

The Steadiness in Narrative Structure in The Woman Warrior

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Abstract

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (hereafter refer to as *The Woman Warrior*) by Maxine Hong Kingston has attracted prompt attention since its first publication, especially in the feminist criticism and ethnic analysis. There is also much discussion on its narration, mainly the narrative techniques or the uncertainty narrative effect. This article is more interested in the steadiness in its narrative structure, trying to explore the certainty under its uncertain appearance. It also points out that the uncertainty and certainty emerging in its narrative content and structure respectively reveals the paradox rooted in Kingston's ideological dimension, due to her indeterminate position stuck between two different cultures.

Key words: *The Woman Warrior*; Steadiness; narrative

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INTRODUCTION

The sense of narrative uncertainty of *The Woman Warrior*, due to the confusing position of Kingston between two cultures, is immediately felt by almost each reader. After reading so much analysis from the perspective like genre, image and semantics, in the uncertainty in *The Woman Warrior*, it will be interesting to turn to the steadiness in its narrative structure. *The Woman Warrior* is a book

consisted of five chapters which seem to be mutually independent but essentially connected. The appropriate combination and interaction of these five sections are not only due to the unified theme but also explicitly attributes to the similar narrative structure shared among the five parts. After exploration a conclusion has been reached that the narrative structure deeply rooted within these five chapters' parallels each other and creates a strong sense of steadiness in the narrative procedure. The conflict emerging from the uncertain content and the steady structure offers another dimension of Kingston's inner turmoil. Three aspects concerning the steadiness hidden in the narrative structure in *The Woman Warrior* can be explored: the Chinese-box narrative model, a similar sequencing of narrative events, and a similar syntagmatic structure.

1. CHINESE-BOX SHARED BY THE FIVE CHAPTERS

The most prominent structure shared by the five chapters is the multiple narrative layers arising from the narrative structure Chinese-box. To clarify the investigation, a brief introduction to Chinese-box is necessary. Originally, this term refers to a set of boxes, which are of graduated size, with each box fitting properly inside the next larger one. "The Russian Matryoshka Doll is a modern interpretation of this form."¹ Later, this structure is borrowed into literature, used to indicate a work which is narrated in the form of a story inside another (and so on), "giving views from different perspectives."² This delicate structure is one of Mario Vargas Llosa's favorite techniques, "la caja China" (Llosa, 2011, p.73) as he calls it. He suggests that Chinese-box works when "[t]he story is constructed like those traditional puzzles with successively smaller

¹ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chinese_boxes 2014-10-02.

² Ibid.

and smaller identical parts nestled inside each other, sometimes dwindling to the infinitesimal.” (Llosa, 2011, p.101)

Kingston also employs this structure, consciously or not. What follows is the specific case analysis of the Chinese-box structure demonstration in each chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, together with the deployment of an exchange of “the subjective perspective of the ‘experience’ self of the time” and “the presumably more “objective” vision of the “narrating” self looking back.” (Rehana et al., 2012)

Chinese-box narrative structure in “No Name Woman”

- (a) No-name-aunt’s story, narrated by mother;
- (b) Mother’s story, the story of mother being the witness of aunt’s story, narrated by the experiencing self of “I”;
- (c) The story of the experiencing self of “I”, the story of mother telling story to “me” for the first time, narrated by the narrating self of “I”;
- (d) The story of implied author, the text of the whole chapter narrated by implied author.

Chinese-box narrative structure in “The White Tigers”

- (a) Fa Mu Lan’s story, narrated by mother;
- (b) mother’s story, mother telling the story of Fa Mu Lan to “me”, narrated by the experiencing self of “I”;
- (c) the story of the experiencing self of “I”, the fantastic story of “me” being Fa Mu Lan, narrated by the experiencing self of “I”;
- (d) The story of implied author, the text of the whole chapter narrated by implied author.

Chinese-box narrative structure in “Shaman”:

- (a) Brave Orchid’s story, narrated by mother herself;
- (b) Mother’s story, the story of mother telling “me” about her life experience narrated by the experiencing self of “I”;
- (c) The story of the experiencing self of “I”, the story of Brave Orchid narrated by the narrating self of “I”;
- (d) The story of implied author, the text of the whole chapter narrated by implied author.

Chinese-box narrative structure in “At the Western Palace”

- (a) Moon Orchid’s story, narrated by younger brother;
- (b) younger brother’s story, younger brother telling story of Moon Orchid to “my” younger sister, narrated by younger sister;
- (c) younger sister’s story, younger sister telling story of Moon Orchid to the experiencing self of “I”, narrated by the narrating self of “I”;
- (d) The story of implied author, the text of the whole chapter narrated by implied author.

Chinese-box narrative structure in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”

- (a) Ts’ai Yen’s story, narrated by mother;
- (b) mother’s story, mother telling story of Ts’ai Yen to the experiencing self of “I”, indicated by the experiencing self of “I”;
- (c) the story of the experiencing self of “I”, the story of me becoming Ts’ai Yen, narrated by the narrating self of “I”;
- (d) The story of implied author, the text narrated of the whole chapter by implied author.

In this inlay narrative structure, “I” am the major narrator, and mother serves as the secondary narrator. In terms of the narrative frame work, the four layers of the story in each chapter are laid one inside another. Even though with some small difference or modification in each chapter, in order to express better the author’s intention, the model of Chinese-box has been generally shared by each section. That each chapter employs the Chinese-box narrative model offers a fairly steady narration.

2. A SIMILAR SEQUENCING OF NARRATIVE EVENTS IN THE FIVE CHAPTERS

Different from the narrative level, the elucidation of the sequencing of narrative events contributes to reveal the steadiness from an alternative angle. In *The Woman Warrior*, the main narrator is Kingston, both the little girl who was still growing and the adult woman, offering different perspectives. The combat between daughter and mother has been waged even from the first page. Most of the narration employs the first person narration, and this is an effective narrative strategy, via which the daughter deconstructs and reconstructs the story of her mother’s version. She tactically retells the story and plants new connotation to each one, and in the end she manages to transform these various Chinese stories into her own, essential part of her Chinese-American identity constitution. As E. D. Huntley (2001) states remarkably, “Each section incorporates a story recounted by Brave Orchid, paired with the narrator’s revision or (re-)creation of that story.” The main five stories in *The Woman Warrior* generally obey this narrative sequence. With small different emphases, the main content of these five chapters can be extracted into the following sequencing.

Sequencing of narrative events in “No Name Woman”

- The experience self of “I” listened to “my” mother talking story about no name aunt;
- The narrating self of “I” comments on no name aunt’s tragedy;
- Another version of no name aunt’s life from the experience self of “I”;
- The narrating self of “I” rethinking aunt’s story.

Sequencing of narrative events in “White Tigers”

- The experience self of “I” listened to “my” mother talking story about Fa Mu Lan;

- The narrating self of “I” comments on Fa Mulan’s story;
- Another version of Fa Mu Lan’s life from the experience self of “I”;
- The narrating self of “I” rethinking and reassessment of woman warrior when I grow up.

Sequencing of narrative events in “Shaman”

- The experience self of “I” listened to “my” mother talking story about herself in China;
- the afterwards dreams of the experience self of “I”;
- Another version of Brave Orchid’s life from the narrating self of “I”;
- the narrating self of “I” rethinking the concept of “home” and redreaming the old dreams.

Sequencing of narrative events in “At the Western Palace”

- Moon Orchid looking for her husband, arranged by Brave Orchid from beginning to the end;
- Children’s reaction to her aunt’s arrival;
- the narrating self of “I” designed the moments of Moon Orchid’s meeting her husband, told initially by Brave Orchid.
- the narrating self of “I” comments secretly to Moon Orchid’s story.

Sequencing of narrative events in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”

- “My” life experience, narrated by the experience self of “I”;
- The narrating self of “I” comments on “my” life in the past;
- the experience self of “I” quarreled with mother, revolting face to face;
- the narrating self of “I” rethinking “my” life, in the future.

Based on the above analysis of the narrative sequence, it can be inferred that there is a strong sense of similarity and steadiness in the five chapter narrative structure. Additionally, if analyzed together with the content of the text, another important similarity embodied in the sequencing of each chapter turns out to discern---the narrative procedure reveals the initiation, the mature, of Kingston.

In each chapter, the comment of the narrator will be elicited after the introduction of the main story. “The ‘inside’ perspective of the experiencing self and the ‘outside’ perspective of the narrating self” (Rehana, 2012, p.45) is applied alternatively. It legitimizes the narrator’s jumping between the past and the present constantly, with the comment from the present perspective being inserted into the narration of the events in the past. In addition, each mature comment forms contrast with the past naive idea, offering a strongly perceivable narrative tense. Furthermore, the pieces of narration from the perspective of the past, inserted into the present narration, are arranged

chronologically, from younger to elder, from naive to mature gradually. Take the first chapter for example. There are four pieces of imaginary complement for aunt’s story from “my” mind. From the tone and content of each imagination readers can predict the age of the narrator, and the four pieces are arranged according to their age, from the beginning of teenage, to adolescence, to adult and then to a mother; the idea is from naive to mature, the thought from superficial to profound, gradually. This subtle change helps to deconstruct her mother’s version step by step, reconstructing the whole story and endowing new meaning. Another convenient example is the narration in the third chapter “Shaman”, where Kingston reconstructs her mother’s part of life in China, based on her mother’s recollection. If divided into smaller parts, this chapter can be sorted into six units. Among these six parts, the first, third, and five parts are mainly responsible for the depiction of Brave Orchid as a brave woman warrior: Diligent medical student, respected doctor in the countryside of her homeland, braves heroine to fight with the ghost. And the positive aspects of Brave Orchid, like her ability, her determination, her strong mind and courage, and her ambition. While the second, fourth, and the sixth parts mainly accounts for her selecting girl slave in market, the suffering she endured during or after her arrival in America, as well as her children’s resistance to the traditional Chinese culture that Brave Orchid represented and jammed into their mind. In this kind of crossing narration, the respect and admiration from daughter to mother as well as the puzzlement from a daughter to her mother appear alternately. It displays the narrator’s conflicting cultural attitude in the meantime: On the one hand she is attracted toward the traditional Chinese culture, especially the harmony concept in it; on the other hand, she tries to keep a certain distance with it, holding the strange or “crazy” part beyond her reach. The narrative arrangement reveals her attitude vividly and directly. And in the end, she finally chose to leave home, to determine to be an American, a Chinese American: this is true as to this chapter, the whole book, and also her real life.

Generally speaking, the growing of the narrator is not straight forward, not smoothly all the way. Conversely, it was accompanied with frustration and difficulty. This circuitous narration mutually corresponds with the theme of “initiation”, growing in puzzlement and frustration. In the opening chapter, the dialogue between the major narrator and secondary narrator reveals a strong refusal and resistance from daughter to an authoritative mother. In the ending chapter, the cooperation of mother and daughter in talk-story signifies not only the artistic cooperation but also the cultural communication and integration. The cultural attitude is becoming also more mature.

3. SIMILAR SYNTAGMATIC STRUCTURE IN EACH CHAPTER

Another analytic perspective to reveal the steadiness is inspired by the methodology of Vladimir Propp. Claude Bremond points out explicitly that semiological study of narrative is partly “a search for the laws which govern the narrated matter,” and one of the laws values lies in their reflection of “the logic constraint that any series of events, organized as narrative, must respect in order to be intelligible.” (Bremond, 2014, p.62) What Vladimir Propp (2010) discovered in Russian folktales is the laws. In his analysis “the structure or formal organization of a folkloristic text is described following the chronological order of the linear sequence of the elements in the text as reported from an informant. ...the structure of the tale is delineated in terms of this same sequence.” (p.XI) Propp’s approach has been termed “syntagmatic structural analysis”, “borrowing from the notion of syntax in the study of language.” (p.XI)

Propp’s deciphering Russian folklore or fairy tales by breaking them up into small sections, through which he extracts the backbone of the tales. Accordingly, he proposed a term “function”, which is “the basic unit of the narrative ‘language’ and refers to the significant actions which form the narrative”, “following a logic sequence.” (Raman, 2005) The corpus of Russian tales has been deciphered into a set of thirty-one functions, among which the last seven are as follows (Propp, 2010, p.25):

25. DIFFICULT TASK: Difficult task proposed to the hero (trial by ordeal, riddles, test of strength/endurance, other tasks);

26. SOLUTION: Task is resolved;

27. RECOGNITION: Hero is recognized (by mark, brand, or thing given to him/her);

28. EXPOSURE: False hero or villain is exposed;

29. TRANSFIGURATION: Hero is given a new appearance (is made whole, handsome, new garments etc.);

30. PUNISHMENT: Villain is punished;

31. WEDDING: Hero marries and ascends the throne (is rewarded/promoted).

A parallel interpretation can be applied to the five stories in *The Woman Warrior*, if they were taken as five stories separately, with slightly different title for functions. After examination, the similarity in syntagmatic structure of the five parts emerges.

(a) Task: Difficult task proposed to the heroine

(b) Decision by heroine: Revolt or not

(c) Result: Success or failure

(d) Another task faced by heroine

(e) Another decision by heroine: Revolt or not

(f) Another result: Success or failure

Each chapter of *The Woman Warrior* follows this syntagmatic structure. In “No Name Woman”, no name aunt is the heroine. She had been educated with the

feudal ethics since born, and taught to act according to the requirement made by the Confucian feudal society to women. The first day she met her husband, they got married. Shortly afterward, her husband went to America and she was left alone in China. At this moment a situation came to her: To become a live widow, like most of the other wives of overseas men, or find another man. The feudal ethics required her to guard home and stay faithful to her husband, no matter what her husband did. She was married to remind her husband to get back. However, she chose to find another man, for herself maybe. This can be taken as a kind of revolt, revolt against the feudal ethics, and revolt against the gender inequality in the society. Afterwards, she became pregnant, which was a humiliation to the whole village, and triggered hatred of all people around her. She was placed in a decisive situation again, to evade or to face the judgment and revenge from others. She chose the latter, because she did not accept the treatment from the village and she was bitterly hurt by her family’s punishment. She jumped to the family well, together with her baby. This spite suicide is more than a revolt; it is a revenge, an expression of her hatred to her family and her village. For this, she was not forgotten, but being remembered and thought.

In the second chapter, the narrator “I” is the heroine, who was faced with two situations that required decisions. The first occurs in the imagination. “I” went to the mountain, following the bird guide. The old couple asked me if “I” would stay with them in the mountain, in order to get training and become a woman warrior. At that moment, “I” decided to stay in the mountain, because “my” family and village were bullied, and “I” want to protect them and revenge for them. The second situation “I” encountered comes in real life, where it turned out that the reality is far different from the imagination, and more complicated and puzzling, and it does not make sense to simply resort to martial art when “I” run into some difficulty. There was still hatred in my heart, but I realized that “I had to get out of hating range” (Kingston, 1981, p.33). The more mature “I” decided to become a woman warrior all the same, but the arms are not sword, but words, as she says “The reporting is the vengeance-- not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words.” (Kingston, 1981, p.33)

“Shaman” is a story unfolded around Brave Orchid. In the text, two crucial decisions came to her. The first is how to deal with the money her husband sent to her. She decided to continue her study in medical school. At that moment, this action was to accept the modern thought, science and democracy. At the college, she studied very hard, gaining herself honors both in study and life, especially after her fighting with the ghost in the haunted house that no others dared to enter. The second important decision lied in how she acted after she arrived in America, faced with a totally strange environment,

different language, disparate life, especially the discrimination from the main stream American. Different from Moon Orchid's evasion, Brave Orchid determined to strive hard, to fight with the difficulties in life with her strength. She made it, and gained herself the right to exist and speak, by paradoxically turning the non-Chinese people into ghosts.

"At the Western Palace" mainly narrates the story about Moon Orchid's searching for her husband. She was presented with two situations for her to make choice. The first one is whether she would go to America and the second whether she would go to San Francisco. She decided to go to America, and sold her house in Hong Kong, which means she did not intend to come back anymore. This is the first step she took for her own personal fulfillment. Her husband went to America, and sent her money, but hoped she would stay in Hong Kong for the whole life, a docile life. But she made her first resistance, to show her own will. However, after that, when she was forced to make the second choice, what she chose was evasion and shrinking back. She failed to face her husband who owed her, and she was almost silent in front of her husband. She shrank from reality which she failed to grasp, and is doomed to lose.

In the last chapter, the central character is "me", again but different, who was also faced with two choices: the first is as to how to communicate with "my" mother. At first, "I" listed all the things, or secrets; "I" intended to say to her, planning to tell her my true thought. "... I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me..." (Kingston, 1981, p.124), but there was something wrong with this communication and the response from the mother was initially silence and in the end anger, "I can't stand this whispering... Senseless gabbling's every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work" (Kingston, 1981, p.126). After being rebuked, "I" still could not calm down. In the end, finally the uncertainty, the puzzlement and conflicts went away, after the fierce argument between daughter and mother. The second choice is about the cultural orientation and cultural identity. After the long journey of searching cultural identity swinging between two cultures, "I" decided to settle down in American soil and culture. "I've stopped checking 'bilingual' on job applications. I could not

understand any of the dialects the interviewer at China Airlines tried on me, and he didn't understand me either." (Kingston, 1981, p.183) However, I was born in a Chinese family, with Chinese parents and my childhood was full of Chinese stories and culture. In any case, it is impossible for "me" to get rid of the influence of Chinese culture. Therefore, the whole story ends with a determination to "translate" between Chinese and American culture, to be a singer of cultures. "I" am going to be a real warrior in the world of letters, to contribute as much as possible to the communication between the two cultures.

CONCLUSION

By and large, the steadiness of the narrative structure of *The Woman Warrior* has been analyzed from the above three perspectives. It creates another different kind of countervailing power against the uncertainty in the genre, images, and semantics. This steadiness formulates a forceful paradox with the uncertainty in another dimension, only intensifying the conflicting situation of Kingston. The apparent paradox between the uncertainty in content and steadiness in narrative structure discloses the narrator's conflicting cultural cognition as well as her puzzlement during this cultural identification in her inner world, from the deep narrative structure.

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