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## Chapter 5

### An Allegorical Reading of *The Woman Warrior*

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Maxine Hong Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior* is, according to Michael Fischer, "developed as a series of fragments of traditional stories, myths, and customs [...] embedded in consciousness to be worked out through, and integrated with, ongoing experience" (208). The result is a multilayered narration of the writer's cultural translation of Chinese history and culture. For Kingston, China is a mythic place which exists mainly in her imagination, but, as such, it is so real it is part of her and other Chinese American immigrants' everyday life.<sup>1</sup> Born and grown up in the US with a Chinese background, she is deeply immersed in the two cultures. In the complex and rich text of *The Woman Warrior*, she interweaves Chinese cultural elements into American writing. The cultural translation makes the text unique in its mode, design, and thematic occupation.

*The Woman Warrior* can be seen as a fictional autobiography, which deals primarily with the narrator's experiences of growing up as a Chinese American woman. Like the "I" in the novel, Kingston herself is trapped between the culture of her family's past and the culture currently surrounding her. The first-person narrator tells five loosely-related stories based on the personal experience of either herself or her family. These stories are a blend of the narrator's childhood memories, her Mother's talk-stories, family history, and folklore. They explore various forms of adversity women face in their search for an identity. In this chapter, I read Kingston's novel as an allegorical text. I demonstrate the stories about others or about other contexts allegorize the narrator's experiences as a Chinese American in the US.

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<sup>1</sup> Kingston says that though China is a mythic place to her, "the place is so real that we talk it in common, and we get mail from there" ("Imagined" 565).

On a superficial level, the novel follows the narrator's memoirs from the time before immigration to her present life in the US. I will explore the deeper layers of meaning imbedded beneath the surface, what Deborah Madsen refers to as a doubled text by another (*Postmodernist* 9). My reading encourages the reader to forge a connection between a distant location in Chinese culture and history and the narrator's immediate circumstances in the US. In the following, I will first define allegory in *The Woman Warrior*, and then present a reading of allegory as a narrative mode in *The Woman Warrior*.

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

“Allegory” comes from the Greek term *allēgorein*, “to speak figuratively.” It is composed of *allos* meaning “other,” and *agoreuein* meaning “to make a speech in public” (“Allegory”). Theorists recognize the classical yet popular usage of allegory as saying one thing while meaning another. James Clifford defines it as “a practice in which a narrative fiction continuously refers to another pattern of ideas or events” (“Ethnographic” 99). He argues allegory “is a representation that ‘interprets’ itself” (99).

In a cross-cultural narrative such as *The Woman Warrior*, Clifford's argument implies that an allegory performs two levels of meaning—the representation of information about a culture, and the understanding of that cultural representation. That is, an allegorical narrative tells a story about a particular society, and embedded in this story is a second story, which may be related to the writer's own culture and cultural concerns. Thus, the text doubles itself and becomes something other. This something other in an allegorical text constitutes an alternative meaning, signified by the word *allos*. This understanding is closely related to the literal meaning of allegory as “other speaking.”

In *The Woman Warrior*, this “other speaking” serves as a way of representing, of speaking for, the people in an “other” position—namely minority women. This “other” position arrives as a result of racial and gender difference. Thus, the act of “other speaking” in *The Woman Warrior* at the same time speaks an “other” meaning. This meaning aims to read against the grain of a white (feminist) discourse. So I argue allegory, as a literary form in which an “other” meaning is inherent, is an appropriate form for presenting an “other” discourse about racial and

gender differences. In the autobiographical text of *The Woman Warrior*, allegory serves as a specific means for self writing. This writing takes place in the self but is articulated by means of a transformation and reworking of events from the past. The other story signified by the *allos* in *The Woman Warrior* is that of the narrator's struggle against being rendered as a voiceless "other" in terms of race and gender. When her self is not powerful enough to break down social constraints, she resorts to allegory to transform this powerlessness. In this way, the narrator empowers herself to create possibilities of constructing her self in relation to others. Thus the fictionally constructed others constitute multiple ways in which the self may be possibly conceived.

## Two Levels of Meaning in Allegory

In allegory, "[o]ne level of meaning in a text will always generate other levels" (J. Clifford, "Ethnographic" 100). The two (or more) levels of meaning in allegory pose questions to the reader. How to define the two levels of meaning respectively? And what is the relationship between them? As allegory depends on "the visual and concrete to convey abstract and moral meaning" (G. Clifford 10), the first level of meaning is always "literal," while the second can be collectively termed as "allegorical." The first is explicit and concrete; the second is implicit, and abstract.

The two levels of meaning in allegory are closely related. On the one hand, the first level comes from what Maureen Quilligan terms the "pretext," or "the text that the narrative comments on by reenacting" (97-98). Quilligan emphasizes the importance of this pretext. She suggests a pretext has a "privileged status in guiding not only the interpretation but the possibilities of the allegory" (98). She further argues, "the status of the language in the pretext [...] determines the development of the allegory" (98). In this sense, the pretext seems to "orient" the primary narrative, and guide the reader to make an analogy to the second level of meaning. On the other hand, the literal surface of primary meaning "suggests a peculiar doubleness of intention" (Fletcher 7). This intention resides on the second level of meaning, which, though less direct than the first level of meaning, is of greater importance. As Angus Fletcher notes, an allegorical structure "lends itself to a secondary reading" (7), and this meaning "is felt strongly to be the final intention behind the

primary meaning” (8). Thus, the secondary meaning turns into something more important than the primary, for the words of the text are directed to or even work for the secondary. The aim, therefore, of an allegorical reading is to explore the second, higher level of meaning. The exploration of this meaning goes along a double path corresponding to the double-leveled structure of an allegory. One path is reading the descriptive, literal meaning, and the other is working out the figurative level of meaning.

The relationship between the two levels of meaning in an allegory, as Ellen Leyburn notes, is “sustaining” and “corresponding” (6). It is sustaining because the first level supports and bears the second in the process of meaning production. It is corresponding because they are associated in their “working” relationship. Leyburn explains the “self-consistent” relation in this way:

The surface level should be clear and interesting on its own plane; but since its reason for being is its illuminating something else, it must have enough resemblance to let us know what is signified as well as enough difference to engage us imaginatively. (6)

That is to say, the sustaining relationship is effected by navigating along a paradoxical path of seeking similarity and preserving individual difference. In my following discussion, this idea is especially presented in the section titled “Fa Mu Lan: From History to Present.”

In *The Woman Warrior*, the relationship between sustaining and corresponding is presented by the writer’s reinterpretation of original stories in family anecdote, historical legend, or mystical figure. Her rereading gives “old” stories a “new” meaning. This new meaning is not determined by the original meaning of the stories, but through their receptions and appropriations. The historical stories produce a correspondence with real-life events in the narrator’s community. Interpretation of her real-life situation is read through the text’s references to Chinese literature and history. Thus, the meaningfulness of the allegory lies firstly in its metaphorical sense of comparing one point to another. More importantly, it also lies in moments when it evokes new meanings by metaphorically situating the corresponding points into another context. In this way, the presentation of Chinese elements structures the narrative from the moment of providing a substitute for comparison between the Chinese stories and the narrator’s reality. The

structuring develops into a process of navigating the correspondence between the two toward the text's metaphoric purpose. The figurative knowledge reveals facts that go beyond literary discourse and evoke a socio-political reality. Thus, the narrative of allegory establishes what Madsen calls "interpretative principles," which "make possible the comprehension of realities that cannot be apprehended literally" (*Postmodernist* 4-5).

### **Allegory in *The Woman Warrior*: A Mode of Narrative**

Theorists agree that allegory is not merely a rhetorical device. Nor are allegorical meanings abstractions added to the original account (J. Clifford, "Ethnographic" 99). As Edwin Honig says, allegory may also refer to a form, a genre-type, and a style (14). Craig Owens expresses a similar idea. He says allegory can be "an attitude as well as a technique, a perception as well as a procedure" (68). Madsen notes the development of allegory from early writings as "a hermeneutic style, a kind of interpretation," to modern use as "a narrative or literary genre" (*Rereading* 2). In allegory, a metaphor is extended to structure an entire narrative. Thus a literary allegory "is distinguished by its reliance on structured narrative" (G. Clifford 14). That is to say, the narrative itself constitutes a metaphor through which allegorization is structured. In this sense, allegory is concerned with "the projection [...] of structure as sequence" (Owens 72). So among the various functions of allegory, I consider it as a mode of narrative, and "a fundamental process of encoding our speech" (Fletcher 3).

Because such an extended metaphor structures the narration of *The Woman Warrior*, I argue the text is allegorical in terms of its content and form. In content, its characters and events have a double significance in relation to two cultures and two histories. They are at once themselves and a representation of a correlated, second level of concepts. Each story maintains a distinct relationship to the socio-political context that writer is in. Each confronts the reader with a "strange" world related to immigrant life. Ultimately one story acquires another meaning and serves another purpose. The new meaning and purpose are doubled by, related to, but not reducible to the original account. The narration serves as a vehicle through which one set of conditions carries forward that other level of signification. This other level is composed of a set of

events that constitute an entire system of Chinese American ideas. The literal plot, whether factual or fictional, sheds light on the suggested cultural conflict and adaptation.

In terms of its form, *The Woman Warrior* involves doubling or reduplicating material of other texts through the strategy of intertextuality. “Intertextuality” is “the interdependence of any one literary text with all those that have gone before it” (Cuddon 454). This textual strategy allows the writer to present her philosophical view about cultural adaptation by incorporating material of other texts. Thus, her text contains abundant references to other texts. The implication is that such a text is the “absorption and transformation” of another text or other texts (454). The absorptive and transformative features of intertextuality make it an appropriate literary mode to express an ontological dichotomy between self and other. In this dichotomy, the “other” meaning exists concurrently with the “primary” language, and the “other” culture coexists with the mainstream. In the following, I will discuss the absorptive and transformative aspects in my reading of the allegorical narrative.

### **Absorption and Transformation in an Allegory**

James Clifford notes that allegory “breaks down the seamless quality of cultural description by adding a temporal aspect to the process of reading” (“Ethnographic” 100). Because of this temporal aspect, the current issues on which an allegorical narrative focuses are inherently involved with questions of the representation of history. Thus, an allegorical text is concerned with recuperating the past. Minority discourse often refers to the past when the marginalized people cannot bear the harsh reality under the dominant ideology of the mainstream society. The stories of the past are built into the process of cultural representation (100). The meanings of the stories become “the conditions of its meaningfulness” (99). In this sense, Clifford concludes, “Allegory prompts us to say of any cultural description not ‘this represents, or symbolizes, that’ but rather, ‘this is a [...] *story* about that’” (100). That is to say, the allegorical discourse is absorption of the cultural description.

When an allegorical narrative uses a lot of historical sources of other (con)texts to address what is happening “here,” the “absorption” of

these historical stories provides a cultural grounding for rewriting history. Fictional stories mediate history. Fictional narrative calls into question the validity of the accepted historical facts. This narrative is critical about the established history as the only truth or the only possible explanation. It is here allegory may now be read to constitute a mode of postmodern expression. Allegory reconstructs historical narratives, whether untruthful, biased, or distorted, into “truths” and “histories.” The “truths” and “histories” absorbed in an allegorical narrative function to interrogate universal platitudes of Truth and History. The “realist” historical narrative can no longer represent the “real” past. The “original” account of history can no longer be considered as “original.” In Linda Hutcheon’s words, “It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance” (*Poetics* 126). When a writer rewrites a primary text in terms of its figural meaning, “allegory becomes the model of all commentary, all critique” (Owens 69). Thus, the absorption of historical stories in an allegorical writing opens history to the possibility of transformation. It alters the “original” meaning in one way or another and provides a multiplicity of “histories.” In this sense, an allegory is concerned with reinventing and reinterpreting history as a narrative, which destabilizes and transforms our fixed ideas of history. I argue the absorption of history in an allegorical text transforms both history itself and the way we understand the authority of histories.

Transformation also takes place in terms of the narrative of an allegory. In *The Transformations of Allegory* (1974), Gay Clifford regards transformation as the fundamental narrative form of allegory (14-15). The title of her work already suggests the transformative quality of allegory. For Clifford, this transformation refers to both the changes of allegory as a literary mode over time (6), and to kinetic energy and kinetics as a recurrent theme of allegory (14). The latter transformation deserves my attention. Clifford regards the kinetic transformation as “some form of controlled or directed process” (15). This control, she argues, is provided by the way “we interpret the significance of the ‘motion’ of the characters” (15). In an allegorical text, the transformation of central characters is expressed by allegorical action in “the form of a journey, a quest, or a pursuit” (11). The figurative movement transforms the surface narrative and its discursive codes. Clifford further argues this allegorical action “becomes the metaphor by which a process of learning

for both protagonists and readers is expressed” (11). Thus the literary transformation prompts the transformation on the side of the audience. The reader transforms his or her understanding of the text’s thematic concern by witnessing the transformation that happens in the text. So, this transformation, I conclude, is effected both intra-textually and extra-textually.

## The Reader’s Participation

Edwin Honig acknowledges the creative capacities of writers of allegory. He notes, “An allegory succeeds when the writer’s re-creation of the antecedent story, subject, or reference is masterful enough to provide his word with a wholly new authority” (13). Honig’s formulation emphasizes the creativity from the side of a writer; however, in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston’s creativity is built on an account of culturally remote references. These references are not masterful, but confusing and sometimes even misleading to the reader. They demand an act of understanding before they can be a meaningful telling of a socio-political reality. In this case, an allegory is suspended for interpretation. I therefore add to Honig’s view that an interpretation of the cultural references helps to see the working of an allegory.

When allegory turns something into “something other (*allos*) than what the open and direct statement tells the reader” (Fletcher 2), the other text is connected to an other (*allos*) reading from the audience. As Fletcher says, “Allegories are based on parallels between two levels of being that correspond to each other, the one supposed by the reader, the other literally presented in the fable” (113). Owens recognizes the interpretative requirement in allegory. Instead of defining allegory as “one text [...] doubled by another,” he regards it as “one text *read through* another” (68-69). This definition requires the reader to make the correspondence between the doubled narrative of something other and the original stories. Such a reading positions the reader at the center of the reading practice. The reader mediates the primary fictional level in order to get the real meaning of the second level. In this sense, the reader becomes the co-producer of the meaningfulness of an allegory, which reflects the postmodern emphasis on active participation in making meaning from the side of audience (Hansson 454). Thus, the reader’s

interpretation, together with the text's mode of narrative, constitutes the making of an allegory.

The working mechanism of allegory, however, often poses a challenge to the reader. As Christopher Norris notes:

Allegory involves a perpetual suspension of meaning, a detour through the various tropes, figures, and modes of oblique signification where language can never reach the point of simply saying what it sets out to say. (95)

This universal "suspension of meaning" and "detour" Norris mentions become especially complicated in *The Woman Warrior*. The reason for this is that the text sets out from Chinese traditional literature to form a representation of American values. The imbedded levels of meaning are often beyond the aptitude of the audience for interpretation. Thus, what the reader may see are only culturally distanced stories. This explains why an American readership can experience *The Woman Warrior* as exotic and remote from reality. For those Chinese (Americans) who have certain knowledges of Chinese culture, they may not recognize themselves in the text's representation of Chinese culture, because it transplants the familiar stories into a foreign milieu (Gao 1-3).<sup>2</sup> However, in my opinion, if interpreted allegorically, *The Woman Warrior* can provide a new understanding of exoticism in American realities and of factual inaccuracies to original Chinese stories. This way of reading will help the reader to understand the process of how the text integrates Chinese cultural history into American reality to articulate a Chinese American voice.

To develop my analysis, I raise three questions concerning the text's use of Chinese sources: 1) How are Chinese sources used as metaphors? 2) How are they developed into a mode of narrative? 3) How should the reader interpret them? My concern is how to read and interpret allegory in this specific text. Rather than provide a theoretical basis to a historical development of allegory, my aim is to demonstrate why an allegorical reading can help understand how allegorical text, as a narrative mode, goes across a personal or family account of immigrant life to a wider domain of political and ethnic concern. That is to say, my

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<sup>2</sup> Gao discusses how the audience receives Kingston's works. She notes *The Woman Warrior*'s use of Chinese myths is problematic for both the American reader and the Chinese reader.

focus is less on how one text is doubled by another than on how to read one text through another. This focus determines my reading of *The Woman Warrior* in this chapter.

In the following, I develop my textual analysis in four parts: “No Name Woman,” “Ghosts,” “Fa Mu Lan,” and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.” Among them, “Ghosts” is divided into three sections. Each of the four parts has a metaphoric figure as its central character. Each of the four stories has a different setting, and concerns a different historical period. In all these stories, an intertwining of the self and the other, history and reality is a central feature of the narrative structure. Finally, I want to explore how the novel, read as an allegory, reflects the postmodern fascination for contradiction.

### **No Name Woman: From Personal to Public**

The title of the first episode in *The Woman Warrior*, “No Name Woman,” evokes a question: who is the woman called “No Name”? This episode is about the narrator’s aunt in China. She was an outcast in the family because of her adultery and illegitimate pregnancy after her husband went to the US to seek fortune. The story tells how she brought shame and humiliation to herself, her family, and even the whole village. The angry villagers raided the family. The aunt drowned herself and her newborn baby in the family well the day after. Forbidden to ask about the aunt, the narrator uses her imagination to fill in the gaps in the story. She makes up two excuses for the aunt’s adultery. One of them runs like this:

*Perhaps* she encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or *perhaps* he first noticed her in the marketplace. [...] *Perhaps* he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told. (*WW* 6; emphasis added)

The narrator shows sympathy and understanding toward her aunt’s adultery. The abundant use of “perhaps” creates possible truths. It reflects the narrator’s inner world of fantasy. In this hypothetical reasoning, No Name Aunt was too weak to fight against the gender oppression. She became a victim in the male-dominant social system. In

Chinese tradition, women have long been oppressed as “others.” They were considered to be subordinate to their male counterparts. Strict and harsh punishment was installed for any woman who violated the established codes and rituals. According to these codes, No Name Aunt’s adultery was unacceptable to her family and her community.

Strangely, throughout the whole story, the reader cannot detect any words or sounds from No Name Aunt. As the narrator says, “She kept the man’s name to herself throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him” (*WW* 11). She did not give any reason or excuse for her adultery and pregnancy. She gave birth silently, and jumped into the family well with no sound. As a woman in patriarchal society, No Name Aunt was deprived of the right to have a voice. After her suicide, the family’s forbiddance to mention anything about her imposed a further and deeper silence because “[t]he real punishment was [...] the family’s deliberately forgetting her” (16).

It can also be argued that the aunt was a brave woman who exhibited her individuality and broke the “roundness” (*WW* 13).<sup>3</sup> She committed adultery as a way to revolt against tradition:

But perhaps my aunt, my forerunner, caught in a slow life, let dreams grow and fade and after some months or years went toward what persisted. Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that’s all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family. (8)

In this hypothetical fantasy, the aunt showed a different personality. The narrator posits an image of female subjectivity that defies feudalist norms about women’s virtues.<sup>4</sup> The narration challenges the traditional

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<sup>3</sup> By “roundness,” Kingston refers to a deep-rooted idea of a balanced structure of family, village and community (12-13). To the villagers, No Name Aunt’s adultery and pregnancy broke that balance.

<sup>4</sup> In Chinese tradition, the most well-known decrees for women are “Three Obediences and Four Virtues”: “Three Obediences enjoined a woman to obey her father before marriage, her husband after marriage, and her eldest son after her husband’s death. The Four Virtues decreed that she be chaste; her conversation courteous and not gossipy; her deportment graceful but not extravagant; her leisure spent in perfecting needlework and tapestry for beautifying the home” (Ling, *Between* 3).

Chinese idea of what is proper and praiseworthy for women. The adultery is still considered immoral by the ethic standard in China today. But this interpretation suggests that women are human beings with desires and individuality. They have the right to pursue freedom. Recognition of this transcends No Name Aunt's pursuit from sexual resistance into a public claim. In a society of oppression and discrimination against women, No Name Aunt's shameful deed turns into a feminist resistance against male hegemony.

In the narration, the gap between the two contradictory hypotheses is played out. This contrast encourages an allegorical reading of the situation. The story, seemingly unrelated to present reality, allegorically portrays the current environment in which the narrator lives. In her immigrant community, as a woman she too is an oppressed figure of patriarchy. There, people hold beliefs like "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," and "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (*WW* 46). The narrator takes the aunt as her forerunner. With her aunt's life branched into hers (8), the aunt becomes "one of the stars, a bright dot in blackness" (14). It lights up the narrator's position in another blackness.

No Name Aunt's resistance, in the form of suicide, is destructive, but it also effectively empowers the narrator. She gains a resistant spirit from her aunt and trains to be a (s)word warrior. Identifying with the same social position as her aunt, the narrator, with no name in the narration, together with No Name Aunt, constitutes a group of "No Name" people in a hierarchically organized society. The story thereby converts one woman into another, and No Name Woman into no name women. The metaphoric dimension here offers a mimic implication of the reality in another discourse. The narrative challenges the gender oppression of women in contemporary (Chinese) American society through the life story of a woman in feudal China. An allegorical reading intertwines a family anecdote with feminist politics. The original story is not confined to its temporal and cultural realm. It gives new dimensions to other women of similar positions in migrant reality. The transition from the personal to public, and from the particular to the general, characterizes the allegorical interpretation of this episode. It also points to the thematic one-others correspondence in the novel.

Through the first-person narrator, Kingston orchestrates a strong resonance between the No Name Aunt story and her personal concern.

As Sidonie Smith has noted, Kingston recognizes the “inextricable relationship between an individual’s sense of ‘self’ and the community’s stories of selfhood, [and] self-consciously reads herself into existence through the stories her culture tells about women” (*Poetics* 150-51). Kingston positions herself in relation to the aunt as a means of finding herself. When she has no way of writing herself into a narration of her story, she resorts to stories of others in her culture. The aunt is an extension of the writer, leading her to freedom and individuality. In this sense, Kingston’s telling of the aunt is a speaking for herself. She establishes her identity in relation to the aunt.

Michael Fischer reads No Name Aunt as an allegory of internal struggles for the adolescent Kingston (209). His reading suggests Kingston’s identification with the aunt on a personal level. My reading also suggests the writer’s feminist preoccupation. By tracing No Name Woman’s “voice” and telling her story, the writer breaks the silence of the cultural bind to discover a resonant voice of her own. More importantly, she also becomes “the voice of the voiceless” with “a gift of an amazing literary voice” (Fishkin 789).<sup>5</sup> This voice arises from sexist and hegemonic systems which repress female voices. The writing thus builds up “another style, another voice, another attitude towards the nature of the self and the form of its creation” (Kingston, “Imagined” 568). The creation of these “another’s” forwards an articulation of female subjectivity. In this sense, the allegory in this episode not only surfaces another meaning, but transforms this meaning into a feminist concern.

Regardless of the fact that Mother tells the daughter several times not to tell the No Name Woman story, Kingston makes the aunt known worldwide. She devotes a whole chapter at the very beginning of her first novel in honor of the aunt. The writing ends “the real punishment” of the aunt. It endows her with “a secret voice, a separate attentiveness” (*WW* 11). It gives her a new name: No Name, and thus a new life, and a new identity. The subject of female identity is reconstructed by re-creating and remapping a secret family anecdote intended to remain untold. The writing breaks down the established family denial of the aunt

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<sup>5</sup> In an interview, Kingston mentions “I think of myself as somebody who’s been given a gift of an amazing literary voice, and so I want to be the voice of the voiceless” (Fishkin 789).

and reclaims her place in family history. The act of resistance even offers her a place in the literary field.<sup>6</sup>

### Ghosts: From Uncanny to Canny

In his essay “The Uncanny” Freud defines “the uncanny” as something frightening, and fearful, but it also “leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar” (76). Linguistically, Freud traces the term “uncanny” to the German word *heimlich* (homely, familiar) and its antonym *unheimlich* (unhomely, unfamiliar). Strangely, among a variety of opposite shades of meaning, Freud perceives commonness. As he says, “the word *heimlich* exhibits one [meaning] which is identical with its opposite, *unheimlich*. What is *heimlich* thus comes to be *unheimlich*” (79).<sup>7</sup> Thus, instead of being an opposite, *unheimlich* is “in some way or other a sub-species of *heimlich*” (80).

I read the mystical ghost figure, which appears in the third story in *The Woman Warrior*, as uncanny. The uncanny ghost is associated with both the *heimlich* and the *unheimlich*. It possesses a similar quality as described by Freud because there is also an internal commonness between what is defined as opposites. The uncanny gradually turns into the canny, and the *unheimlich* into the *heimlich*. I will use Freud’s formulation as a starting point for my interpretation of the uncanny in *The Woman Warrior*. If in Freud’s analysis the ambiguity of meaning exists on a linguistic level, I argue that the ambiguity in *The Woman Warrior* takes place in relation to the writer’s thematic occupation with cultural adaptation and identity construction.

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<sup>6</sup> No Name Woman catches great attention from critics. There is endless discussion about her story. For example, Yan Gao uses this story to interrogate the feudal code of “heroic woman” in Chinese tradition (24-31). Michael Fischer reads this story as one of the fragments of the past. These fragments are embedded in the writer’s consciousness to be integrated with on going experience (208-09). Pin-chia Feng reads it as the narrative *Bildung* of the writer as a word warrior (114). The narrative shows the writer’s determination “to insert the nameless ‘individuality’ into the collectivity of her community” (116).

<sup>7</sup> Freud explains the reason for this paradox: “on the one hand, it [*heimlich*] means that which is familiar and congenial, and on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight. The word *unheimlich* is only used customarily [...] as the contrary of the first signification [of *heimlich*], and not of the second” (79).

I see two differences between how the uncanny is used in *The Woman Warrior* and in Freud's analysis. On the one hand, the uncanny in *The Woman Warrior* is not a "both-and" juxtaposition between opposites, but a progressive evolvement from one to the other. In this process, the novel articulates a voice of how to perceive and receive the two extremes of canny and uncanny in the two cultures. On the other hand, *The Woman Warrior* adds other varieties. What is uncanny for one person may be canny for another, and vice versa. And what is uncanny at one moment or one place may be canny at another, and vice versa. Thus, the uncanny in *The Woman Warrior* is more fluid and diversified. These differences, together with what they have in common, work to allegorize the protagonists' outlook toward cultural adjustment. I will use Mother and the narrator, representatives of two generations, as examples to demonstrate this.

### **Mother's Ghost Experience: Canny, Uncanny and Natural**

Mother, a woman warrior in the novel, showed her dragon spirit of exorcism when she studied at a medical school in China before immigration. She said, "I am brave and good. Also I have bodily strength and control. Good people do not lose to ghosts" (*WW* 73). The ghosts that could make the "haunted ones [...] give high, startled cries, pointing at the air" (65) were under her physical and literary control. As the narrator tells:

My mother relished these scare orgies. She was good at naming—Wall Ghost, Frog Spirit [...], Eating Partner. She could find descriptions of phenomena in ancient writings—the Green Phoenix stories, "The Seven Strange Tales of the Golden Bottle," "What Confucius Did Not Talk About." She could validate ghost sightings. (65)

Later, Mother exorcized and fooled more ghosts on her way to visit patients alone on countryside roads where "the ghosts, the were-people, the apes dropped out of trees" (83). The frightening ghosts were frightened by her brave exorcism. The narration of exorcizing the supernatural ghosts unconsciously evolves into the opposite direction of naturalizing it. For the mother, "Sometimes ghosts put on such mundane disguises, they aren't particularly interesting" (67). She interrogated,

“What is there to be afraid of? [...] What could a ghost do to me?” (67-68). As she said:

How do we know that ghosts are the continuance of dead people? Couldn't ghosts be an entirely different species of creature? Perhaps human beings just die, and that's the end. I don't think I'd mind that too much. Which would you rather be? A ghost who is constantly wanting to be fed? Or nothing? (65-66)

Instead of viewing ghosts as something frightening from afterlife, Mother took ghosts as natural beings of another species. To her, “Perhaps in daylight we accept that bag to be just a bag [...] when in reality it is a Bag Ghost” (74).

After immigrating to the US, Mother lives in a ghost society. She despises America as a place “thick with ghosts.” As she says, “This is terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away [...]. Even the ghosts work, no time for acrobatics” (*WW* 104). Mother, once a capable exorcist in China, now spiritually exorcizes ghosts in the US. In her eyes, non-Chinese are all ghosts. She looks at the West from an eastern anchor. This perception reverses the Orientalist mechanism of “othering,” and occidentalizes the West. The occidentalization retaliates discrimination of Orientals by westerners. This reversed “othering” is a reciprocal of Orientalism (by which Chinese immigrants were long stereotyped as “foreign,” “exotic” and “terminally inassimilable” [Wong, “Chinese” 39]). It de-marginalizes the Orientalist depiction of Asians as “unfit for America’s prospective society” (Lee 249).

With the reversed marginalization in this ghost country, Mother’s *unheimlich* experience gradually develops to the *heimlich*. The omnipresent ghosts come into Mother’s life:

For our very food we had to traffic with the Grocery Ghosts, the supermarket aisles full of ghost customers. The Milk Ghost drove his white truck from house to house every other day. [...] We were regularly visited by the Mail Ghost, Meter Reader Ghost, Garbage Ghost. [...] They came nosing at windows—Social Worker Ghosts; Public Health Nurse Ghosts; Factory Ghosts [...]. (*WW* 97-98)

Mother, a dragoness who once manifested her heroic ghost-fighting spirit to fight her way out in feudal old China, now looks at ghosts calmly. If ghosts in old China are monster-like, ghosts in the US are the

opposite. They are recognizable and part of everyday life. They are not imaginary, or external to reality, but interior figures. In fact, they are nothing but real persons living and doing things in society.

In this ghost world of the foreign land, Mother, or the first-generation immigrants as a whole, feel insecure and alienated. Something “unhomely” can still be detected in their feeling of the American “home.” The long historical marginalization makes them “strangers at home” (Paul 19). Though they are American citizens, they always feel a sense of temporariness, as if they are sojourners in relation to their residence of home. For them, “home” always refers to some place in China: “Someday, very soon, we’re going home, where there are Han people everywhere” (*WW* 98). As the narrator says, “Whenever my parents said ‘home,’ they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment” (99). They cannot identify America as home.

In Freud’s logic, *heimlich* works toward *unheimlich*. As he says, “*heimlich* is a word the meaning of which develops towards an ambivalence, until it finally coincides with its opposite, *unheimlich*” (80). In Kingston’s narration of the first-generation immigrants’ experience, *unheimlich* also works toward *heimlich*. The uncanny ghosts were exorcized into canniness and/or naturalness in China and in the US. Home, a place of canniness, ironically constitutes uncanniness in the US. This two-way mechanism creates an alternative and alternate reality. “Alternative” signifies a duality of two (or more) things, propositions, or courses of action. By “alternate,” I mean “occurring by turns.” That is to say, there is always another reality allegorized beyond the immediate one, and another story doubled by this told one. These two accounts interchange successively with each other and develop into a continuum of certainty and uncertainty, and hominess and unhominess. This fluctuating continuum constitutes a first-generation immigrant experience in China and the US.

From the above analysis, we can see Mother’s “ghost” experience in the US develops from the “uncanny” home to “canniness” and finally to naturalness. This process allegorizes the first-generation immigrants’ American experience. The allegorization is related to the theme of how to adapt oneself to American culture. With Mother’s acceptance of ghosts as part of life, she accepts her American life: she “recently took to wearing shawls and granny glasses, American fashions” (*WW* 100). As she mentions, “I don’t want to go back [to China] anyway” (107). The

acceptance develops from her identification of the US as home. Here, I would like to extend Freud's interpretation of "un" in "uncanny" as "repression" to "progression." The meaning of this prefix in my interpretation signifies a relationship of mutual reference between the canny and the uncanny in an onward and forward movement, as "progression" literally connotes. With time passing, the Chinese immigrants come to accept their American life. The uncanny gradually progresses into the canny. This process is a way to proceed because it reconciles incompatible forces, and the resulting shifts of meaning permeate their lives.

Kingston's writing gives full play to the coexistence and interchange of the two incompatible forces in many aspects such as its theme, genre, and subject matter. If the reader can perceive the inner logic of the paradox, and acknowledge the necessity of transmutation from the uncanny to the canny, then the seemingly untraversable gaps can be traversed, and the irreconcilable reconciled. All those brutal contentions in the novel finally "progress" into harmony by the mechanism that relates the uncanny and the canny. As Freud says: "this uncanny is in reality nothing new or foreign, but something familiar and old-established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression" (90). In this sense, the ghost allegory leads to new possibilities of understanding of the two worlds. These worlds are personal and public (discussed in the previous section), historical and contemporary, and literary and real.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of keeping the uncanny concealed or out of sight, as is implied by the term *unheimlich*, the narration picks up the canny part from concealment and exposes it into a *heimlich* openness. The process of exposition is developed from the contradiction characterized by an *un* between the two terms, to a common ground of *heim* as it is in Freud's formulation. The supernatural ghosts—Chinese feudal codes and rituals, American ideological hegemony, Western Orientalism and Eastern Occidentalism—are exorcised into natural things. However, it is in this turning of the supernatural into natural that the reader senses an unnatural implication. As the narrator says "ghost forms are various and many. Some can occupy the same space at the same moment. They

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<sup>8</sup> This will be discussed in the section on "Fa Mu Lan" and on "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" respectively.

permeate the grain in wood, metal, and stone” (*WW* 83). So the uncanny ghosts are not supernatural. They exist everywhere, and are part of the natural world.

With a blurring between the polarities, ghosts, whether from an occidental or an oriental viewpoint, coexist with other living beings. Freud extends the traditional definition of “the uncanny” from unfamiliarity to both *unheimlich* and *heimlich*. I add another extension: the uncanny further develops into something natural. This natural thing is experienced as neutral, neither uncanny nor canny. The omnipresence of ghosts and the transference from uncanny to canny represent another blurring of the border between spaces.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the immigrants’ supernatural experiences are naturalized and neutralized as part of their life. The de-mystified figure takes a view of human society that too is natural. The ghosts become an emblem of the writer’s thematic concern: life is natural. From the prevalence of recognizable ghost figures, the narration makes this allegorical gesture recognizable. As the narrator says to her mother:

We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we’re no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot. (*WW* 107)

Following this statement, it is unimportant where a person lives, because “we belong to the planet.” To go one step further, it is unimportant to argue whether Kingston’s writing is more Chinese than American or vice versa, or which part is Chinese-based and which is American-oriented. In whatever case, it belongs to the globe’s literature.

### **The Narrator’s Ghost Experience: Chinese Uncanniness and American Canniness**

The experience of Mother’s ghost-exorcism in China sounds uncanny to the narrator. She tells it like this:

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<sup>9</sup> It is commonly acknowledged that Kingston’s novel blurs a series of boundaries between fiction and (auto)biography, dream and reality, fact and fantasy. Here, I add another.

She [Mother] advanced steadily, waking the angular shadows up and down the corridor. She walked to both ends of the hallway, then explored another wing for good measure. At the ghost room, door open like a mouth, she stopped and, stepping inside, swung light into its corners. She saw cloth bags in knobby mounds; they looked like gnomes but were not gnomes. Suitcases and boxes threw shadow stairs up the walls and across the floor. Nothing unusual loomed at her or scurried away. No temperature change, no smell. (*WW* 66)

The ghost-haunted room was Mother's "secret place" for study at the medical school. Ironically, the haunting happens not in a desolate mountain road or deserted grave, but in a medical institute, a place for seeking scientific knowledge and a place supposed to negate the existence of any supernatural beings. This ghost episode provokes an uncanny feeling. However, I feel the uncanniness comes not from the frightfulness of ghosts. It comes from the unhomely moment when Mother is stepping into the haunted room. It is out of quietude, nothing unusual, no change in that space for the reader to feel alert to changes, or to expect unusual happenings. Generally, a person experiences uncanniness when ghosts appear unexpectedly and unforeseeably. However, the uncanny feeling here arises particularly in the moment of waiting for impending ghosts.

In the narrator's American experience, ghosts are not uncanny anymore on part of their prevalence. They are natural for the second generation, because in the older generation's opinion, younger generations grow up in the ghost country. They "had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were [them]selves half ghosts," and they are called "a kind of ghost" (*WW* 183). However, the narrator uses an alien word "kuei" as a substitute of "ghost" when she refers to her generation's ghost experience. "Kuei" is a Cantonese pronunciation for "ghost."<sup>10</sup> The narrator does not understand the term: "I keep looking in dictionaries under those syllables. 'Kuei' means 'ghost,' but I don't find any other words that make sense. [...] How do they translate?" (88). The familiar image and connotation of "ghost" is replaced by the unfamiliar "kuei." It is linguistically uncanny to the English-speaking narrator. The same "ghost," when pronounced as "kuei," provokes uncanniness to the child generation. Here, I conclude that in the second generation, the

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<sup>10</sup> "Ghost" is translated as "gui" in Mandarin Chinese. In Cantonese, the pronunciation of "gui" is "kuei."

ghost is both canny and uncanny. The uncanniness of “kuei” is associated with Chineseness which suggests an alien connotation. This meaning deserves further attention.

Apart from the alien pronunciation, the narrator’s uncanny feeling arises more broadly from anything associated with Chineseness. The Chinese background is exotic, remote, and unreasonable. It fills the narrator with sharp inconsonance and incompatibility: “I hated the secrecy of the Chinese” (*WW* 183). To her, China is an alien place: “I did not want to go [to China] where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own” (99). Though living in a Chinese community, the narrator does not have homely feeling toward her Chinatown home. She complains she always gets sick, has to lock her doors and keep checking the locks (108). In her childhood, she does not want to go to Chinese school: “I can’t stand Chinese school anyway” (202). She is “mad at the Chinese for lying so much” (21). Hearing the Chinese way of greeting, she feels helpless: “I would live on plastic” (92). Chinese speech sounds terrible to her American ears. She cannot identify with the Chinese way of utterance. As she says:

How strange that the emigrant villagers are shouters, hollering face to face. [...] And they yell over the singers that wail over the drums, everybody talking at once, big arm gestures, spit flying. You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. (171)

Though not identifying with the Chinese way of talking, ironically, the narrator talks in a way even more Chinese than Chinese people do. In her imagined warrior experience, the narrator, as Fa Mu Lan, is greeted by the old couple training her. She responds in a typically Chinese way.<sup>11</sup> In her childhood, the narrator suffers from silence—she cannot speak out to express herself. She thinks the silence “had to do with being a Chinese girl” (166).<sup>12</sup> Later, she retrieves her “faltering” voice. But it sounds like

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<sup>11</sup> When the narrator was greeted “Have you eaten rice today, little girl?” she replied out of politeness, “Yes, I have [...]. Thank you” (21). This response is typically Chinese. Inquiring whether you have eaten does not necessarily mean an invitation or an offer for meal. The reply from the greeted party is expected to be “No,” regardless of whether or not one has eaten. The writer’s imaginative mind again reflects her Chinese background.

<sup>12</sup> The narrator tells her experience of childhood silence in which she either cannot talk or speaks in a weak, broken voice. She finds other Chinese girls suffer the same

“a crippled animal running on broken legs” (169). Gradually, she becomes talkative. But when she says out things loud on her list, “they kept pouring out [...] in the voice like Chinese opera” (203). She is blamed to have a “dried-duck voice” (194), “an ugly voice [...] that] quacks like a pressed duck” (192). She admits it as being right: “if you squeezed the duck hung up to dry in the east window, the sound that was my voice would come out of it” (192).

Though critical of the Chinese way of greeting, speaking, and doing things, the narrator does many other things in a Chinese way, reminding the reader of her cultural status. She is a person of Chinese background, and is inevitably influenced by this. The Chinese uncanny way hits its home in the person who names and is disgusted by its very uncanniness. Thus, the uncanny is not unfamiliar, or unhomey, but even more familiar and homely than the canny. Likewise, Kingston too, repeatedly claims herself as non-Chinese, as American, and as a writer of American stories. But her writing depends so much on Chinese elements it immediately directs the reader’s attention to her Chinese background. It is Chineseness, whether faithful or not, whether exotic or familiar, to which her writing is related. It is Chinese culture that endows her with the gift to construct a discourse that negotiates the two ideologies.

Though the (un)canny ghosts work differently in the two generations, I see a common allegorical implication to their operations: both the parent and the child generation embrace canniness and uncanniness in their recognition of Chinese American identity. As Kingston says in her “Personal Statement,” “‘I’ am nothing but who ‘I’ am in relation to other people” (23). Thus a person’s identity is dependent on how he or she is related to others. Using Freud’s formulation of the uncanny, I interpret this “I” in two ways. In a canny sense, the “I” is oneself, as it is connoted by the term *heimlich*. In an uncanny sense, the “un-” part suggests the “I” is a non-I. It embraces meaning as it is connoted by the term *unheimlich*. In this sense, this “I” constitutes a contrast against, a difference from, or a part other than the self “I.” This suggests a person’s identity is an identification with both himself or herself and others. Or in James Clifford’s words, “every

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problem as she. So she says, “The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (166).

version of an ‘other’ [...] is also the construction of a ‘self’” (“Partial” 23). Like other ethnic writers, Kingston also struggles with “the dilemmas between politics and aesthetics, between self as central and self as other” (Ling, “I’m Here” 151). So she, as well as others, may seek to comprehend and balance the intricate ethnic position of “being neither one nor the other.”<sup>13</sup> This process takes place both within herself and in interaction with others.

The variety of ghosts, whether in China or in the US, whether imaginary or real, are linked together in a sociological notion of “otherness.” Their (un)canniness delineates both what we are and what we are not. They reveal and conceal not only what we fear but also that for which we hope. The ghostly “other” in *The Woman Warrior* is inherent to the immigrant environment. This “otherness” allegorizes another “otherness,” or, an “other” position of marginalized people in the face of the dominant. So “otherness” is not confined to ghosts. The metaphor is extended to apply to people driven into an “other” position. Chinese immigrants are “othered” by Americans. Women are “othered” in male-dominated societies. Chinese (American) culture is “othered” by various dominant discourses. In tracing the movement of uncanny ghosts to a canny and natural existence, I see this “other” world as part of the whole American culture. This world is “home” and solid according to the logic of the uncanny. The allegorical extension of the metaphorical figure of ghost transcends the “otherness” from uncanniness to a naturally socio-political constituent.

Freud’s essay “The Uncanny” explores a person’s anxiety of castration, and thus death and immortality. The uncanny ghosts in *The Woman Warrior* extend to the narrator’s immigrant life. They are more reality-oriented, and thus more widely perceivable. The prevalence of ghosts reinforces the persuasiveness of its allegorical working as a trope. Allegory presents an alien figure in a form interior and inherent to human experience. Ghosts in the narrative posit a strong visual presentation. The visibility from fantasy into life concretizes their allegorical connotation. The visible ghosts challenge and resist the “imbeddedness” or the “hiddenness” of an allegorical implication in

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<sup>13</sup> Bhabha uses “neither one nor the other” to formulate hybridity of culture and identity in the “third space” in postcolonial context. Asian American scholars also use this “neither-nor” formula to refer to Asian American ethnic identities. For more detail, see Chapter Four.

their own performance. In this sense, ghosts present themselves as a dynamic form of allegory. Their effect is open and active in everyday life. The recurrence of ghosts repeatedly reminds us that “we are not merely what we appear to be.” This parallels the mechanism of allegory.

The difference between “what we are” and “what we appear to be” implies the spectrality of ghosts. They are difficult to define or interpret from their apparent being. The ghost stories play out the indefiniteness, not from the ghosts’ evasiveness, but from their prevalence. The narrative works against the usual way of seeing ghosts as frightening thus uncanny. The metaphorical meanings are neither fixed nor easily secured by a general audience. Instead, the ghostly sections offer multiple and fluid connotations with the writer’s philosophical outlook incorporated into them. Ghosts are so pervasively configured, yet their connotations are so fluidly construed, that ghosts constitute the most ambiguous figures in the narrative.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, the most ambiguous ghosts are the most productive figures.

## **Fa Mu Lan: From History to Present**

The woman warrior appears in a constellation of forms in the novel.<sup>15</sup> Fa Mu Lan is one of them. The historical figure Fa Mu Lan comes from the Chinese Legend *The Chant of Fa Mu Lan*.<sup>16</sup> In the novel, the narrator imagines herself as Fa Mu Lan and relates the talk-story. I will use this story to illustrate how historiographic metafiction comes to allegorize the narrator’s experience in contemporary American society.

The episode of Fa Mu Lan can be understood through what Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction.” In her essay “The Pastime

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<sup>14</sup> In the following chapter, I devote two sections discussing the most ambiguous figures of ghosts.

<sup>15</sup> Four female characters in the novel are depicted as warriors in one way or another. They are No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan, Brave Orchid (Mother), and Ts’ai Yen.

<sup>16</sup> *The Chant of Fa Mu Lan* is a popular story in China. It is a literary ballad based on an oral tradition and composed by an anonymous sixth-century Chinese writer. According to the chant, Fa Mu Lan replaced her elderly father to battle against the Tartars for twelve years disguised as a man. When the war was over, instead of taking an official rank offered to her as an honor and award, she returned home and resumed her girlhood, putting on her robe and make-up. Her female identity surprised her fellowmen, who traveled with her without knowing that Fa Mu Lan was a woman (Gao 10).

of Past Time,” Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as “novels that are intensely self-reflective but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge” (54-55). This definition states that fictional narratives of historiographic metafiction textually link historical events and literary texts. The implication of this statement is that neither history nor fiction is a transcendent concept, but is a discursive, intertextual, and provisional conceptualization. Thus, the innovation of historiographic metafiction, in Hutcheon’s words, “destabilizes concepts of both history and fiction” (69) and “privilege[s] [these] two modes of narration” (66).

Using Hutcheon’s idea of historiographic metafiction, I see the destabilizing force in the Fa Mu Lan allegory coming from its flexibility to suggest similar socio-political meanings in similar historical contexts. Two things become apparent in light of Hutcheon’s description of postmodern historiographic metafiction. The first is that the retold story of Fa Mu Lan is brought to the level of other literary texts, presenting different levels of consciousness. On one level, the narrator’s personal childhood collection of memories links a historical story with a present immigrant experience. On the other level, the two protagonists’ lives, one legend-based and the other “fact”-based, bring into play a potent mechanism toward constructing a “true” self in the “real” world.<sup>17</sup> The double-level allegorization, one being from history to reality, the other being from others to oneself, integrates two cultural and ideological systems into one frame. The intertextual engagement “both installs and then blurs the line between fiction and history” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 62). The two levels of consciousness embedded in the historiographic metafiction of Fa Mu Lan make it a meaningful demonstration of metaphorical relation that connects each two accounts in one narrative.

The second thing that becomes apparent is that a historical narrative circulated through generations, whether fictional or realistic, is always already re-perceived and reinterpreted. How it is recited is dependent on the writer’s stance. Hutcheon notes Kingston is in a paradoxical position of being “aware of those political and social consequences of art [...] and] still part of American society” (*Poetics* 198). That is to say, Kingston’s narrative intervenes political and social issues Chinese immigrants are subject to in American society. On the

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<sup>17</sup> The construction of a “true” self is problematic. I discuss it in the next chapter.

one hand, this postmodern paradox evokes an urgency by questioning the dominant versions of history. In this case, the story of historiographic metafiction “attempts to demarginalize the literary through confrontation with the historical” (Hutcheon, “Pastime” 58). On the other hand, the recombination of historical and fictional works in this historiographic metafiction bridges the rupture between the two genres. The paradoxical act of setting up difference and of bridging the generic rupture is a representation of postmodern theory and art which challenges the separation of literary and historical studies (54).

As a feminist writer, Kingston plays out two adaptations to the original story. One adaptation is that the swordswoman Fa Mu Lan married her childhood playmate and gave birth while fighting courageously in the battlefield. The other is that after finishing her public duties, the swordswoman “I” resumed her feminine duty as a mother, wife and daughter-in-law: “doing farmwork and housework, and giving [...] more sons” (*WW* 45). In the two adaptations, Fa Mu Lan excels in performing masculinity and femininity. She marries for love, which is against the Chinese convention of arranged marriage. She gives birth when fighting in the battlefield, which traverses gender boundaries. She is a brave warrior (representing masculine strength) and a tender mother (representing feminine strength) at the same time. This suggests women can shoulder the same public responsibility as men while also fulfilling domestic duties. The adaptations continue and enlarge feminist concerns in the original story. They allegorically manifest the narrator’s repressed idea that runs counter to misogynist tradition. Female duties are not to bind women. Instead, “[m]arriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman” (48).

The traditional version of Fa Mu Lan celebrates heroism and the spirit of making a contribution to the country without seeking fortune or fame. The image of swordswoman in *The Woman Warrior* erects a sharp contrast with American-stereotyped Chinese women images such as Lotus Blossom or Dragon Lady.<sup>18</sup> Fa Mu Lan transcends into an

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<sup>18</sup> They are two opposite stereotyped images of Chinese American women. Dragon Lady is pictured as “[w]ith her talon-like six-inch fingernails, her skin-tight satin dress slit to the thigh, she can poison a man as easily as she seductively smiles and puffs on her foot-long cigarette holder. An ‘Oriental’ Circle, she is desirable as she is dangerous.” Lotus Blossom is “demure, diminutive, and deferential. She is modest, tittering behind her delicate ivory hand, eyes downcast, always walking 10

allegorical icon. She is independent, courageous, and powerful, in contrast to the stereotyped women, who are passive, obedient, and dependent. The value of the icon is particularly conspicuous in its practical intent. It helps the narrator to feel a sense of worth and to orient herself in a culture marked by a lack of valuing women. The transformed Fa Mu Lan is not bound to a narrow historical context but capable of adapting to a different culture and thus generating another level of meaning. The evoked allegorical effect lies in the fact that it points to a crucial reality in the US. In the narrator's Chinese community, the position of women are devalued and "parents are ashamed to take us [girls] out together" (*WW* 46). Fa Mu Lan's story bears the traces of the narrator's condition that relates to the defiable socio-political context.

Many critics pay attention to the differences between the original story and the retold one in *The Woman Warrior*. However, their similitude cannot be ignored either. The original story provides a basic pattern for thematic essentials the new one wishes to explore. The common theme of depicting a warrior spirit runs through both. The belief imbedded in the old story constructs the writer's purpose of retelling it. The narrator pursues commonality with the traditional image of Fa Mu Lan. She also wants to be a woman warrior in her childhood and adolescence. Inspired, the narrator thinks "perhaps I could make myself a warrior like the swordswoman who drives me" (*WW* 48). From the fairy tale, she learns who the enemies are: "It's not just the stupid racists that I have to do something about, but the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work" (49). Racism and sexism stir up the narrator's rage. She has acquired an avenging spirit from Fa Mu Lan. They both have "the words at [their] backs" for revenge (53), but the narrator will take revenge by writing the injustices with the sword of words. In her everyday life in California, the narrator is doubly oppressed by gender and racial ideologies. When her boss addresses her as "nigger yellow," she has to reply "in [her] bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact" (48). Then the narrator fantasizes herself as a woman warrior. She shows her defiance against racial injustices in the battlefield of her real life.

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steps behind her man, and best of all, devoted body and soul to serving him" (Ling, *Between* 11).

The paradox of playing out differences and seeking commonality in the historiographic metafiction of Fa Mu Lan provides insight into how historical stories are revisited and infused with new meaning. As many critics note, *The Woman Warrior* is overtly intertextual.<sup>19</sup> In Fischer's words, it is conceived with "intertextuality, inter-reference, and the interlinguistic modalities of post-modernist knowledge" (202). These "inter" prefixes transform the alien, remote, and somebody else's story into familiar, intimate, and part of immigrant life. Thus, the rewriting from the original version, whether faithful or not, works in a doubly productive way. The similarity and the sameness are the heroic spirit admired in both cases. The difference challenges the convention. The truthful and the untruthful in the new story keep working against each other, which requires other (un)truthful realities to be constantly reconstructed. Thus the narrative is engaged in a constant state of inconstant (un)truthful production and an impossible presence of all possibilities.

In the historiographic metafiction of Fa Mu Lan, the original story is not embedded in the text, but nevertheless it is clearly articulated. The story is an archetype on which is built a modern narrative with a metaphorical purpose of feminist politics. It provides a framework for locating women's struggles. The difference with the original story is where allegorical meaningfulness is conceived. This meaningfulness is continuously re-created in utilization of one story as a frame but evoking new meaning with reference to the other story. In this process, the allegorized reality initiates a dialogue with the traditional source (con)text. The understanding of the dialogue depends on the production of recoding "one story" to acquire "the other" meaning. Thus it creates another dialogue between the reader and the writer beyond this story into the other(s). The two dialogues produce an enriched interpretation and a channeled understanding of temporally and geographically remote culture.

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<sup>19</sup> For example, Yan Gao's *The Art of Parody* traces the Chinese sources in *The Woman Warrior*; Maureen Sabine's *Maxine Hong Kingston's Broken Book of Life* offers an intertextual study of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*.

## **A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe: From Confrontation to Translation**

The description of the woman warriors from the narrator's memory presents dramatic and brutal pictures of raid, suicide, and fight. The reader senses nothing but bloody contradiction and confrontation from past to present, from China to the US. The narrative goes all the way along the path of battling. Yet, at the very end of the narration, an abrupt disruption occurs. The narration turns away from the previous course. The last chapter of the novel, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," harmoniously sings out.<sup>20</sup> This song is a song of cultural translation, as I will explain later.

This final episode in *The Woman Warrior* deploys another female figure from Chinese history as its protagonist: Ts'ai Yen, a poetess of second-century (CE) Han Dynasty. She was captured in the course of the upheavals of the civil war in North China in the last decade of the second century. Afterwards, Ts'ai Yen was forced into marriage with a chieftain of the Southern Hsiung-nu, with whom she bore two sons (*WW* 207-08). During her twelve-year exile with barbarians, the only music she heard was the high whistles of arrows. The arrows "terrified their enemies by filling the air with death sounds" (208). Yet, one night Ts'ai Yen heard flute music "tremble and rise like desert wind" (208):

She walked out of her tent and saw hundreds of barbarians sitting upon the sand [...]. Their elbows were raised, and they were blowing on flutes. They reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held—an icicle in the desert. [...] Night after night the songs filled the desert [...]. (208)

The songs replace Ts'ai Yen's previous beliefs that there was no music among these barbarians. The barbarians' sharp, cold flute music pierced through the desert. The "canniness" of the music disturbed and struck Ts'ai Yen, and stimulated her to sing along:

Then, out of Ts'ai Yen's tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the

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<sup>20</sup> The song is traditionally attributed to Ts'ai Yen. It tells the misery of Ts'ai Yen's exile to a barbarian land. Kingston's final episode is based on Ts'ai Yen's life.

barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians. (209)

Presented here is a harmonious picture in sound. A high and clear song matches the flutes. Sadness and anger sung in another language are conveyed to the barbarians. The children who once “imitated her [Ts’ai Yen] with senseless singsong words” (208) stop laughing and come to sing along. Similarly, the barbarians and even her own children once felt that Ts’ai Yen’s language was alien or uncanny, but now “they could catch barbarian phrases.” Both Ts’ai Yen and the barbarians perceive something familiar and homely from the discourse they once experienced as alien and unhomely. Both understand and are understood. The previous contention from both sides *suddenly* disappears and transposes into a discourse pleasant to both. The cultural difference shifts to commonness, and language incongruity to consonance. In the end, Ts’ai Yen “brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down [...] is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,’ a song that Chinese people sing to their own instruments” (209). Originally, the song was sung to match the barbarians’ flutes. Now it is adapted to fit Chinese instruments.

On a narrative level, the story of Ts’ai Yen serves as an allegorical paradigm of the novel, and calls forth the previous tropes. One set of agents and images (No Name Woman, ghosts, and Fa Mu Lan) conveys difference and likeness through correspondent accompaniments to form a consistent whole in the end (a Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe). Thus the text becomes, in Stephen Tyler’s words, “a sequence of separate tellings in search of a common theme” (126). It pieces together the scattered meanings articulated through multivalent voices from multivalent backgrounds.

How the song is related to the three previous tropes (No Name Woman, ghosts, and Fa Mu Lan) characterizes the working of allegory of the text. The previous conflicts constitute a multileveled metaphor to work for the final unity. The tension between a theme of resolution and its incoherent process of development toward that coherence troubles the reader. The first three allegorical registers in my analysis tend to work on their own in a deranged direction until the song rings to incorporate them into a larger organism. Thus, the allegorical meaningfulness of the

text lies in the process of building up a series of tropes with increasing tension separately. The building goes on until the last moment when the tension breaks out not into ruin, but into a transcendence of a harmonious reorganization and re-signification of all the previous separate meanings. At this moment, the allegorical force of this narration reaches its climax.

In an interview, Kingston makes clear the function of Ts'ai Yen's adaptation in music. She says, "this heroine took the arrows and turned them into flutes, and then she composed songs for these flutes. My idea was that we can turn weapons into musical instruments" (Fishkin 783). The writer's idea of "turning weapons into musical instruments" is the idea of a transcendence from confrontation to reconciliation. Thus, the song allegorically acts as a symbol of translation between two incompatible discourses. This translation is not necessarily between two languages. It relates more to cultural aspects. It is a transcultural construction of a discourse accessible to alien cultures. Within the Chinese American community, the narrator feels that Chinese and American languages are incompatible. One is too loud, earsplitting, and the other is too soft, unhearable. The narrator explains the incompatibility:

It isn't just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly, to American ears [...]. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thang names you can't remember. And the Chinese can't hear Americans at all; the language is too soft and western music unhearable. (*WW* 171-72)

Likewise, the adaptation of the music from the barbarians' flute allegorizes the process in which the writer writes across cultural incompatibility. Among the uncanny presentation, Kingston perceives and then develops canniness, and finally adapts an alien discourse to fit her own "instruments." She produces a writing that breaks down the incompatibility. Her narration balances loudness and softness, and turns the strange into familiar, the inaudible into melody, and alienness into commonness.

To go one step further, as an allegory, the making of Ts'ai Yen's song teaches a Chinese descendant how to be an American in the alien land. More importantly, it also conveys an idea of adaptation in other contexts of incompatibility: how to be a woman in a male patriarchal

system, and how to be a minority writer in a tradition that submerges ethnic voices. For those who live in the margin, this adaptation is a postmodern attempt to “negotiate the space between centers and margins in ways that acknowledge difference and its challenge to any supposedly monolithic culture” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 198). It is through this acknowledgement that the reader comes to understand how the novel, as postmodern fiction, “foreground[s] the productive, constructing aspects of [its] acts of representing” (Hutcheon, *Politics* 22). That is, the novel is a story itself, but it is not fixed. Its allegorization goes on to perform metaphorically another meaning built up from the story to set up a new discourse of value, representation, and communication. Finally, the novel serves a practical purpose for cultural reconciliation that aims to negotiate difference and subvert cultural monolithicity. This process suggests a possible way out of racial subordination and cultural confrontation. The allegorical trope extends itself to function as a workable resolution of conflicts both within and outside of a narrative discourse.

*The Woman Warrior* translates Chinese myths to American readers in the same way as Ts’ai Yen picks up commonness from an alien discourse. By an extension, the novel also translates another life experience, and another culture into dominant national discourse. The allegorical transition from Ts’ai Yen’s experience to the narrator’s is another productive translation. It traverses temporal, cultural and ideological differences. It is also what the writer strives for as she comments in several interviews: a way of seeking balance and familiarity from the uncanny encounter with uncanny cultures.

## Postmodern Contradiction

Read as an allegory, *The Woman Warrior* writes between extremes.<sup>21</sup> It brings postmodern contradiction into full play. An understanding of the contradiction in light of postmodernism is key to providing a more meaningful approach when reading the novel. I will elucidate this argument first from the allegorical narrative itself, and then from the

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<sup>21</sup> These extremes include those from personal to public, from uncanny to canny, from history to reality, and from confrontation to translation.

novel's thematic and structural engagement in the production of contradiction.

In her article "The Double Voice of Metaphor," Heidi Hansson points out that in postmodern literature, certainties are continuously questioned and challenged. Allegory becomes a suitable form for presenting this characterization because it expresses distrust of accurate representation (454-55). When a text is read through another in an allegorical structure, the text presents itself as a double discourse. It tells a story but points the reader in the direction of something else doubled by that story. The inherent non-order suggests a distinctive postmodern "double view" of honoring "[s]ameness and difference, unity and rupture, filiation and revolt" (Hassan 88). The distance between a sign and the signified, between what a text says and what it performs is dramatized. When this happens, allegory becomes "a classic example of double discourse [...] that [...] avoids establishing a center within the text, because in allegory the unity of the work is provided by something that is not explicitly there" (Hansson 454). That is to say, allegory aims to install and reinforce a secondary meaning within a primary text that undermines or competes with its primary intention (J. Clifford, "Ethnographic" 98-99). In this sense, the paradox in an allegory displays a postmodern stylistic contradiction: a contradiction of "mark[ing] its paradoxical doubleness of both continuity and change, both authority and transgression" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 35). On a narrative level, it is a contradiction between intent and content, between the surface and the hidden, between the one and the doubled other.

When one narrative is read as covertly representing another meaning, the relationship between the two becomes problematic. In his essay "The Allegorical Impulse," Craig Owens notes two fundamental impulses of postmodernism: "[a] conviction of the remoteness of the past, and a desire to redeem it for the present" (68). This contradictory conviction, as Hutcheon notes, is "a contesting revision or rereading of the past that both confirms and subverts the power of the representations of history" (*Politics* 91). When a historical account is used for "another" discourse, the incoherent relation challenges the authority of history. In this sense, allegory displays the negativized rhetoric of postmodern tendencies: discontinuity, decentering, and indeterminacy (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 3). Owens continues, arguing that instead of restoring an original meaning, an allegorist "adds another meaning to the image," where the

addition is, “only to replace: the allegorical meaning supplants an antecedent one; it is a supplement” (69). Owens argues that the relation between the two texts in an allegory is “fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic” (69). Thus the fragmentary, intermittent, or chaotic supplement makes allegory a narrative that problematizes rather than conveys meaning. As Owens notes, “Allegory is consistently attracted to the fragmentary, the imperfect, the incomplete” (70). He points out to the existence of mutually incompatible and even antithetical meanings. Thus an allegorical narrative complicates the text by destabilizing the relation between word and meaning. The use of the original account of another (con)text does more corruption than preservation, more supplement than representation. In this sense, allegory contributes to a contradictory postmodern phenomenon: “one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges” (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 3).

This inherent contradiction of postmodern allegory between one text and another, between an original story and its meta-account, is enacted through the double narration of *The Woman Warrior*. The main metaphors in the text are all inherently contradictory. They are forever carried out along a track of duality: personal versus public, canny versus uncanny, and history versus reality. The relationship between the two opposites in each dichotomy is not of subversion or negation, but of saying and confronting while challenging one with the other. This juxtaposition of two or more cultural traditions, according to Fischer, generates the search in another tradition, and serves as a way of exploring one’s own past (200). Fischer further argues that the search “needs [...] anchorages that can allow a kind of dual or multiple tracking” (200-01). The cultural logic generated in the tracking is “subjected to mutual criticism or mutual revelation from both traditions” (201). To structure this dual or multiple tracking in one tradition in light of another, the writer needs to employ correspondent double or heterogeneous strategies. The diversity of genres, voices, and sources in *The Woman Warrior*, is characterized by non-uniformity. The inter-reference between these diversities and within each diversity provides reservoirs for generating ethnic specificity of this group of people.

Another postmodern contradiction in *The Woman Warrior* comes from the representation of traditional Chinese culture. The representation reiterates the very concept in Chinese myth or historical resources. It displays a postmodern way of setting up a communication with the past

that works for the present. In the cultural field of postmodernism, the text's American story continually ravel and unravels the fragments of a Chinese past. The paradoxical way of using the past offers a continuity of values in a critical way. In presenting the past, Hutcheon argues that "postmodernism is fundamentally contradictory, resolutely historical, and inescapably political" (*Poetics* 4). In *The Woman Warrior*, the "fundamental contradiction" lies in the working of its historicity and politics. The historical turns into a current issue, and political awareness is worked out as a personal concern.

However, the representation of tradition in *The Woman Warrior* is often not a faithful one. The writer uses historical materials while acknowledging and even highlighting the apparent distortions. The unfaithful reproduction seems to play out a tension between denying and cherishing the past. Thus the inherent postmodern contradiction works out another contradiction. The unfaithful writing in the novel on the one hand subverts the very idea that the historical texts try to convey. On the other hand, it challenges both Chinese traditional ideas and American ideology by situating them in new circumstances of an (Chinese) American reality. Things, events, and experiences, which were once separated by time and space, are juxtaposed in a postmodern way. In this juxtaposition, the unfaithfulness from the original accounts brings up new conditions of another context. It connects stories of different contexts.

The text's paradoxical thematic occupation and a lot of (un)truthful adaptations demonstrate a strong mood of "meta-ness"—historiographic metafiction, meta-autobiography, meta-folktale, and meta-talk-story. The prefix "meta-" implies a multitude of meanings, such as "after," "along with," "beyond," "among," and "behind." It reminds the reader they are reading something re-created, not the original account. Thus the meta-narrative presents itself as another contradiction. It is as much connected with as it is separated from its original genre of fiction, history, (auto)biography, and fantasy. The paradox of connection and separation reflects the contradictory nature of postmodernism, which "involves its offering of multiple, provisional alternatives to traditional, fixed unitary concepts in full knowledge of [...] the continuing appeal of those very concepts" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 60). Thus the fissure between the meta-discourse and its home genre opens up a dynamic space of dialogue and debate. This space is built up on difference: difference between meta-

account and its original, between alternative meta-accounts (in Hutcheon's words, "provisional alternatives"). The difference represents a multiplicity of two worlds: fact and fantasy, personal stories and their significance at political level, family past in a patriarchal society and present immigrant community. The encounter of meta-ness and its home narrative is a moment of symbolic power struggle. This struggle can be extended to the construction of the self through its various dynamic representations in this contesting space between worlds.

In the meta-narrative of *The Woman Warrior*, there are always two or more layers of meaning in each of the allegorical tropes I discuss in this chapter. This meta-ness suggests a postmodern disbelief in the meaning of its original discourse. It rejects the claims of both authenticity of historical representation and inauthenticity of fictional representation. Thus, the meta-narrative engages itself in an endless production of "provisional alternatives" for an open-ended truth. In this working lies the postmodern way of rewriting and representing the past in fiction and in history: "to open it up to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon, *Poetics* 110). The rewritten past works to change the present by resisting totalization, uniformization and conclusion.

## Conclusion

In *The Woman Warrior*, traditional stories consisting of either family anecdotes or historical legends are integrated in the narrator's life story. These stories reveal the writer's thematic concerns—feminism, anti-racialism, and cultural reconciliation. The stories are all haunted by some underlying meaning. This meaning concerns the narrator's development from a girl to a word warrior, from bewilderment to resolution, and from silence to articulation. Ultimately, the meanings from each story refer back to the writer's central thematic concerns. The double-line narration fuses Chinese conventional and American postmodern narrative strategies. The literary hybridity in terms of genre, subject matter, narrative plotting and mode of narration destabilizes the interpretation of the narrative. The various voices from the first stories are a useful tool to allegorize new female images, new philosophical views, and new cultural understandings. The production of new meanings revitalizes the past. The narration of *The Woman Warrior* weaves these new ideas and

ideals into a manifold allegorical work structured by the renewed old stories. Focusing on the novel's postmodern use of Chinese sources, my analysis demonstrated how allegory is employed as a narrative mode in *The Woman Warrior*.