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An Archetypal Study of Maxine Hong Kingston's Work: *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract

This article takes Maxine Hong Kingston's works - *The Woman Warrior* as the object of study. Relying on Frye's myth and archetypal criticism, through the analysis of myths and literary classical archetypal images, the paper illustrates Maxine Hong Kingston's rewriting process systematically, thus discussing Chinese American's survival condition and their inner world, and Chinese American's dissimilation and naturalization in the dominant heterogeneous culture. Meanwhile, the thesis points out that Maxine Hong Kingston's strategy of adapting myth is, in fact, a kind of recreation of literature. She has created a new form of "American myths."

Key words: Maxine Hong Kingston; Myths and archetypes; Rewriting; Identity

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INTRODUCTION

Of all the Chinese American writers, Maxine Hong Kingston is undoubtedly the most well known. Kingston's first book, *The Woman Warrior* is now regarded as the milestone of Chinese American literature. This article makes a new path in focusing solely on myth and archetypal criticism to explain Kingston's strategy of adapting myths - to create a new form of "American myths" and a kind of recreation of literature. Her goal has always been to incorporate the myths of China in her work without fostering the stereotypical exotic image that appeals to so many white Americans. This kind of borrowing and displacing traditional culture challenges both the Chinese tradition and American tradition, adding new interpretation to both.

1. THE ARCHETYPE OF CROSS-GENDER - FA MU LAN: A MASCULINE WOMAN WARRIOR

Being proficient in the technique of sex change, Kingston adopts the archetype of cross-gender in *The Woman Warrior*: Fa Mu Lan - a Masculine Woman Warrior. Hua Mulan is a well-known heroine of *The Chant of Mu Lan*, a Chinese literary ballad based on an oral tradition and composed by an anonymous writer in the sixth century. In this poem, disguised as a man, Hua Mulan replaces her elderly father to battle against Tartars for twelve years. When the war is over, she refuses to take an official rank offered to her and returns home. Putting on her robe and make-up, she resumes her girlhood. Her female identity surprises her fellowmen, who travel with her for twelve years without knowing that Mu Lan is a girl. As a popular legendary heroine in China, Hua Mulan is loved and admired for her diligence, intelligence, valiant spirit, and the ability to do both women and men's work.

Inspired by the chant of Hua Mulan heard from her mother in her girlhood, Kingston creates purposely a composite fantasy figure, the swordswoman, through whom Kingston illustrates a young Chinese American girl's fight against gender injustice. Because Kingston doesn't want a point-for-point identification of Fa Mu Lan, so in "White Tiger", the second chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's version derives from the traditional story. As for the figure, sometimes there is no

clear distinction among Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman and the narrator. Although there are many fundamental similarities, Kingston makes several alterations to her version. First of all, she rewrites the swordswoman's story as the narrator's fantasy. Secondly, she adds passages concerning the woman warrior's martial training in the mountains of the white tigers. Thirdly, Kingston even inserts domestic episodes of a husband and a child while Fa Mu Lan is still a maid in the original chant. The fourth alteration is to add description of the swordswoman's adversaries in each battle. At last, the swordswoman pursues revenge on her enemies for her village whereas Fa Mu Lan fights for reasons of filial piety. However, at the end of her adaptation, Kingston changes Fa Mu Lan's filial piety as a daughter into the swordswoman's daughter-in-law's duty - taking care of parents-in-law and bearing more grandchildren. All in all, Kingston's modification of the myth is a way to protest against double discrimination - gender and racist discriminations.

1.1 Avenging for the Sexism

Among all the virtues of Kingston's Fa Mu Lan, her valiancy and her disguise as a man are the most striking and suggestive. The cross-gender undertaken by Fa Mu Lan seems fascinating and expressive. Fa Mu Lan's success on the battlefield demonstrates women's equal capability in man's work, and her transformation to a fighter in man's guise advertises her intelligence to a male-dominated society in which a woman is only associated with housework child care.

In domestic life, this courageous woman masquerades as a male warrior in defense of her country. In order to challenge the stereotype of traditional marriage arranged by parents and go-betweens, Kingston creates an ideal matrimonial and domestic life through her imagination. Not like Hua Mu Lan, the swordswoman has a handsome husband, whom she chooses from her playmates in childhood. She marries for love rather than being married out as burden-relieving. With its own significance in terms of gender issues, the swordswoman's child-bearing episode reinforces the feeling of freedom and empowerment. As Ling Amy points out, Kingston "increases the woman's stature and asserts that the impossible is possible" (Ling, 1990, p.159) by having her warrior bear a child while still fighting battles disguised as a man. The episode of giving birth to a boy in the battle field serves to glorify women and symbolizes the battle against sexism: as the indispensable producers of men, women can do not only what men can do, but also what men cannot do. Grafted on to the model of Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman's marriage and childbirth mirror Kingston's resistance to the traditional arranged marriages.

In military life or on the battlefield, Kingston transmits these characteristics of Fa Mu Lan - fighting spirit and perseverance into the swordswoman in her description. In Kingston's fantasy, the swordswoman is a conflation of Fa Mu Lan, a traditional Chinese figure *Kongfu* movie stereotype learns from her mother, with the swordswoman, a *Kongfu* movie stereotype she sees in the Confucius Church in her childhood. In Kingston's recreation, the narrator, a Chinese American girl, fulfills her desire to be treated as the equal of a boy through imagination of the swordswoman. Although the swordswoman is still a woman, she has a glorious time - performed heroically in man's armor, she returns home finding her parents "killed a chicken and steamed it whole as if they were welcoming home a son" (Kingston, 1976, p.40). Further, the narrator has achieved her goal of being treated as a boy through her imagination of the swordswoman. The swordswoman proves that she can practice a son's filial piety by sending money home and getting her parents' coffins ready. Thus her parents can live wealthily and happily in their lifetime without worrying about their posthumous lives.

From all the above, as a woman and a warrior, swordswoman is proud of her success. She is proud that her parents sacrifice a pig for her. And also when the battle is over, the heroine returns home and says to her husband: "I will stay with you, doing farm work and housework, and giving you more sons" (Kingston, 1976, p.45).

1.2 Avenging for the Racism

In the transformed myth, Kingston borrows a story of a Chinese patriot to illustrate her fight against the racism. She rewrites a word-carving episode derived from the story of Yue Fei, who fought against the Mongols to defend China in the twelfth century. His mother cut into his back four Chinese characters Jing Zhong Bao Guo meaning to serve one's country with adamant loyalty, because she wanted to remind him of his responsibility to defend his motherland. With his mother's carved words as a motto Yue Fei fought brilliantly until the end of his life and became a Chinese national hero. In her episode, Kingston transposes the act of engraving words from the story of Yue Fei to the tale of the swordswoman. As Yue Fei has the slogan tattooed on his back by his mother, Kingston's swordswoman has hers on her back by her father. Both highly commended for their virtue of filial piety, Yue Fei and Fa Mu Lan are famous for their valor on the battlefield and their patriotism in repelling foreign intrusion into their country. So in a sense, Kingston is transforming the myth of the woman warrior into avenging for the racism she personally experiences. One of her racist bosses calls her "Nigger yellow". She wants to revenge her racist boss: "If I took the sword, which my hate must surely have forged out of the air, and gutted him, I would put color and wrinkles into his shirt" (Kingston, 1976, p.49).

Referring to this blending of two identities, some critics think that it is a sort of profane ignorance of Chinese culture, such as Frank Chin, who delivers the harshest critique, accusing Kingston of "faking" Chinese myths. To Kingston, her adaptation is not the story of

Yue Fei and Fa Mu lan at all. Just as she said: "I see that as an aggressive storytelling act, and also it's part of my own freedom to play with the myth, and I do feel that the myths have to be changed and played with all the time, or they die" (Skenazy, 1998, p.40).

What's more, the swordswoman is sent to the mountains of the white tigers at fourteen where she is blindfolded and runs into nothingness with the falling snow. This white world mirrors the real world in which the narrator is surrounded by white Caucasian. The swordswoman's loss in wilderness and hunger also reflects the narrator's hard situation among the white Caucasian. Meanwhile, In Kingston's recreation, the giant the swordswoman fights against symbolizes the narrator's racist bosses. There are similarities between the description of the swordswoman's opponents and the narrator's adversaries. They are both powerful, not only socially and politically, but also physically.

In her reinterpretation of the fantasy woman warrior, Kingston not only reveals the young narrator's desire of being treated as equal as a boy by her family and society, but also expresses her desire to overcome her feelings of powerlessness and uncertainty with regard to her status and identity as an ethnic woman. In a whole, Kingston's recreation of the swordswoman is a revenge on the discrimination and maltreatment which women have been suffered for centuries from the gender perspective as well as from the racial perspective.

2. THE ARCHETYPE OF EXILE - TS'AI YEN: A SONG FOR A BARBARIAN REED PIPE

Exile means that the immigrants are in the state of exile no matter voluntarily or involuntarily. As a second-generation Chinese American, Kingston understands the complicated inner world of Chinese immigrants who struggle for acceptance and recognition in the United States. She borrows the well-known legend of the Chinese ancient exiled poet, Ts'ai Yen, to mirror the reality of Chinese Americans in the United States.

The last story in *The Woman Warrior* is about a mythic woman, Ts'ai Yen. Kingston borrows the image from the Chinese sources shifts from the legendary warrior to the poetess Ts'ai Yen. Kingston replaces the words once carved on the swordswoman's back with "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe."

In the second century of Chinese traditional history, Ts'ai Yen was a famous poetess, who was the daughter of the eminent poet and statesman Ts'ai Yung (Cai Yong) (133-192) in East Han. Her first marriage, to Wei Zhongdao, ended with his death shortly after the wedding with no offspring. During the civil war in North China in the last decade of the second century (the Dong Zhuo Rebellion), Ts'ai Yen was abducted by barbarians and became the wife of a chieftain of the Southern Hsiung-nu (Xiongnu), to whom she bore two sons. Twelve years later，she was ransomed by Cao Cao (155-220), who was in authority of the decadent, floundering Han court and wanted her to complete the editing of her father's books. However, she had to leave her children with the nomads. After her return, Cao Cao married her to his statesman Dong Si. In her whole life, Ts'ai Yen married three times, never of her own choice. Historically, the only records about the details of Ts'ai Yen's exile are to be found in her three poems. All the three poems represent the same theme: anxiety, lamentation, and sorrow of exile.

Ts'ai Yen is most known for her poem "Songs of the Barbarian Reed Whistle in Eighteen Stanzas" in China. Written in eighteen stanzas set for a nomad's flute, the poem is about Ts'ai Yen's misery in exile, about her nostalgia since she has been abducted by the barbarian rebels. However, in Kingston's version Ts'ai Yen's grief and frustration disappear. Kingston presents us another Ts'ai Yen, a woman warrior who can adjust herself to displacement in a new circumstance. Unlike the sentimentalized Ts'ai Yen of "Song of the Barbarian Reed Whistle in Eighteen Stanzas", Kingston's Ts'ai Yen can fight from horseback. Living in a tribe, she even gives birth on the sand like the barbarian women. Finally, Ts'ai Yen is able to join in singing "a song so high and clear" (209), which match the flutes. Though she sings about China and her family there in Chinese, the barbarians still feel her sadness and anger, thinking that they can catch familiar barbarian phrases about endless wanderings. Even her own barbarian children who cannot speak Chinese, they "eventually come to sing along with her when she leaves her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians" (209). Through mutual understanding and emotional empathy, Kingston's Ts'ai Yen has overcome her ordeal by obviating cultural barriers. The gulf between Ts'ai Yen and the barbarians is finally bridged.

Most critics agree that "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" is "literally Kingston's recomposition of Ts'ai Yen's lyrics and symbolically Kingston's song about herself" (Gao, 1996, p.40). Kingston's rewriting not only mirrors the quest for identity of a second generation Chinese American girl, but also echoes the experiences and inner world of her first generation Chinese American mother.

2.1 Ts'ai Yen vs. Mother: Song of Nostalgia

From the analysis, we can clearly know that between Ts'ai Yen and her Mother there are similarities. The first point, both of them are the educated women, Ts'ai Yen is famous for her brilliant literary talent and Mother builds her reputation for "being brilliant, a natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it" (63). Second, they both get married out of their own choice. As it is mentioned above, none of Ts'ai Yen's three husbands are chosen by her while Mother first meets her husband at the wedding. Third, both of them feel difficult in communicating with

their own children because of language block. Ts'ai Yen's two barbarian sons "did not speak Chinese. She spoke it to them when their father was out of the tent, but they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed" (Kingston, 1976, p.208). In Mother's eyes, her children have been born among ghosts, are taught by ghosts, and themselves ghost like. Likewise, the daughter cannot understand her mother and complains. Maybe the daughter cannot communicate with her mother only because of her "seventh-grade vocabulary" (206) in Chinese. The fourth similarity between the two women is their nostalgia in an alien world. Ts'ai Yen's barbarian husband treats her well. But Ts'ai Yen is still disturbed by the barbarian music which trembles and rises like desert wind because it makes her yearn for her former life in China with her family. At last, she reconciles with the barbarians and her own children by singing "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe". Not like Ts'ai Yen, who at last is ransomed back to her homeland, Mother can't back China because she has "no more China to go home to" (106) after losing their land there. However, living in America for almost forty years, Mother adapts herself to the new land and tries to become an American: "she recently took to wearing shawls and granny glasses, American fashions" (100).

2.2 Ts'ai Yen vs. Daughter: Song of Identity

Through Ts'ai Yen's story, the American born daughter learns that she can merge into the mainstream society if and only if she has her own song of identity - a new *Hujia Shibapai*. Living in the Southern Hsiung-nu for twelve years, Ts'ai Yen composes Hujia Shibapai, a poem set for a nomad's flute, to illustrate her nostalgia in exile. It is the barbarian music inspires her although it disturbs her first. However, Ts'ai Yen decides to end this suffering and abreacts her longing for home by composing her own song. She sings about China and her family in Chinese so highly and clearly, making it match the flutes, even the barbarians understand its sadness and anger because it arouses their sympathy, making them think about their forever wandering. Ts'ai Yen successfully develops a bond of sympathy with the barbarians.

Likewise, the American born daughter is eager to be accepted as an American instead of being treated as an outsider. As a second generation Chinese American, she knows the silence of Chinese from her own father. Actually, she "enjoyed the silence" (Kingston, 1976, p. 166) until she realizes the meaning of dumb. She notices that other Chinese girls do not talk either, so she knows "the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). Tortured by the unbearable silence, she tries to break silence, not only for herself, but also for all the Chinese Americans. She torments a Chinese American girl in order to force her to speak. The daughter realizes that only by breaking silence can demonstrate one's identity. She also learns a lesson from her family stories: "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" (186). However, the daughter is "making progress, a little every day" (165). Finding her own voice, Kingston triumphs in the transition from silence to song by creating "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", a new *Hujia shibapai*.

Taking Ts'ai Yen's story as the archetype of the exile, Kingston interprets the extending metaphor of reuniting across national and cultural borders. She explores further the issue of cultural misunderstanding, the interpenetration of the Eastern and Western cultures and the necessity for mutual understanding. As an ethnic woman that fully embedded in a cross-cultural situation, Kingston can compose a new *Hujia shibapai*. In the adaptation, she transforms sorrow into hope and winnows out an active meaning from the passive experience in the original story of Ts'ai Yen. It turns out to be a way of eliminating the dilemmas of cross-culturalism. Ts'ai Yen's Hujia shibapai eventually coalesces into Kingston's own song, the song of her Chinese American female identity.

CONCLUSION

The archetypal myth of hero is an important composition of Kingston's reconstruction. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston recreates the cross-gender myth of Fa Mu Lan. She chooses the particular archetypal myth of Fa Mu Lan to explain her process of identity construction allegorically. Kingston's reinterpretation of the swordswoman is a revenge on the discrimination and maltreatment which women have been suffered for centuries in the male dominated society. She not only displaces of Chinese Hua Mu Lan's story into a Chinese American myth, but also the song of Ts'ai Yen at the end of the book, in which the protagonist eventually finds a way of reconciliation between Chinese and American mainstream culture. Being an ethnic poet herself, Kingston chooses the Chinese poet as the archetypes of exile. Ts'ai Yen's experience in Southern Hsiung-nu mirrors the inner suffering of both Chinese immigrant mother and the American born daughter. Ts'ai Yen's exile life recalls Mother's nostalgia and her adaptation to the new land. As for the American born daughter, she successfully finds her own identity by breaking silence and singing her own "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe."

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