literature and myth of this novel as "restating the white racist stereotype" (29), which is "destroying history and literature" (3). He blames the work for its distance from American reality and for its exoticism. Whether praising or criticizing the novel, scholars from both the US and abroad recognize the cultural alterity of the novel to a worldwide readership, even to Chinese and American readers.

Contradictory feelings toward *The Woman Warrior* are aroused by the unconventional nature of both its content and structure. On the one hand, the telling and retelling of stories in *The Woman Warrior* reflect the writer's divergent interpretations of Chinese historical and cultural materials. Relating to the narrator's and her family's past, *The Woman Warrior* rewrites stories of an ethnic culture to articulate stories of the dominant culture. The narration incorporates the two cultural systems into a process of transculturation. It presents, dwells on, and finally accepts an immigrant reality that embraces both Chinese inheritance and American present. On the other hand, the writing transgresses the genre boundaries of traditional (auto)biography and fiction. Whether it is

autobiography or fiction, *The Woman Warrior* contains autobiographical and historical accounts, factual materials, and fictional reenactments. As Kingston says in an interview, “I am writing about real people, all of whom have minds that love to invent fictions. I am writing the biography of their imaginations” (Rabinowitz 186). The unconventional writing in those two respects makes the reader uncertain about how to approach the work.

### **Defining “Ambiguity” in *The Woman Warrior***

According to *Collins English Dictionary* (1998), the literal meaning of the term “ambiguity” is “the possibility of interpreting an expression in two or more distinct ways” (“Ambiguity”). Ambiguity can therefore refer to a person’s doubtfulness, indecision of an intention, or an unclear, equivocal expression that causes confusion. In my opinion, *The Woman Warrior* is an ambiguous text, for a plurality of meanings characterizes its narrative. Sometimes, the text refuses to resolve contradictions and purposefully leaves gaps open. This bewilders the narrator and reader alike, and throws them into a state of uncertainty. At other times, the narrator’s uncertain mind produces multilayered interpretations.<sup>1</sup> One story may generate two, or multiple, distinct and mutually exclusive responses. This juxtaposes conflicting meanings in the same context. These two (or more) possible interpretations are often remote from, or even contradictory to, each other. Thus, the reader is kept in a dilemma as to which interpretation he or she should accept.

However, this does not mean the text’s ambiguity cannot be explained in a logical sense. Nor does one possible interpretation negate the other. Rather, it may simply be the result of looking at the same problem from different perspectives. In this chapter, I am going to analyze Kingston’s ambiguous writing by exploring how the narrator’s Chinese American perspectives generate ambiguity. I will approach the ambiguity on the level of both the materials the writer selects and the writing strategy that underlies the text’s structure. I will demonstrate that the retelling of stories and the genre transgression innovate (Chinese)

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<sup>1</sup> I read *The Woman Warrior* as a work of multilayered meanings. As Kingston says, “I hope my writing has many layers, as human beings have layers” (“Cultural” 65).

American writing, and create a life narrative that mediates the immigrants' relation with their ethnic surroundings in a powerful way.

As a postmodern text, *The Woman Warrior* is concerned with problematizing, not offering, solutions. Ambiguity is inherent in the narration. In what follows, I cannot resolve it, but I will try to analyze it, and to offer some reasonable explanations for the ambiguity. I start my analysis from a discussion of the unconventional genre of *The Woman Warrior* in light of postmodernism. My analysis moves on to the problematic presentation of "truth" and "self" in this autobiographical work. Finally, I will use storytelling as a concrete example to demonstrate how ambiguity is written into the novel's politics of gender, identity, life construction, and self-orientation. These parts of my analysis, like the text, are not linear. Nor are they centered on one aspect of writing. Though not exclusive, they are representative of the ambiguous aspects of narration. They touch upon the ambiguity in plot and genre as much as in writing technique. It is not my intention, however, to produce another piece of ambiguous writing, but the ambiguity in the narration of *The Woman Warrior* involves such an extensively wide range of narrative aspects, it is impossible to cover them under one category.

## **The Paradox of Postmodern Genre**

Genre theory is important for interpretation of a text. It informs the reader what and how to read the text. As Marjorie Perloff notes, "it is virtually impossible to read a new 'text' without bringing to it a particular set of generic expectations" (4). In postmodern literature, genre boundaries that exist in modernist narratives have been questioned and transgressed. The transgression poses potential difficulties for studying this literature. Linda Hutcheon regards genre crossing between fiction and non-fiction as the most radical crossing (*Poetics* 10). Postmodern texts, such as Alice Munro's *Lives of Girls and Women*, or Michael Ondaatje's *Coming Through Slaughter*, cannot be classified into clear genres. Hutcheon cites these texts as examples and writes:

The borders between literary genres have become fluid: who can tell anymore what the limits are between the novel and the short story collection [...], the novel and the long poem [...], the novel and the

autobiography [...], the novel and the history [...], the novel and biography? (9)

For Hutcheon, postmodern narrative lacks firm boundaries. Ralph Cohen expresses a similar idea. The fluidity of a genre's boundaries evokes the question "Do Postmodern Genres Exist?" Cohen asks this question in the title of his article.

Cohen notes the paradox inherent in the term "postmodern genre." On the one hand, postmodern issues are encoded from a variety of genre perspectives. Postmodern writing "blurs genres, transgresses them, or unfixes boundaries that conceal domination or authority" (11). So postmodern work tends to dismiss genre as an "anachronistic term and concept" (11). In this sense, the term "genre" is "inappropriate for characterizing postmodernist writing" (11). Traditionally, genre theory "is committed to backgrounding literary artifice, to demanding coherence, unity and linear continuity" (11). It seeks to elucidate classification to provide clarity and determinacy.

On the other hand, Cohen notes there are other genre theories "perfectly compatible with multiple discourses, with narratives of discontinuity, with transgressed boundaries" (11). That is to say the blurring or transgression of genres does not invalidate all genre theories. He writes:

It [A genre] not only inquires into the reasons for intertextuality; it inquires into the significance of the combinatory procedures that result from it. The generic concept of combinatory writing makes possible the study of continuities and changes within a genre as well as the recurrence of generic features and their historical implications.  
(14)

Cohen's position recognizes the combinatory writing in postmodern genres as an important critical guide in an era of openness and flexibility. In the interpretation of postmodern texts it is impossible to recognize the conventional features of genres. So, postmodern writing does not eliminate genre or negate the usefulness of it, but it rejects the conventional idea that genre boundaries are discrete or fixed. There is no pure genre any more. As Cohen says, postmodern genre operates on the theoretical basis of "mixed forms or shared generic features" (12).

The paradox of "postmodern genre" actually manifests the conceptualization of a genre order: "the more radical the dissolution of

traditional generic boundaries, the more important the concept of genericity becomes” (Perloff 4). Cohen further argues that when critics and theorists reject genre procedures, they “deprive themselves of explanatory tools” (19). When they attack genre boundaries, their attack “falls within the genres of satire, parody and literary theory” (20), which seems to indicate postmodern writing cannot escape genre classification. In fact, postmodern writing renovates genres by putting old genres into new uses. Any postmodern genre is a hybridization of other genres. It constantly revises itself in relation to others to construct more meaningful ways of presenting contemporary and/or past reality.

### **Genre Hybridization**

Hutcheon recognizes the ambiguous representation of postmodern novels by a “paradoxical mixing of seeming opposites” (*Politics* 6). This mix creates a potential for hybridization. Ihab Hassan defines hybridization as a mutant replication of genres, or a form of “de-definition” and “deformation” which “engenders equivocal modes” such as “fictual discourse,” “nonfictional novel,” and “a promiscuous category of ‘para-literature’” (170). The hybridization of different genres with others creates another genre: a hybrid genre. This genre is a product of the “invasion of the integrity of one genre by another genre or genre convention” (Bhatia 58). It “shares some of its genre characteristics with the one that influenced it in the first place” (58). A genre hybridization blurs the boundaries between genres because it creates innumerable variations by combining conventions of desperate genres and discourses. As Hassan says,

This [Hybridization] makes for a different concept of tradition, one in which continuity and discontinuity, high and low culture, mingle not to imitate but to expand the past in the present. In that plural present, all styles are dialectically available in an interplay between the Now and the Not Now, the Same and the Other. (170-71)

When this hybridization is specifically applied to genre, hybridity produced out of genre invasion proposes a double or multiple reading. On the one hand, the past of another tradition is employed to question, compare, and contrast with the present dominant discourse. On the other hand, the present hybridity positively recognizes the phenomenon of

transgression or resistance in a wide context where various ideologies meet. Thus postmodern genre hybridization fosters a multiplicity of ideas and thoughts. The intersection of several mainstream and subsidiary genres, of various cultural phenomena narrated in these genres, enables the reader to get a glimpse of many different ideologies. So the reader is able to relate to characters and plots with different perspectives.

Boundary-crossing in *The Woman Warrior* has caused much debate about its classification as fiction or nonfiction. When Alfred A. Knopf decided to publish *The Woman Warrior* as autobiography, Donald Goellnicht contended that this classification is “difficult to justify on traditional generic grounds” (343). He argues:

there is no single autobiographical “I” in *The Woman Warrior* [...]. Nor is there a central biographical figure, but instead a series of female figures from Kingston’s family who form a composite or communal (auto)biographical subject that both is and is not Kingston herself. In addition to drawing on family history, most of which the narrator invents from bare bones given her by her mother, Kingston also makes extensive use of Chinese myths and legends, which she revises for her own purposes of self-fashioning. (343)

Goellnicht concludes *The Woman Warrior* does not follow the traditional conventions of autobiography, “which is linear, chronological, progressive, and individualist” (343). I contend further that the unconventional genre of *The Woman Warrior* falls into what Hassan has called “equivocal modes” (170). The complex interplay of fact and fiction in the narrative makes for a factual reading of fiction or a fictional reading of facts.

Kingston herself also recognizes the controversy around the text’s lack of clear genre categorization. Despite the controversy, she still considers she wrote biography and autobiography of imaginative people (Rabinowitz 186). This answer does more blurring than clarification, because neither autobiography nor imagination is a stable form of narrative. As Kingston says concerning her narrative structure, “I invented new literary structures to contain multiversions and to tell the true lives of non-fiction people who are storytellers” (185). Her play with word and form undermines the usual idea of biography that “is of time-lines, of dates and chronological events” (186).

The hybrid genre of *The Woman Warrior* is composed of a multitude of narratives. Each of the constituent episodes displays features of genre hybridity. The story of Fa Mu Lan, for example, mixes Mother's talk-story, the narrator's dream and reality, with other historical figures and novels to develop a myth of a woman warrior. This is how the narrator starts the story:

Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep. [...]

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. (WW 19-20)

The story starts from Mother's talk-story with the description of a dream. Childhood memories are fictionalized and branched into a historical legend. They are so (con)fused it becomes impossible for the narrator to "tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her [Mother's] voice [and] the voice of the heroines in my sleep" (19). The literary character Fa Mu Lan becomes "I," the narrator. The fourteen-year training inside the mountain enables the narrator to grow up to be a warrior in the battlefield.

In her American life, the narrator shows her resolution to be a warrior like Fa Mu Lan. The wish is presented through her upward struggle to receive college education. As the narrator says:

I'm so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. [...] I'm going to get scholarships, and I'm going away. [...] I'm going to college. (WW 201-02)

Later, the narrator becomes a warrior and takes revenge in writing. She inherits warrior spirit from Fa Mu Lan and returns to Chinatown. Fa Mu Lan's revenge on the barons becomes the narrator's revenge on racists

and tyrants in the US. The narrator describes her commonality with Fa Mu Lan as follows:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The ideographs for *revenge* are “report a crime” and “report to five families.” The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. (53)

The narrator’s words narrating *The Woman Warrior* constitute a written “report.” She writes a way out of voicelessness to a voice full of possibilities.<sup>2</sup> This transition, as I see it, is a process of building an identity by breaking silence from a voiceless “other” on a self-determined individual. It puts the Chinese myth of the woman warrior at work at a political level. The revised story aims for a definition of women’s roles in present American society in contrast to a feudalist ancient society. Fictional narration extends to politics. Facts and fiction merge and intertwine into one narration. As the writer says, it is impossible to “find the seams where a myth leaves off and a life and imagination begin” (“Personal” 24). The fusion breaks monotony and frees the story from the conventional delineation of any specific genre. In my opinion, *The Woman Warrior* has had a profound impact on the traditional definition of genres, especially the genre of autobiography and novelistic fiction.

### **Genre Innovation of *The Woman Warrior***

Kingston asks the following question: “How is it possible that a writer can suddenly and effortlessly become now this character and now that one, see through his eyes, her eyes, speak with his voice, her voice, make the reader view the world with the soul of another?” (“Imagined” 568). The answer lies in her creative use of the genre. Many critics have noted the novelty of fusing fiction and nonfiction. Pin-chia Feng, for example, claims that the innovation of *The Woman Warrior* lies in its breakthrough of “an ‘autobiographical form,’ which can be fictional

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<sup>2</sup> By “voice full of possibilities,” I refer to Ts’ai Yen’s voice from a Chinese literary classic. For more detail, see the section “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” in the previous chapter.

and/or nonfictional” (110). Views like this do recognize the innovative moments in Kingston’s writing, but they fail to see that Kingston is not the only writer who includes fiction in (auto)biography. As Sidonie Smith notes that “autobiographers gradually incorporated the techniques of realist fiction—dialogue, characterization, plotting—within the structures of autobiographical narrative” (“Construing” 146).

I contend genre innovation in *The Woman Warrior* not only consists of the inclusion of fictionality in a(n) (auto)biography, but, more importantly, is a postmodern hybridization of fictionality which puts the traditional genre into new use. In the novel, strategies of fictional writing, such as fantasy, imagination, and myth are redesigned. They construct a historical and cultural experience of uncertainty and multi-vocality in an immigrant context. They are engaged in a realistic portrayal of the political struggle with American racism and Chinese feudalism. In short, fictionality constructs factuality about a subjective experience. As Kingston says, the women in *The Woman Warrior* “draw on mythology for their strengths, [and] the myth becomes part of the women’s lives and the structure of the stories” (Rabinowitz 179). With a fact-oriented aim, the narration moves to and centers on a thematic occupation with identity issues through fiction.

The factual fictionality bridges real and imaginary worlds to create a hybrid text. It provides a stance to perceive the world as a complex and uncertain place. The reality is fictionalized from the writer’s specific point of view. In interviews, Kingston insists that she is an American or a Chinese American writing American novels (“Cultural” 57, 65; “Personal” 24; Rabinowitz 182). With this American perspective she positions herself as a foreigner who uses Chinese cultural sources. This ambiguity sets up a distance toward Chinese people. The distance from Chinese traditions prompts a reader to question how a non-Chinese deals with the task of constructing herself as an American by using Chinese sources. The conflict between two ideologies of being Chinese and being American can be appropriated into the same movement of hybridization as the genres do. This hybridity extends beyond the literary field into the cultural field of an ethnic community. The hybrid narrative of *The Woman Warrior* reflects the dynamic and contradictory social relations rooting the writer’s immigrant situation.

## The Reader's Ambiguity

By examining three of Stephen Crane's classic texts, theorist Thomas Kent argues, "the meaning of a text may derive directly from its manipulation of generic conventions" (124). For Kent, the aesthetic uncertainty is employed to mean epistemological uncertainty (126), which functions on two levels. One is "on the narrative level within the text where characters and events are interwoven." The other is "[o]n the extra-textual level, or audience level, where judgments must be made by the reader about the meaning of the text" (126). These two levels of uncertainty are intensified in a hybrid genre text, "[b]ecause a hybrid genre does not conform to expectation, and because it is not formulaic or predictable" (69). Following Kent, I see that the confusion over the narrative of *The Woman Warrior* is directly related to its unconventional manipulation of hybrid genres.

In my opinion, the unconventional genres of *The Woman Warrior* are characterized by meta-discursive qualities. The meta-discourse produces a two-leveled uncertainty similar to Kent's formulation. On the narrative level, the interplay of the meta-narrative and its original narrative always provokes at least two certainties, two possibilities from these two accounts. The fissure in-between opens the narration to a space of ambiguity. In the No Name Woman story, for example, the aunt, who was supposed to be a victim of feudalism repression, showed individuality. The narration etches details of the moment when she looked into a mirror: "She brushed her hair back from her forehead, tucking the flaps behind her ears" (WW 9). The story is suspended between seemingly contradictory accounts, between reality and imagination. It is also suspended between great details and a biography of a family outcast whom the narrator has never heard about before and is forbidden to mention in future. The suspension puts the story in a dubious position. The ambiguity on this level is further transformed into the subject matter of boundary crossing of the two cultures.

On an audience level, the reader is uncertain about what to expect from the text, how to read it. On the one hand, the text continually undermines the reader's expectations in terms of genre, structure, mode of representation, and narrative coherence. That is why *The Woman Warrior* has incurred criticism in many respects. On the other hand, the "meta-" qualities in contemporary ethnic autobiographies, as Michael

Fischer notes, have encouraged the reader to self-consciously participate in the production of meaning (232). The reader becomes a co-producer of meanings. He or she is forced to respond consciously to the parodic imitation of conventions, incompleteness or fragments in the discourse. This connectedness between the reader and the meaning production, Fischer argues, “is not merely descriptive of how ethnicity is experienced, but more importantly is an ethical device attempting to activate in the reader a desire for *communitas* with others, while preserving rather than effacing differences” (232-33). The dynamic force of the reader’s interpretation challenges the authority of a smooth and unified representation of immigrant experience passed down for decades. When the meaning of a text becomes unstable because of its genre violation, the desire for *communitas* turns into an uncertain equilibrium, which engages the reader between the extremes of genres such as fact and fiction.

The uncertainty on extra-textual level pushes the reader to rely on himself or herself to self-consciously construct the meaning. To make a satisfactory reading, the reader brings his or her own set of assumptions, preconceptions, and values into the interpretative framework. The reader must elucidate the absences of fact, and cope with the unstable, fragmented fiction. Thus the work presents itself through what Smith calls “double reading,” which is actively engaged “by the autobiographer who, in effect, is reading his or her life; and by the reader of the autobiographical text, who is also in the encounter with the text, rereading his or her own life by association.”<sup>3</sup> The reader becomes a writer who composes one’s own stories. At this point, reading *The Woman Warrior* is an experience similar to how Kingston seeks to construct her cultural identity from a discourse of contradictory sources. When both the reader and the writer are freed from confinement of absolute truths and seek a way of their own reading and writing, the reading and writing of this experience enable a more comprehensive understanding of the problematics of immigrant reality.

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<sup>3</sup> Janet Varner Gunn’s idea (qtd. in Smith, *Poetics* 6).

## Autobiography: Truth-telling or Storytelling?

The genre of autobiography is hard to define. The term “autobiography,” denoting “self life writing,”<sup>4</sup> demonstrates a characteristic of what Hassan has called postmodern hybridization of genres. That is to say, it is a hybrid genre, or in Smith’s and Watson’s words, “an ‘umbrella’ term for widely diverse kinds of life narrative” (“Trouble” 357). This genre may include a diversity of biography, historical, and fictional narrative. Traditionally, truthful representation is an important strategy in autobiographies, but both the telling of truth and the truth itself are brought into question in postmodern literature.

In her essay “Construing Truth in Lying Mouths,” Smith notes that “‘truth’ to and of ‘self’ and ‘experience’ is a problematic phenomenon” because of the inaccessibility to a “true self” and to the homogenization of “truth” (149). She questions this “truth” and “truth-telling” by asking “‘Truth’ to what?”<sup>5</sup> and “what does it mean to ask about the perplexed relationship of the autobiographical to ‘truth-telling’?” (147-48). Smith redefines truth as the (woman) autobiographer’s experience, and truth-telling as the autobiographer’s translation of her original, unmediated experience, where the text is an accurate reflection of this experience (147-48). In this sense, personal is truthful. To present a truthful self, an autobiographer resorts to personal dreams, memoirs, myths, and fantasies.

Traditionally, these genres might not belong to a realistic reflection of one’s past. But now they constitute a “truthful” telling of one’s life. Autobiographical texts structured by these genres may deploy a series of techniques, such as “bifocality or reciprocity of perspectives, juxtapositioning of multiple realities, intertextuality and inter-referentiality, and comparison through families of resemblance” (Fischer 230). Fictional genres and writing strategies intensify the novelization of autobiography. The novelization has confused the genre boundaries that

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<sup>4</sup> Smith and Watson trace the etymological origin from Greek of the term “autobiography,” which is composed of *autos*, signifying “self,” *bios* “life,” and *graphie* “writing.” They give a brief definition of autobiography as “self life writing” (*Reading 1*).

<sup>5</sup> Smith asks a series of questions: “‘Truth’ to what? To facticity? To experience? To self? To history? To community? Truth to the said, to the unsaid, to other fictions [...], to the genre? And truth for what and for whom? For the autobiographer? The reader? Society?” (147-48).

distinguish between the autobiographical and the fictive (Smith, "Construing" 146). The traditional truth-telling of life stories becomes storytelling. As Smith writes:

memory only leaves a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story; experience itself is mediated by the ways we describe and interpret it to others and ourselves; cultural tropes and metaphors which structure autobiographical narrative are themselves fictive; and narrative is driven by its own fictive conventions about beginnings, middles, and ends. (145)

An autobiography becomes a narrative artifice that only exists within language. Subjectivity is thus understood as the construction of the self based on language. The embedded alternative or deferred identities in the text constantly subvert the so-called "truthfulness" (Smith, *Poetics* 5). In striving to be truthful representation, an autobiography ironically produces untruthfulness. In this case, autobiography is fictional and nonfictional, truthful and untruthful. Fiction and nonfiction are neither clear-cut opposites nor mutually exclusive. They are all different ways to interpret experiences with different methodologies. To put it in another way, there is no pure fact in an autobiography. The self becomes fictional and truth is composed of half-truth and half-lying. The truthful life writing of the self is set in a continuum where facts and fiction are both needed to tell that specific experience. In the following sections, I will discuss respectively how *The Woman Warrior* deals with the task of "truthful" writing of self and of life experience.

## A "True" Self

The concept of postmodern indeterminacy goes deep into a person's uncertainty about his or her identity. Destabilization of the genre puts the notion of the "self" under question. Smith argues that, for women, the self in autobiography can only be an "approximation" ("Construing" 145). This argument suggests that the self, like the truth, is always in construction toward a truer and newer self. Smith understands the self in an autobiography not as a true presence, but as "a cultural and linguistic 'fiction' constituted through historical ideologies of selfhood and the processes of our storytelling" (*Poetics* 45). Thus a true self "can never be discovered, unmasked, or revealed because its core is [...] an infinite

regress. The origin and history of the self, then, are fictions” (Smith and Watson, *Reading* 132-33). Postmodern literature further complicates the notion of true self because it encourages multiple interpretations. In this context, “incursions on authority, legitimacy, origin, and meaning,” Smith says, “have all colluded in rendering the old essential self and its myth of uniqueness, coherence, and imperial power, a fictive construct” (“Construing” 146). The “I” is not fixed or real, but constructed.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator’s cultural environment intensifies her puzzlement as to how to understand the self in the two worlds. She expresses her puzzlement as follows:

I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” has seven strokes,<sup>6</sup> intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? (WW 166-67)

Trying to bring the two selves into accord generates the narrator’s confusion. She cannot identify which “I” she is. Sometimes, the narrator claims to be American, and speaks from an American perspective against being Chinese: “You can’t entrust your voice to the Chinese” (169). Other times, she uses “we” to refer to Chinese people: “We make guttural peasant noise” (171-72) as if she is one of them. On the one hand, she is a Chinese descendant but does not identify with the Chinese identity. She “had to whisper to make [herself] American-feminine” and she “whispered even more softly than the Americans” (172). On the other hand, being an American but being addressed discriminatingly as “nigger yellow” (48) fills her with resentment toward Americans.

Such bewilderment echoes what Smith and Watson have pointed out in respect to the representation of the “I.” They say, “an ‘I’ is neither unified nor stable; rather, it is split, fragmented, provisional, a sign with multiple referents” (“Trouble” 357). The incongruous semantic essence of “I” is represented by the contradiction of the narrator’s Chinese American experience:

trying to be an American, when you are the child of Chinese emigrants; trying to be a woman, when you have been taught that men

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<sup>6</sup> In Chinese, “I” is written as “我,” which contains seven strokes.

are all that matter; trying to be a writer, when you have been afraid to speak out loud at all. (Juhasz 69)

Tensions arise in representing the paradoxical “I” against the adversity of being a voiceless woman of Chinese background. The opposition against this self constitutes an integral part of living in these paradoxes. The representation of this “I” results in a text full of contradictions.

Writers like Kingston, Shirley Lim notes, “pursue an elusive literary form capable of expressing alternative self-images” (“Twelve” 245). The alternative images of ethnic women subvert the stereotypical image of third world women as exotic or as model minorities.<sup>7</sup> The elusive literary form takes the place of directness and determinacy. This literary form, as Fischer notes, is a “technique for achieving [...] multidimensionality [of the self]” (201). I see the multidimensionality as related to the social and historical environment in which alternative identities are constructed. Thus, “my” traditions, beliefs, and experiences reflect a culturally specific collective account. The fact that Chinese immigrants and their offspring live in a foreign land is a matter of multifaceted contradiction as well as of possibility. Simple and plain narration does not qualify to accomplish the task of presenting the multidimensionality of a fractured or cross-cultural identity and the conditions of a hybrid culture. The “umbrella-genred” text represents the subject of hybridity in terms of identity and culture. In this hybrid identity, it is neither possible to tell clearly which parts are Chinese or American, nor is the identity simply Chinese plus American, nor can one be separated from the other. Immigrant life resembles the terms and narrative that describe it. Similarly, the narrative creates a genre in which the reader cannot draw a clear line among its component genres. The genre is designed to fit in immigrant ethnic identity. A blurring of genres consolidates Kingston’s postmodern writing of decentering the paradoxical “I” who lives in the space of hybridity.

## Storytelling

Theorist Michael Jackson brings up two theses in *The Politics of Storytelling* (2002). The first thesis is that “storytelling is a strategy for

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<sup>7</sup> As Fischer notes, Asian Americans are viewed “as either totally exotic, as no different from anyone else [...], or [...] as model minorities” (211).

transforming private into public meanings” (14-15). That is to say, storytelling records stories of personal experiences, and puts them into public interpretation. The second is “seeing storytelling as a vital human strategy for sustaining a sense of agency in the face of disempowering circumstances” (15). He continues, “To reconstitute events in a story is no longer to live those events in passivity, but to actively rework them, both in dialogue with others and within one’s own imagination” (15). These two theses together suggest a storyteller transgresses boundaries between personal and public, narrative and reality, self and other. A person’s storytelling turns into an act of reinventing himself or herself and of reworking reality. It becomes a coping strategy, which as Jackson notes, “involves making words stand for the world, and then, by manipulating them, changing one’s *experience* of the world” (18).

When available, storytelling as an existential strategy or practice discloses the experiences of marginalized people. These people rework reality by making and telling stories in order to make it bearable (Jackson 16). The narration of a story becomes a construction of reality and of identity. In telling a story, the meaning of both the self and of the story is continually revisited and reinvented. The remaking is not a purely personal articulation because it is “authored and authorised [...] in the course of sharing one’s recollections with others” (22). That is why the politics of storytelling concerns “vexed and unstable contrasts between truth and untruth, articulated as an opposition between public and private domains, or [...] ‘dominant’ and ‘demotic’ discourses” (27). Based on this view, I see that storytelling as a kind of coping strategy performs negotiation beyond telling a story: it “enables us to negotiate an existential balance between ourselves and [...] spheres of otherness” (23).<sup>8</sup> This active self-conscious performance characterizes storytelling.

### **Mother’s Talk-Story: A Source of Ambiguity**

In Chinese community, the oral tradition of storytelling is referred to as “talk-story.” This communal folk art “serve[s] to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore” (Sledge 143). It maintains Chinese traditional oral forms such as parables, proverbs, and heroic biography (143). *The*

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<sup>8</sup> By “spheres of otherness,” Jackson refers to “worlds that extend beyond us” (23).

*Woman Warrior* is a narrative of life stories that uses Mother's talk-stories as a sketch. The narrative revises, thus revitalizes, old stories, and incorporates them into writing new life. In the following, I will discuss the politics of storytelling as a coping strategy for immigrants, followed by how the narrative of *The Woman Warrior*, based on Mother's storytelling and non-telling, becomes a coping strategy for the narrator to deal with her confusion and to negotiate her cultural conditions.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Mother adopts storytelling as a way to instruct her children how Chinese people were and should be. Her talk-stories are the source materials of the narration. As the narrator says, "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (WW 5), and "My mother has given me pictures to dream" (86). Often the narrator constructs a story in which the beginning is Mother's and the ending is hers (206). Smith characterizes Mother's commanding voice in her analysis of storytelling in *The Woman Warrior*. This voice both "enforces the authority and legitimacy of the old culture" and "gives shape [...] to create a space of cultural significance" (*Poetics* 151). She asserts that "storytelling becomes the means through which [Mother] passes on to her daughter all the complexities of and the ambivalences about both mother's and daughter's identity as woman in patriarchal culture" (151-52).

However, Mother's talk-stories become problematic for the next generation (Smith, *Poetics* 162). The stories generate ambiguities because her stories are full of contradictions about her daughter's identity in the patriarchal culture. As the narrator says:

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. (WW 19)

She [Mother] said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (20)

Mother passes on to her daughter an ambivalent message. She says that the daughter would "grow up a wife and a slave," but teaches her "the song of the warrior woman." This message troubles the clear alignment of identity. The daughter is left in insecurity as to whether the mother expects her to be a wife and slave or a warrior. In confusion, she employs fiction as primary mode of narration to solve this contradiction.

By storytelling herself as a mythical figure of Fa Mu Lan, the narrator is able to become a heroic woman warrior to get out of “slavery.” By taking No Name Aunt as her forerunner, the narrator seeks individuality by fighting against feudalism against women. By writing Mother’s biography to understand the archetypal mother, the narrator constructs a quest for her self.<sup>9</sup> In conclusion, by situating her identity construction in relation to the stories of her people, the narrator constructs her selfhood as “a composite self” (Feng 113). This self is constructed out of her fictional women warriors’ struggle with diverse values and established traditions.

The ambivalence of Mother’s messages is caused, as I see it, by her status of being a woman influenced by Chinese traditional patriarchal system. Under this system, on the one hand heroism of a warrior spirit like Fa Mu Lan is advocated. On the other hand, women are in an inferior position and can only be men’s wives and slaves. Even in one culture, a woman is simultaneously influenced by two sets of contradictory codes and rituals. Living in another country with a different culture coupled with an “other” position of being an immigrant minority woman further complicates the contradiction. Mother’s paradoxical attitude in her talk-story is also a reflection of her experience reduced from the old world. In China, she was a brilliant medical scholar of high social status, a delicate, elegantly dressed small lady. In America, she is “a capable exorcist,” a big eater with “big muscles,” and an indefatigable immigrant who works at the laundry from 6:30 a.m. until midnight. Her life experience in the US addresses different aspects of racial and gender oppression. The inferior position as a wife or slave demands a warrior spirit to fight against it. The sense of loss in the new land urges her to look back into her past and Chinese history, and to reclaim what has been lost. She resorts to talk-story of her experiences and warrior fictions as a strategy for empowerment. The construction and sharing of stories is a way that she, borrowing a sentence from Jackson, “contrive[s] to restore viability to their relationship with others, redressing a bias toward autonomy when it has been lost” (18). This viewpoint again proves how talk-stories become enduring sources of strength for Mother.

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<sup>9</sup> For the narrator, “understanding the archetypal mother” resembles a “quest for self” (Kingston, “Personal” 23).

Mother's paradoxical attitude in telling the stories constitutes the narrator's ambiguous mind. As she says:

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities. [...] Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the *invisible world* the emigrants built around our childhoods fit in *solid America*. (*WW* 5; emphasis added)

Mother's talk-story builds an "invisible world" in "solid America" for the later generation. The narrator uses the past of that invisible world as an important source of her story. Throughout the novel, the narration presents the confrontation and interplay between the two worlds. However, the fact of an "invisible world" in "solid America" is incompatible in its literal sense.<sup>10</sup> Specifically, the "invisible world" concerns imaginary China from Mother's talk-story. The "solid America" is where the narrator's experience lies. The encounter of the opposite entities in the narrator's life creates contradiction because the "solid" world is built on an "invisible," and thus "fluid," basis. The "invisible world" is full of intricacies for those who grow up in the "solid America." The younger generation who live in the present solid America must infer values, ideas and principles from the invisible world. Mother's principle is that after telling once-and-for-all the useful parts, she will add nothing (6). Chinese custom in which "[t]he adults [...] shut you up if you ask" (185) further problematizes their inference. Without a solid ground, the inference of the invisible world is bound to be "groundless."

### **Mother's Non-Telling**

In other cases, Mother, or the immigrant generation in general, either do not say anything about Chinese tradition or tell the opposite of what they mean. The narrator is confused about this generation's evasiveness. As she says:

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse

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<sup>10</sup> By this statement, I mean that the word "invisible" signifies a "hidden" or "evasive" state, and "solid" implies a "substantial" and "real" being.

## Chapter 6

their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways—always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence. (*WW* 5)

The immigrants' attachment and resort to Chinese ancestral roundabout ways of speaking and doing things are full of mystery and superstition. The younger generation is puzzled. They cannot understand what is real and what is imagined because of the Chinese way of saying the opposite (202-03). The narrator even wants to go to China to "find out who's lying [... and] what's a cheat story and what's not" (205, 206). It is a desire to find out the truth about her family's traditional heritage.

On one occasion, Mother "pour[ed] Seagram's 7 into the cups and, after a while, pour[ed] it back into the bottle" (*WW* 185). The narrator states her bewilderment:

Never explaining. How can Chinese keep any tradition at all? They don't even make you spy any attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. [...] I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we'd have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death. (185)

Later in the text, the narrator becomes angry with her mother for telling confusing stories by not making a clear line between reality and fantasy. She protests to Mother:

I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, "This is a true story," or "This is just a story." I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. (202)

While complaining about Mother's vagueness, the narrator seems to adopt even in a deeper sense the very style that has irritated her. She claims she "enjoy[s] the simplicity" (204), but she tells stories of great complexity. Kingston, too, picks up Mother's vagueness, continues with it by amplifying it with postmodern writing strategies, and produces a nonlinear-structured narrative.

Not telling, or telling the opposite of a person's ideas, serves as another kind of coping strategy. The unexplained customs, Fischer notes, are "grounded in survival tactics that the immigrants developed against the discriminatory immigration policies of the United States against Asians" (210). Thus, non-explanation is a way of easing the difficulties faced in first-generation immigrant "exile." Many Chinese migrants moved to America and later built their identities from forged identification papers.<sup>11</sup> The text mentions that if they had not lied to American immigration authorities, they could not have come to America. Nor could they have claimed American citizenship. As the narrator explains, "Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home" (*WW* 5). The marginalized position after immigration intensifies their sense of insecurity. As mentioned in the narrative, warnings like "Don't tell," "Don't ask" and "Lie to Americans" come from a fear of being caught in an American trap. Chinese immigrants hold the belief that if they tell the truth, they will be put in jail or deported (184). These "survival tactics" constitute a political resistance against the unfavorable immigration policy.

By analogy, I see that the immigrant generation's condition of physical survival resembles the literary circumstances in which Kingston finds herself. The innovation in her writing is also a form of resistance. Her writing fights against a long-established tradition both in feminisms and the literary field. In the fields of gender studies, Kingston's stories break the long silence of the immigrant voice, and turn the silence into a recognition and assertion of women's self-value. The voice from a minority culture resists a racist dominant discourse, and a misogynist feudal system. Her warrior depiction subverts the stereotyped images of Chinese immigrant women as being "devious, timid, shrewd, and [...] 'inscrutable' or [...] docile, submissive, and obedient" (Cheung, *Articulate* 2). It creates new images of ethnic women. *The Woman Warrior's* subversion of stereotypes, as Shirley Lim notes, "is related to the rejection of conventional literary forms" ("Twelve" 245). In the literary field, the unconventional way of narration "breaks down the hegemony of formal 'autobiography' and breaks out of the silence that has bound her [Kingston] culturally to discover a resonant voice of her

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<sup>11</sup> Chinese immigration history is a history of exclusion and discrimination from US immigration policy against Chinese. I discussed it in the Introduction and in Chapter Three.

own” (Smith, *Poetics* 151). The reflexive and inventive dimensions of ethnicity not only innovate an unchanged literary tradition in Chinese immigrant writing,<sup>12</sup> but also start “another tradition of American literature.”<sup>13</sup>

### **No Name Woman: An Example of Ambiguity**

Based on Mother’s talk-story, Kingston, through the narrator, tells imagined stories from her or her family’s “real” experiences. Among them, I choose stories of No Name Woman and of ghosts as examples to show how Kingston constructs her ambiguous writing in a postmodern way.

The ambiguous nature of the No Name Woman story stems from its forbidden-to-tell narration. Mother tells the daughter the story while warning her “You must not tell anyone” (WW 3), and “Don’t tell anyone” (15). Is she protecting the family integrity by keeping it a secret, or humiliating the family history by revealing it? Is she reinforcing No Name Aunt’s shamefulness, or lessening it by sharing it with her daughter?<sup>14</sup> These questions again reveal Mother’s paradoxical attitude toward the silence imposed on the aunt in a feudalist discourse.

The narrator’s aunt committed adultery when her husband was away in the US to make money. As I discussed in the previous chapter, the narration explores the silence of No Name Aunt and the family’s

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<sup>12</sup> Before *The Woman Warrior*, works by Chinese American writers, for example, Jade Snow Wong’s *The Fifth Chinese Daughter*, are mostly restricted to (auto)biography with a truthful reproduction of immigrant life. Kingston subverts this literary tradition with her use of Chinese myths.

<sup>13</sup> Chinese American literature has long been excluded from the American literary canon, which is based on white (male) American experience and conforms to the style and subject matter of the white American literary tradition. It is until 1960s when diverse perspectives and images were produced in Chinese American literature that the stereotype was overturned and the literature began to draw attention as part of American literature. By “another tradition of American literature,” Kingston means that she is “trying to write an American language that has Chinese accents;” that she will write the American language as she speaks it. In a way, she is creating something new by pushing the American language further (Rabinowitz 182).

<sup>14</sup> In the text, the narrator mentions that her family treated No Name Aunt as if she had never been born. The fact that Mother told the No Name Aunt story goes against this treatment.

forbiddance to mention her name. As to the reasons of her adultery, on the one hand, evidence within the text encourages readers to conclude that No Name Aunt was forced into sex (*WW* 6). On the other hand, the narration seems to support the conclusion that she committed adultery out of willingness: she liked the man's appearance and manner (8). The contrast between the two hypotheses is an example of two opposed viewpoints.

The narration constantly shifts between two viewpoints. Each change of viewpoints calls for a new understanding of the existing story. Each viewpoint needs to negotiate with a specific historical context that the protagonist or the narrator is in. Thus, the text confronts the reader with sets of two possible ways of interpretation. In times of need adultery is a crime, while in good times adultery is only a mistake (*WW* 13). No Name Aunt is a silent sexual victim, a shameful family outcast, and a spiteful ghost in a patriarchal system. Simultaneously, she is a brave woman warrior who pursues passion of freedom and individuality. From a Chinese male patriarchal viewpoint, No Name Aunt "did as she was told" (6). From the perspective of modern American popular culture dominated by the idea of individualism, "she gave up family" (8), and "She wanted him to look back" (9). The latter understanding in each dual reading emphasizes the aspect of agency in No Name Aunt's character and her opposition against the patriarchal society.

Positing so many "realities," the indefiniteness creates a pervasive ontological ambiguity. The multiple possibilities constantly interact because they are generated from a life account of one subject. As a result, No Name Aunt oscillates between being an active pursuer and a passive receiver. The polarity of views testifies to the complicated state of mind of the protagonist and narrator. It further suggests the confrontation between the two cultures, and the dilemma and inner-world conflicts suffered by Chinese Americans. The two possible views are juxtaposed throughout the text. This produces a paradoxical mixture of contradictions, through which the narrative confronts political and ideological levels. The polarity of views can be both a point of comparison and of contrast. While comparing the aunt's passiveness in terms of her subjectivity, the text foregrounds the contrast between the two cultures and suspends itself between the two ideologies. The suspension is intensified when the narrator asks these questions while telling the No Name Woman story:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (WW 5-6)

When asking, “What is Chinese tradition” in an American narration, the narrator, caught in an entangled web of Chinese heritage and American reality, cannot help but be influenced by both. The work addresses both of the feelings. These questions penetrate the narration till the last chapter: “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (205). In the end, the narrator is still in doubt: “Perhaps [...] what I once had was not Chinese-sight at all but child-sight” (205). Though not resolved, these questions probe into the sphere of how an outsider “critically receiv[es] and rearticulat[es] cultural traditions in the face of a dominant national culture that exoticizes and ‘orientalizes’ Asians” (Lowe 65). It leads further to the issue of how this outsider’s identity is shaped in such conditions of exoticization and orientalization.

The narrator’s uncertain mind comes from the novel’s confrontation between Chinese heritage and mainstream American culture. The effect of the interaction, as stated by Yan Gao, is that “Kingston’s Chinese heritage is neither deserted, nor melted, nor assimilated, but rather transformed, penetrating American culture and enriching its literature” (150). Gao notes the positive interaction generates rich texts from Kingston by emphasizing how an ethnic subculture influences the dominant. From my own Chinese perspective, however, I would like to add another observation to Gao’s analysis. The second hypothesis of No Name Woman’s adultery from an American perspective in the narration also enriches the traditional Chinese culture, which privileges passiveness and collectiveness. The enrichment is achieved with another possibility of choosing one’s life when “women in old China did not choose” (WW 6), and of being romantic in the time when “[t]o be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was a waste enough” (6). In short, the enrichment comes from the possibility of being extravagant in times of necessity. Thus the writing enriches the two cultures mutually.

## Postmodern Indeterminacy

In analyzing the reasons for No Name Aunt's adultery, the text repeatedly says "perhaps," "as if," and "she must/could/may have." The indefiniteness parallels the state of the narrator's immigrant background which is full of (un)certainities and (im)possibilities. It plays out features of postmodern indeterminacy. An awareness of this indeterminacy is crucial for intercepting the mode of storytelling in *The Woman Warrior*. The indeterminacy in the No Name Woman story (and by extension, the whole narration of *The Woman Warrior*) is integrated in the transposition of perspectives, the cross-cultural experience, and hybridization of genres suffused in the narration.

In postmodern times of indecisiveness, different opinions and perceptions are welcome to understand reality. Thus multiple narrative voices, non-resolution, and open ending are useful strategies to represent this trend. To go one step further, if reality is not based on a reliable source, the representation of it is inherently unstable. Therefore, the understanding of the reality can never be contained within the text itself, and is constantly changing depending on the context. The indefiniteness dissolves narrative centers, and breaks the unity of a literary text, which leads to indeterminacy of its narration. This indeterminacy not only exists in literary texts; it also permeates all the aspects of postmodernism. As Hassan notes, "Indeterminacies pervade our actions, ideas, interpretations; they constitute our world" (168). The postmodern indeterminacy is where critical pluralism takes shape (168). This quality suggests that there is no finality in postmodernism: the world is indeterminate. We can only mediate, balance, and relativize. This non-absolute quality is also reflected in postmodern literary works. Hassan notes the validity of the indeterminacies concerning literature. These indeterminacies reconstitute themselves in various ways: "pervasive procedures, ubiquitous interactions, immanent codes, media, languages" (94).

The postmodern indeterminate character manifests itself explicitly in the language of *The Woman Warrior*. Words in Kingston's use become the "fantastic and magical power to turn the order of things upside down" (Kingston, "Imagined" 570).<sup>15</sup> Her narration uses a word

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<sup>15</sup> Kingston gives an example of it: "I wrote about a tribe of musical barbarians, who played reed flutes and fought with bows and arrows. So I invented for them a

while pointing in the opposite direction. By speaking the “unspeakable” and writing “No Name Aunt,” however, the words say “a name.” By asking the reader to listen to the sounds of “silence,”<sup>16</sup> the narration speaks aloud. By presenting possible explanations, the text resists the totality of interpretations. It gives one set of hypotheses only to be subverted by another while suggesting more to be unearthed. Thus, all the meanings in the narrative are provisional and conditional because they are forever confronted, subverted or falsified by a new meaning. The establishment of this new meaning is not final either, because it is only to be contradicted by still another or the previously subverted meaning. It seems the production of meaning is cyclically endless.

*The Woman Warrior* heavily employs on indeterminacy as a “truthful” way of self-portrait. The uncertain narration of this fictional truth conforms to the worldview of postmodernists, where there is no determinacy in both the fictional writing and the real world. The opening story of No Name Woman in *The Woman Warrior* initiates the novel’s overall indeterminate mode: of the narrator’s feelings about her identity, of narrative disorder, and of plot fragmentation.

### **Ghosts: The Most Ambiguous Figure**

The image of No Name Woman plays out a sense of contrast between two ideological understandings. Ghosts do more. They conjure a multiplicity of different connotations—from favorable to unfavorable, canny to uncanny, familiar to exotic—with many nuances in between. An audience outside of Chinese culture can hardly understand the meaning of ghosts in Chinese culture, as they are problematic for Chinese natives as well. In Western culture, “ghosts” or disembodied spirits may be mainly associated with terror, revenge, and myth, but in Chinese cultures, ghosts carry more varied implications. They can be addressed to persons with whom one has a relationship (as a lover, or one’s beloved children). They can also be used as curses for a person’s enemy. Ghosts suggest a sense of mystery. They are fluid, indeterminate in form and action, and do not follow a fixed path. Ghosts carry

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nock whistle to attach to their arrows; the archers shot terrifying sounds through the air” (“Imagined” 570).

<sup>16</sup> In telling the No Name Aunt story, the narration emphasizes its “silence.” I discussed it in the previous chapter.

paradoxical feelings and convey delicate ambiguities. The depiction of ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* is characterized by uncertain implications and by their omnipresence. Confusion, threat, and delusion occur in connection with ghosts. Indeed, nothing definite is of ghosts.

In the opening chapter, ghosts in the No Name Woman story assume a shape of what the reader normally has in mind. The raid from the villagers threatened the family. No Name Aunt was cursed as a ghost for incurring the raid. The dreadful suicide after the raid turned her into an “always hungry, always needing” ghost (WW 16). More dreadful ghost images appear later in the narration, such as the ones Mother exorcized in the medical school and on her way to visit patients. For the child generation, the mysterious and sometimes distorted pictures of China and the Chinese are a kind of specter, from weeping ghosts, sitting ghosts, to wandering ghosts. Ghost stories become a form for exploring frightening and undesirable territory.

However, there are other scenes in which ghosts are not presented too negatively or dreadfully. No Name Aunt called her newborn baby “the little ghost,” and thus expressed her love and appreciation. Mother curses the narrator as ghost and *Ho Chi Kuei*. This suggests an inseparable mother-daughter relationship of love-and-hate. The narrator’s middle brother is addressed as *Ho Chi Kuei* by the great-uncle in Chinese community, who “seemed to like him best” (WW 204). With a sense of insecurity, Chinese immigrants regard America as a “terrible ghost country” (104), and Americans as all kinds of ghosts. This reverses racial discrimination against Chinese, and transforms the use of ghosts into a means for self-protection. Ghost stories Mother once experienced, later become a way for the family to “get some good chills up [their] backs” (87). It seems ghosts haunt the novel. They exist everywhere. Everyone, everything is addressed as ghost. Their prevalence runs counter to the narrator’s scientific claims that “[t]here are no such things as ghosts” (70), and “[m]ost ghosts are only nightmares” (65). Confused by the term “ghost,” the narrator looks up the word in the dictionary. She gets translations for *ho* and/or *chi*, and finds diverse meanings, but over a dozen meanings provided in the reference book only make her more confused. As she says, “I like to look up a troublesome, shameful thing and then say, ‘Oh, it that all?’” (205).

As Lynette Carpenter and Wendy Kolmar note in their introduction to *Haunting the House of Fiction* (1991), when women writers of ghost

stories portray natural and supernatural experience along a continuum, the boundaries between the two become blurred. Then “the supernatural can be accepted, connected with, reclaimed, and can often possess a quality of familiarity” (12). Referring to ghost stories by several American women writers including Kingston, Carpenter and Kolmar point out that ghosts “can be healing and supportive, and can bring information crucial to survival” (13). The depiction of ghost stories in *The Woman Warrior* moves from bizarre images to natural ingredients of everyday life. The narration presents the supernatural figure as possibilities symbolic of cultural reconciliation. It moves from a dreadful image, to a confused combination of the positive and the negative, and finally to the recognition of it as representation of everydayness. Following this track, I argue that the process from repulsion to recognition of this social metaphor constitutes a significant step in the process of the narrator’s recognition of her Chinese cultural background.<sup>17</sup> She first takes it as something alien and unhomey, and feels confused when hearing Chinese myths, fantasy, and striking stories. Finally, she accepts it and incorporates it into her Chinese American identity. The outcome of the process is transformation of a direct confrontation into a dialogue with her ethnic background. In this sense, it seems to me the acceptance of the supernatural comes more from the narrator’s ethnic experiences than from her minority’s cultural traditions.

### **Ghosts: From Binary Opposition to Boundary Blurring**

Theorists have commonly noted that in the postmodern age, our presence in the world is hybrid in multiple ways. Ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* can be understood as a pluralistic category of binary opposition of self and other, home and alien. They constitute a representation of a labyrinth of dualisms. As Gayle Sato says, ghosts “imply both insubstantiality and solidity, represent both poetry and practicality, isolation and integration” (205). Sato regards these opposite implications not as conflicting definitions of ghosts, but that “they simply represent the two ways of responding to otherness” (205). She sees ghosts as natural ingredients of

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<sup>17</sup> The process from repulsion to recognition also parallels the moment when Ts’ai Yen heard the striking music on the land of barbarians. I discussed it in the previous chapter.

everyday life. The fluid implications of ghosts make them an adequate metaphor to describe the lived existence of ambiguities.

I further contend that this “natural” figure in *The Woman Warrior* is denaturalized into “unnatural” and “cultural” by presenting the ghost as a dominant feature in postmodern writing. Postmodern society needs as many ways as possible to communicate and express its ideas, feelings, and thoughts. Ghosts constitute a force of generating various metaphors and symbols. The fluid sign of ghosts provides an example of how the meaning of a lexical term can be culturally and socially constructed to express specificity. The specificity in *The Woman Warrior* transforms natural life experience into something culturally representative of the narrator’s ethnic experience and her Chinese (American) background. The demystification of the supernatural is a strategic way to address unnatural and cultural issues brought about by cultural encounters.

Sato explains that ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* designate a particular and shared Chinese American experience. She regards *Ho Chi Kuei* as “an ethnic marker” (210), an “adjuster that puts the entire cultural fabric signified by *ghost* into perspective” (211). She notes the function of the untranslated term *Ho Chi Kuei*, by writing how it, “reminds us that not everything needs explanation, that some explanations are a matter of absorbing a whole context, or that what seems alien might be more familiar than we realize” (211). Based on Sato’s explanation, I suggest there is no explicit narrative that can adequately address the protagonists’ dual Chinese American experience in *The Woman Warrior*. The figurative use of ghosts offers a multi-angled view of perceiving the Chinese world in America and the American world from a Chinese tradition. The depiction of ghosts covers a multiplicity of diametrically opposite and intricately involved images and implications. With so many diversified images denoted by ghosts, this expression represents the generative source of a metaphor. It serves as an important tool to echo diverse voices from this culturally constructed group of people. The multiple denotations together suggest multiple psychic relations with the outer world.<sup>18</sup> This implication turns the absolute distinction between alienness and hominess, self and other into a changeable and negotiable relation.

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<sup>18</sup> In the previous chapter I analyzed the uncanny ghost from a psychoanalytic perspective.

Kingston also recognizes the fluidity that ghosts signify. She comments in an interview that ghosts “are not concrete; they are beautiful, and powerful. But they don’t have a solidity that we can pass around from one to another” (Rabinowitz 178). Kingston’s writing concretizes the invisible images of ghosts into solid figures by giving them a substance (178). The solid “realist” writing of life narrative permeates ambivalence that characterizes ghost stories. The physical world of immigrants is so prevalent with ghosts that a crossing takes place, in effect, from supernatural to natural, from unreality to reality. With the crossing, the prevalence of ghosts in the narration produces a clear picture of boundary blurring. They turn the unreal into real, and invisible into visible. In Sato’s words, the various forms of ghosts represent the writer’s life as “an undichotomized Chinese-American totality” (193).

Another reason for the use of ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* can possibly be deduced from Salman Rushdie’s elaboration on why he uses English in writing:

Those of us who do use English do so in spite of our ambiguity towards it, or perhaps because of that, perhaps because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. (17)

Rushdie’s elaboration links linguistic translation to cultural translation. Postcolonial subjects use ambiguous English language to struggle personally and socially and to define their hybrid selves. Though ambiguous, English language is still a “[fertile] territory for a writer to occupy” (15). This explanation can be applied to Kingston’s use of ghosts. The culturally-specific figure from Chinese heritage crosses cultural frontiers and works to represent a fluid social context in an American story.

The various (un)familiar connotations of ghosts expand the curious space of the in-between world. As I have mentioned, Kingston insists that her novel is a piece of American writing addressed to a (Chinese) American audience. I would suggest that she creates an audience living in and out of the in-between space regardless of being Chinese, American, or Chinese American. The various ghost images presented in her narrative are addressed to disparate audiences. The everydayness

makes them recognizable and identifiable to Chinese and (Chinese) Americans of whatever backgrounds. Embracing this wide readership, the multifaceted images of ghosts, as Smith and Watson note, “produce gaps, fissures, and boundary trouble within the narrative” among different groups of audiences (“Trouble” 357). However, it is from these incongruities that possibilities are generated to create a process-oriented negotiation of these non-unities. Despite their great fluidity and the puzzling and puzzled meaning, the hybrid mixture of indefinite implications reflects divergent realities. The writing of ghosts not only signifies a cross-cultural understanding, but also metaphorically generates various meanings of Chinese (American) culture. It reminds us of what a true society means. The ubiquitous presence of ghosts undermines the stability of the narrative as well as of reality.

### ***The Woman Warrior: A Text of Ambiguity***

Smith classifies the history of criticism on autobiography into three generations.<sup>19</sup> I will focus on the most recent one, the third generation criticism, which, “has challenged the notion of referentiality and undermined comfortable assumptions about an informing ‘I’” (*Poetics* 5). Autobiography by women writers becomes a dialogic process in which discourses interact to create meanings, and in which female subjects re-create themselves. This perspective of narrative draws attention to the processes of interpretation and to the subjectivity involved in the processes. Smith argues further, “the *autos* [...] may be nothing more [...] than a convention of time and space where symbolic systems, existing as infinite yet always structured possibility, speak themselves in the utterance of a *parole*” (5). Thus an autobiography is a product of writing in which “concepts of subject, self, and author collapse into the act of producing a text” (Sprinker qtd. in Smith, *Poetics* 5).

*The Woman Warrior* is a case in point of this third-generation criticism of autobiography, which is “structured by linguistic

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<sup>19</sup> The first generation of criticism concerns “the *bios* of the autobiographer [...] derived from the conceptualization of autobiography as a subcategory of biography” (Smith, *Poetics* 4). It regards autobiography as a universalized and transcendent presentation of the self. The second generation understands autobiography as “a process through which the autobiographer struggles to shape an ‘identity’ out of amorphous subjectivity” (5).

configurations beyond any single mind” (Smith, *Poetics* 5). The life writing of real people is fused with imagination and the invention of fictions. This way of writing produces a narrative abundantly suffused with both detailed fantasticality and incredible factuality. The title, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, has already subverted a truthful narration of a life experience. It indicates the narrative will disclose a personal story on the one hand, and on the other hand a fantastic account of woman warriors tracked down through girlhood memories. It suggests a dual-track reading along fiction and nonfiction—memory mixed with fantasy, and factual past fused with ghost stories. Returning to the title after finishing the whole text, the reader may find that it can be read in a more profound way. The girlhood memories are presented through a multiplicity of female characters. Paralleled to them is a multiplicity of genres. The two sets of multiplicities dispersed in the stories problematize the stability of narration. The narrator’s troublesome voice<sup>20</sup> compounds the two-leveled uncertainty until this uncertainty becomes the real meaning of the text. This is a total ambiguity that baffles a worldwide readership.

The ending of *The Woman Warrior*, “It translated well” (WW 209), once again throws the text into ambiguity. Seeming to end everything, this sentence is instead open to many possible interpretations.<sup>21</sup> The open-ended ending displays a postmodern characteristic of refusing finality. Beyond that, it also “insists on its right to be not even ‘satisfying’” (Friedman 105). This insistence on dissatisfaction is another significant feature that characterizes postmodernism. The refusal of finality ambivalently claims itself to be final. The unhappiness with the finality dissolves the rigid pattern of refusal of the final. Such an open ending reflects a novel’s postmodern way of perception of the world—there is no final, fixed or determined truth. More importantly, it also shows the postmodern aim of forming a life in a space free from confinement in rigid structures. In other words, though absolute truth is

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<sup>20</sup> The narrator realizes her ugly voice, and continually describes her unhappiness with it. This voice is, on the one hand, broken and cracking in a way that Chinese talks (WW 165). On the other hand, it is inaudible and American-feminine (11). The voice regarded as abnormal turns out to be normal when it is referred to speech therapy. I discussed the narrator’s voice also in the previous chapter.

<sup>21</sup> Many critics and scholars have commented on the ambiguous ending. I discussed the possible interpretations in the previous chapter.

nowhere to be found in the social and intellectual assumptions of postmodernism, the search for it cannot be abandoned.

In *The Woman Warrior*, this persistent truth seeking becomes the “translation between an individual narrator and the family, whose stories have been narrated, and the history in which that family has lived its stories” (Rabinowitz 185). Thus, “It translated well” relativizes the binary opposition of self and other, reality and history. It articulates reconciliation from rigidity to relativity, from absoluteness to the attempt to be absolute. I conclude that the multitude of possible interpretations of the ending amplifies its “unsatisfying” effects with its openness and an attempt for a more truthful understanding. The irresolution ironically conveys a hope for resolution. Though none of the various interpretations are absolute truth, they together constitute a generative power for truth seeking. The generation of a multiplicity of readings prevents the text from acquiring closed, totalizing meaning. The unclosed ending, together with the unresolved paradoxes in the narrative, may be unsatisfying to those who expect a story with a coherent, clear-lined plot and structure. But they prevail beyond the text to a sense of reality of Chinese American conditions.

Another “insistence on being unsatisfying” can be perceived from *The Woman Warrior*’s untruthful retelling of Chinese historical stories. Critics see the text’s adaptation of original stories either as “a malformed cultural embryo” (Gao 3), or as confusing “transplantation of the familiar stories into a foreign milieu” (2).<sup>22</sup> Yan Gao analyzes possible reasons for the assumed cultural ignorance, and attributes them to Kingston’s Chinese backgrounds, and her indirect contact with Chinese culture (4). These viewpoints take the untruthfulness as a mistake, whether it is a major fault or a minor slippage.<sup>23</sup> To such criticism, Kingston retorts that she “take[s] a dynamic view of traditional myth” (Patell 357). She says:

Sinologists have criticized me for not knowing myths and for distorting them; pirates correct my myths, revising them to make them conform to some traditional Chinese version. They don’t understand

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<sup>22</sup> Yan Gao makes a detailed review of the criticism concerning Kingston’s works (1-5). Here I use two of the voices mentioned by Gao. The first comes from a Chinese scholar Li Shaoming, and the second from Gao’s own comment.

<sup>23</sup> Yan Gao regards the factual inaccuracies as “minor flaws compared with Kingston’s achievement” (4).

that myths have to change, be useful or be forgotten. Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. ("Personal" 24)

In light of a dynamic myth's insistence on dissatisfaction, it makes sense to see the factual slippage in *The Woman Warrior* as a postmodern strategy toward the writing of a truth: stories (by extension, all things) are not unchangeable or changeless. This unsatisfactory way of writing truth disrupts the continuity of passing down a literary tradition from history by dissolving its stability and invariant structures. The "dissatisfaction" with traditional immigrant writing promotes the writer's literary innovation which makes the text not only distance from the "law" of autobiography (Smith and Watson, "Trouble" 363), but also from the law of any forms of narration.

## Conclusion

Ambiguous narration in *The Woman Warrior* rests on a postmodern way of connection and transgression between life and narrative. It blurs genre boundaries in the field of literature. The textual indeterminacy extends beyond the narrative into a mimic representation of the narrator's immigrant reality. Ambiguous narrative is not only a writing device but also metaphorically a means of "living life in a more dangerous place" (Rabinowitz 184). From the ghost stories, the reader gets the message that life is precariously ambiguous. Reading *No Name Woman*, the reader feels the contradiction between the two cultures. Fa Mu Lan generates the reader's warrior spirit. Ts'ai Yen teaches the reader to turn confrontation into reconciliation. In the text, many paradoxes, uncertainties and possibilities contradict and balance one another. The result is that the strange turns into the familiar, the others' story is self's, and the linear is broken. The writing disregards the logic and coherence we commonly see as inherent to narrative. It violates the rules of narrative structure, plot development, and conflict resolution. The violation produces a work that generates ambiguity in its narrative structure, form and content. The novel's ambiguity is reinforced by its multilayered episodes and the simultaneous affirmation and undercutting of multiple perspectives of traditional Chinese and contemporary American culture. The ambiguous ending leaves the narrative ambiguity unresolved in the end. The logic of the narrative is the logic of ambiguity.

Thus ambiguity is intrinsic in, and fundamental to the work for a representation of an equally ambiguous reality.