

## Usable Past, Unspeakable Secret: Maxine Hong Kingston's Use of Woman Warrior Characters

Naoko Sugiyama

### Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston, one of the most highly regarded contemporary authors in the United States, wrote *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* in 1976, and it continues to be a critically well-received long seller. Using the popular American framework of a young ethnic woman coming of age in America while also presenting its own unique blend of Chinese and American legends, stories, memoirs, and historical episodes, it is said to be one of the most frequently taught books in American universities.<sup>1</sup> The Walt Disney Company's animation film *Mulan* (1998) and its sequel DVD production *Mulan 2* (2004) that feature this female hero was probably inspired by Kingston's best-selling memoir.

As Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, among others, argue, this book's popularity owes much to the mythic woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, a character Kingston created based on the supposedly historical but legendary Chinese heroine. According to the poem "The Chant of Mu Lan" that dates back to the sixth century, Fa Mu Lan disguises herself as a young man, becomes a great general in the army, and returns home to her parents to resume life as a woman. Fa Mu Lan has been a popular figure in Chinese culture and has been the subject of poems, songs, and operas. Several film versions featuring the central figure of Fa Mu Lan have been made over the years. *Mulan Joins the Army* (1939), produced in China, for example, was very popular in China and was also well received in Japan, despite the fact that the movie's thinly disguised protest message against Japanese imperialism was no secret to anyone. Toward the end of the twentieth century, Disney's *Mulan* movie was internationally popular, and according to Hana Washitani, "connected the local culture to the global and universal culture" (138, 139).

This woman warrior character, as Washitani mentions, has multi-dimensional appeal—the story of Fa Mu Lan has been regarded as the embodiment of the Confucian virtues of loyalty to the emperor and filiality to one's parents; she then became a symbol of the spirit of Chinese resistance against Japanese imperialism; and, as its popularity in Japan shows, as the representation of a beautiful young woman in men's clothes, Fa Mu Lan has strong, highly stylized sexual appeal that has been developed by movie actresses such as Greta Garbo and Marlene Dietrich. But most importantly, the woman warrior character in Kingston's memoir, like other woman warrior figures of the 1970s and after, has been seen as a symbol of the strong and independent woman who

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<sup>1</sup> Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, "Introduction," in Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, ed., *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston* (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998).

transgresses gender boundaries and excels in domains that have traditionally been male—in short, a feminist heroine and role model for women.

The narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, a young Chinese American woman, “I,” identifies with Fa Mu Lan, whose story was told to her by her Chinese mother. The narrator decides that she has to be a woman warrior who is strong and courageous, so that she will be respected and loved by the people around her in spite of her lower status as a woman in the Chinese American community. Using Fa Mu Lan as a role model, the narrator avoids the stereotypical dichotomy of Old World misogynist China versus advanced and egalitarian America. Instead, she succeeds in making use of different aspects of American and Chinese culture and tradition in order to find her own way of life. While her story is specifically Chinese American, her use of the historical woman warrior Fa Mu Lan was well received by female audiences seeking a strong female role model.

Kingston, however, has claimed to be a pacifist; she was, in fact, seriously involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement and was arrested in March 2003 in Washington, D.C. when she was participating in a protest against the war in Iraq. She expressed her regret from a pacifist point of view for having used the woman warrior as a central figure in her book.<sup>2</sup> In an interview with Donna Perry, Kingston reflects that she should have presented Fa Mu Lan not only as “a battle-axe-type woman” but also as a weaver and an artist, as she is in the original Chinese legend (175). In another interview with Paul Skenazy, Kingston comments:

I have often regretted calling the book *The Woman Warrior* because I have become more and more of a pacifist. Even as I was writing *The Woman Warrior*, I was finding a lot of dissatisfaction with having a military general as a hero. So I end the story with another mythic woman, Ts'ai Yen. I like her a lot better. (“Kingston at the University,” 132)

In her essay “The Novel’s Next Step: From the Novel of the Americas to the Global Novel,” Kingston proposes the idea of “peace literature” that would be “about a society in which characters deal with one another nonviolently” (13). In this paper, I would like to lay out how Kingston tries to negotiate between her pacifism and her need to depict a Chinese American female hero, and what her strategic moves are in drawing from various cultural sources in order to create her new genre of “peace literature.” I argue that, despite Kingston’s efforts to create “peace literature,” her own text betrays the secret of the woman warrior; the unspeakable secret that is not just about Fa Mu Lan’s true female identity hidden under man’s clothes, but also the female desire for violence.

### **Woman Warriors in the US Culture of Violence**

Images and representations of “woman warriors,” especially after the 1960s era of feminism, have been considered symbols of female independence, strength, and gender equality, and have been more and more favorably accepted by women as well as by the general public. Susan Faludi’s

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<sup>2</sup> For Kingston’s pacifist activism, see her interview with Paul Skenazy.

*Stiffed: The Betrayal of the American Man* and James William Gibson's *Warrior Dreams: Violence and Manhood in Post-Vietnam America* both point out the rise of the culture of violence in post-Vietnam United States, including the idealization of violence and admiration for fighting warriors and soldiers as heroes. They argue that this culture of violence, developed by American men in the post-Vietnam era, is exclusively male and extremely misogynistic: Faludi discusses the ruthless male desire to exclude women from the world of masculine privilege such as the military. Gibson points out the scarcity of female warriors in Hollywood films compared with male warrior heroes and quotes a well-known editor who says, "I think women want to have men as heroes, and men want to have men as heroes" (63). But this situation that they describe seems to have changed since the 1990s, when films and TV programs started to feature many women warriors: *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, and animated programs for children such as *The Powerpuff Girls* and *Sailor Moon*, to name just a few.<sup>3</sup> As for major motion pictures, it goes without saying that there have been more and more female action heroes and female warriors.<sup>4</sup> These women warriors in US popular culture are not just as strong and competent as their male counterparts, but they are also often presented as cute or attractive *as women*. It seems that post-Iraq War, post-9.11 US has been more tolerant of fighting women in the military, and it is this tolerance that has probably brought about the popularity of women warriors as positive figures in the US popular imagination.

While many women are in favor of more women in the military and regard women warriors as role models, some feminists such as Cynthia Enloe have criticized this phenomenon as "the militarization of women." Enloe, in her *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, perceives war and militarism to be patriarchal, and argues that the acceptance of women as warriors in the patriarchal social order only signifies the militarization of women and should not be celebrated as a feminist gain. She opposes the idealization of woman warrior figures as part of the maneuver to militarize women, pointing out that in various cultures, heroic women warrior stories have been used to inspire war (244).

### **Kingston's Strategy for Creating "Peace Literature"**

Kingston obviously shares Enloe's concern that presenting woman warriors as positive role models may promote the militarization of women. It is also obvious that this concern has led her to make strategic narrative moves so as not to equate woman warriors with heroic female role models. In her later works, she criticizes her earlier use of heroic woman warrior figures. For example, in her *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, the omniscient narrator sarcastically describes women who want to be warriors in a revision of the Fa Mu Lan story, explicitly critical of presenting a woman warrior as a liberating role model:

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<sup>3</sup> For women warriors in TV programs and discussions on their feminist implications, see Frances Early and Kathleen Kennedy's *Athena's Daughters: Television's New Women Warriors* (Syracuse UP, 2003).

<sup>4</sup> About the recent Hollywood films that feature women warriors, see, for example, Dominique Mainon and James Ursin's *The Modern Amazons: Warrior Women on Screen* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2006).

Unfortunately for peace on Earth, the listening ladies were appeased, and Lance had run out of plowshare ideas. Nanci and Taña and Sunny and Judy [the protagonist's friends who are participating in his theater production] thought that if they were allowed to play war women, they were liberated. The time of peace women, who will not roll bandages or serve coffee and doughnuts or rivet airplanes or man battleships or shoot guns at strangers, does not begin tonight. (148)

Here, a third-person narrator juxtaposes a heroic fighting beauty, female factory workers, and nurses and housewives, highlighting the fact that, although those who are "liberated" and those who support men in traditionally feminine ways are often perceived as binary opposites, all women who participate in war-related activities are trapped in the state military system, though in different slots.

In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston expresses her resentment that *The Woman Warrior* is being used as a text at the United States Air Force Academy because "[i]t gives a mythos to the women military students," and admits that her attempt to expand the concept of the word "warrior" to mean the nonviolent "one who wars against confusion" has failed (49). She refuses to be identified as a warrior woman, and when one of her friends comments that she strides like a warrior, Kingston responds, "Oh, no, I'm not a warrior. I don't walk like a warrior," even though her friend explained that she meant that she had "a strong, purposeful walk" (256). Thus, Kingston makes it clear that being a feminist and being a woman warrior are two entirely different things, if not mutually exclusive.

Even in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston tries to de-militarize Fa Mu Lan. For example, her version of the Fa Mu Lan story emphasizes Fa Mu Lan's stoic self-restraint and physical and mental skills as a martial arts expert rather than her triumphs as a war general. Although Fa Mu Lan eventually becomes a general who leads troops, much of the Fa Mu Lan story presented in *The Woman Warrior* depicts her training years, and there are only two occasions on which Fa Mu Lan actually fights and kills her enemy. Moreover, one of these combat scenes is mythic and symbolic rather than realistic. In this scene, the enemy is a giant, and when Fa Mu Lan cuts off his head, his true form of a snake is revealed, and slithers away (45). His soldiers, freed from the snake's spell over them, stop fighting and pledge their loyalty to Fa Mu Lan.

In *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston refers to and quotes from Chinese classic literary works such as *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *The Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *The Journey to the West*, but she cautiously makes them material for creating peace literature rather than the male-centered war stories that they are more generally considered to be. For example, in both *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, *Three Kingdoms* is represented by its "Oath of the Peach Garden" scene, in which three heroes swear to be lifelong brothers and then have a barbecue party. *Tripmaster Monkey* also introduces episodes from these Chinese classics in which militarism and violence bring not glory but meaningless tragedy.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For Kingston's use of the Chinese classics in *Tripmaster Monkey*, see the second chapter of my "Speaking with Divine Authority: Maternal Discourse in the Works of Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison, and Leslie Marmon Silko" (Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University, 2003).

Kingston's use of Chinese classics has been criticized by some Chinese American intellectuals such as Frank Chin, who holds up the same Chinese classics as representations of positive Chinese masculinity. While I do not intend to describe this well-known so-called debate, I must here point out that Kingston's selective uses and revisions, which Chin and some others criticize as a distortion of the original Chinese culture, are also part of the Chinese literary tradition that she consciously draws from.<sup>6</sup> For those of us whose culture has been under the strong influence of Chinese culture, different versions, revisions, and selective uses of these Chinese classics are nothing new—for example, the Japanese reading public is familiar with different versions of *Three Kingdoms* and *The Outlaws of the Marsh* written by popular novelists such as Eiji Yoshikawa and Kenzo Kitakata, the graphic novels of Mitsuteru Yokoyama, episodes from these same classics made into dramas, all-female Takarazuka theater productions, puppet shows, and computer games. Kingston, thus, tries and succeeds in creating her pacifist polemic by using the Chinese literary tradition.

It is not only Chinese tradition that Kingston uses as a cultural resource; writing within the American literary tradition, Kingston also emphasizes American tradition in order to support her pacifism. One good example is her representation of her brother in *China Men* who is a high school teacher. He tries to teach pacifism to his hostile working-class male students, and says that “[t]he military draft is not an American tradition. Protest against it is a longer tradition” (285). This brother, who also goes on the “economy” in Taiwan with his friends, is probably referring to Henry David Thoreau. *China Men* also presents the story of an old Chinese immigrant in Hawai'i who has worked as a field hand since 1885, who, when asked how to stop the war, replies, “Let every body [sic] out of the army” and says, “What I like best is to work in a cane field when the young green plants are just growing up” (307). It seems that Kingston is claiming that the American tradition of hard-working immigrants is also the tradition of pacifists and nurturers. His simple anti-war philosophy and his love of living with nature also evoke Thoreau, the American icon of anti-war civil disobedience.

Another American tradition that Kingston draws from is the telling of stories from real experience. Like Thoreau, as well as the Beat authors by whom Kingston has been greatly influenced, Kingston seems to believe in writing from experience. In her foreword to *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, a compilation of essays, poems, and fictions written by veterans who participated in Kingston's writing workshop for Vietnam veterans, she emphasizes the importance of war survivors telling their stories in order for the rest of the population to understand the reality of war and to be enlightened in order to become pacifists. She refers to Odysseus, who goes to war and comes back to tell his story, thus reminding us that telling the veterans' stories for a pacifist cause also belongs to the much longer tradition of Western civilization itself.

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<sup>6</sup> For the details of this so called debate, see Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiographical Controversy.”

## Conclusion

In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston's most recent literary work in which she documents her Vietnam veteran writing workshop project as part of her pacifist effort, she quotes the story of "another woman warrior," who, according to her mother, "is better than Fa Mook Lan [sic] (58).

Ming Hong...disguises herself as a man, and wins first, second, and third places in the imperial exams and archery...contests. As a doctor, she cures the king. The king's daughter throws a red ball at Ming Hong, who catches it and has to marry her. Already married to a man, she marries a woman. Her enemy discovers her feminine shoe, and takes it to the king. Her father-in-law, who's been having yearnings for her/him, takes the mighty archer, doctor, scribe in a carriage to a whorehouse, and exposes him/her. Meanwhile, Ming Hong's husband, away at war, lives through many adventures. He comes home. (58)

Why this appearance of another woman warrior? Does this mean that it is, after all, too difficult to erase women warrior figures as female heroes who possess physical strength, self-respect, independence, and the love and admiration of others, historically long denied of women? Does it mean that a woman warrior, if she exists at all in reality, will not be a simple and clean-cut female hero as generally perceived but a character with unknown facets? Moreover, Ming Hong in this story is not actually a warrior. Does it mean that a woman in traditionally a male role still has to "fight" and thus become and/or be regarded by others as a warrior, probably against her own will? Kingston describes her frustrating experience at a meeting of American and Vietnamese war veterans, in which the participants eagerly agreed with a female Vietnamese veteran who claims that the war years were "good times, good fun" when they "had adventures" and "made tight friends." This episode demonstrates that the appeal of war rhetoric is difficult to resist even for pacifist women. With the suggestive possibility of lesbian eroticism, this bizarre and unfinished story of Ming Hong indicates the possibility of new stories of women and violence while claiming, as Kingston's mother claims, that such stories should be hidden and kept secret, especially from men.

After all, *The Woman Warrior* begins with the words, "You must not tell anyone," and the secret here is a story that the protagonist's mother tells about her Chinese past; it is about the protagonist's aunt who, after being violently attacked by her fellow villagers as punishment for her extramarital relationship, commits suicide, taking her illegitimate baby with her. This story of her family secret, a story of malice and violence against women, leads the protagonist to fantasize about the female hero Fa Mu Lan, who, as a "female avenger," cuts off the head of the exploitative local baron who claims that "girls are maggots in the rice" and that "it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (43).

Kingston tries to create an American tradition of peace literature, drawing both from the Western and Chinese literary traditions and also drawing on her creative will to concoct a new tradition. At the same time, female rage and female desire for physical violence, hidden under the tradition of pacifism, seems to be another tradition, which, despite Kingston's conscious effort to

erase it out of existence, seems to be ever-present and continuous.

### Notes

I would like to notify my readers that some of the ideas presented in this paper also appear in my earlier essays, "From the Woman Warrior to Veterans of Peace: Maxine Hong Kingston's Pacifist Textual Strategies" (2009) and "Chaina Taun no Onnna Musha: Kyarakuta to shite no Fa Mu Lan no Henyo" (2008) although the main themes and emphases of these papers are different from those of this essay.

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