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The Problematics of Kingston's "Cultural Translation": A Chinese Diasporic View of *The Woman Warrior*

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By recognizing certain problematics of Maxine Hong Kingston's cultural translation in *The Woman Warrior*, I question in this article the context in which Asian American ethnicity is delimited within American domestic politics and sustained in narratives of Americanization. Only by calling this context into question can we realize that Kingston's personal ambivalence towards Chinese culture becomes, in the afterlife of her book, collaborative with a Western ambivalence of "desire and derision" (Bhabha 67) to an Asian people. I believe that this critique is made necessary and pressing by a Chinese diasporic perspective which I will explain first.

I must stress that, because of the Chinese diasporic perspective I adopt, my problematizing *The Woman Warrior* is meant more to negotiate a paradigm shift than to rekindle previous criticisms of Kingston such as, to cite a well-known case, the one made by Frank Chin in his article in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), although I do briefly discuss that as well. If a Chinese diasporic reading questions uncritically favorable readings of Kingston's text, it also differs from the criticisms, such as that of Frank Chin's, that do not adequately consider questions of cultural translation.

The Diasporic Perspective

"Diaspora" means "dispersion" or "scattering." Although the global dispersion or scattering of Chinese has been going on for centuries, (Note 1) the recognition of the Chinese (as part of Asian) diaspora as an identification and a perspective is something recent. (Note 2) In "Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads," Sau-ling C. Wong, Professor of Ethnic Studies at the University of California at Berkeley, describes the paradigmatic shift the diasporic represents in Asian American studies as follows: "A *diasporic perspective* emphasizes Asian Americans as one element in the global scattering of peoples of Asian origin, in contrast to what I call a *domestic perspective* that stresses the status of Asian Americans as an ethnic/racial minority

within the national boundaries of the United States" (2). The diasporic perception of Chinese (Asian) Americans not just as Americans but as "one element in the global scattering" of Chinese (Asians) has several implications. It generates new opportunities for expanding the international dimension of Asian American studies, including postcolonial reevaluations of politics in ethnic identity formation and cultural transformation. It questions models of cultural nationalism that include the prevalent concept of ethnicity in the US. Associated more closely with postmodern cultures, the diaspora also acquires connotations of a more fluid and culturally translational subjectivity. In short, from the diasporic perspective, politics of identity and questions of cultural production and transformation are considered more internationally, interculturally, and translationally.

To many, the diaspora is a pragmatic mode of living and thinking. Take, for example, a large number of Chinese intellectuals in diaspora in various Western countries. Carrying within them the legacies of imperialist presence in China, of domestic oppressions and of China's complex processes of social transformation, they are cultural nomads constantly crossing various kinds of borders. Being translational is part of their newly discovered *episteme*. They thus possess, in their dispersed conditions, a special sensitivity that sometimes clashes with the politics of cultural studies in a country such as the United States.

As a Chinese who grew up in the Chinese culture and who now reads and writes most of the time in English, I myself have learned that it is not inconceivable--and indeed, on the contrary, highly possible--that a person of Chinese origin become completely assimilated into the horizon of American cultural nationalism. In order to retain his/her original cultural differences, s/he has to maintain constantly a tension with the norms of American culture. To be diasporic is therefore a choice and a struggle.

Questions from a Diasporic Perspective

To illustrate the problematics of *The Woman Warrior*--and, incidentally, my own diasporic position (Note 3)--I would like to start with a personal history of reading Kingston's text. In fact, reading *The Woman Warrior* has been a process in which I rediscover the "diasporic" in me. My first encounter with the book was in 1985 when I was a graduate student at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst. My friend H, a graduate student from China pursuing a degree in History, read the book first. One day, H walked into my room, and declared quite plainly in Chinese: "Kingston's attitude towards the Chinese is imperialist." I then read Kingston's book myself, understood H's anger but decided at the time that his comment was far too harsh. Whether it was due to my academic training here in the US or because of the difficulties involved in formulating a fair articulation, I simply accepted for many years Kingston's text as it is read in American English Departments, and was reluctant to acknowledge the value of H's position, until I adopted the text in my

courses. Each time we read it, quite a few of my students would submit essays unequivocally suggesting that the way the book exposed "the repressive nature of the Chinese culture" is to them its main value. One essay began with this pronouncement: "Given the repressive nature of the Chinese culture . . ." Another essay quoted a sweeping statement from Sandra Cisneros, who must have learned from Kingston: "I think this is a Chinese lie because the Chinese, like the Mexicans, don't like their women strong" (10). What is astonishing is that, as far as I know, these students are innocent of Sino-Western politics and ignorant of modern Chinese culture. Yet their opinions were expressed confidently as if an intended effect in the book were faithfully reproduced. Favorable interpretations of *The Woman Warrior,* now more and more taking the voice of American Academy, invariably emphasize the narrator's rebellion against sexism in the Chinese culture as her way of coming to terms with a "paradox," namely, the fact that the Chinese culture produces at the same time both heroines like Fa Mu Lan and submissive wives like Moon Orchid. My classroom experiences, however, led me to reconsider seriously this view, as the responses of some of my students showed that some American readers do not see anything paradoxical about the Chinese culture as depicted in Kingston's text. I then remembered H's comment and recalled how, in my first reading of the book, I too had felt a resistance to Kingston's narration. In anticipation of a likely objection to my argument, I will clarify that the kind of resistance H and I felt to Kingston's book has nothing to do with the book's exposure of sexism in Chinese culture. Any independently thinking Chinese would share the position that Chinese culture, notably under Confucianist ethics, is one in which both men and women, but especially women, are repressed. Our argument is that Kingston's text offers virtually no analysis of why and how gender inequality exists in China, and yet makes sexism a characteristic of being Chinese. An ignorant racialization of the "Chinese," that continues the ideological legacies of uneven Sino-Western relations since the mid-19th century, is achieved through an emotional power that Kingston's text evokes. What the average American reader obtains from Kingston's text is the confirmation of the "knowledge"--through the negation of another, clearly barbarous, culture--that being American is culturally superior. As the responses of some of my students show, in their complete innocence some American readers can reproduce a tone of cultural authority that Edward Said, in defining Orientalism, aptly calls "positional superiority" (7).

The negative character of my article may seem to some unwarranted. After all, until recently, it has been all too natural to read an ethnic text such as Kingston's in the *American* context. It has also been taken for granted that "claiming America" is an unquestionable objective for ethnic studies. The intention behind "claiming America" is to include subaltern groups into American society and is therefore good. Yet, a question not always asked is: *how* should these groups be included? Can they be included as "foreigners," as peoples in diaspora (even with un-American thoughts), and not necessarily as domesticated minorities? (Note 4) According to narratives of "assimilation" or "Americanization" predominant in

the 1940s and 1950s, the need to acquire the "new" culture is coupled to a certain degree with the rejection of the "old" culture. I would like to argue that, despite good intentions, the hitherto prevalent model of American ethnicity has not been free from the ghost of such narratives. Thus, American readers, if they think *only* as Americans, perceive nothing wrong in Kingston's depiction of those foreigners called the Chinese.

The paradigm shift from American ethnicity to diasporic ethnicity is still faced with unanswered questions. For the purpose of exploring, in this article, the politics of reading *The Woman Warrior*, I shall consider three interrelated questions.

The first question concerns the diasporic in Asian American studies, if the departure from cultural nationalism as a horizon is not to be simply a shift from American nationalism to another kind of nationalism. Insofar as people in diaspora *recreate* their "home" culture in the setting of a host culture, the diasporic is intercultural, not mono-cultural, in its location of culture. I explore this interculturality in terms of cultural translation.

Secondly, there is the question of what a proper principle for cultural translation should be. Since an intercultural endeavor is often intertwined with international relations, the two need to be considered together. Yet, interculturality and international relations do not always mean the same thing. Modern world history sees a constant impediment of intercultural goals by nationalist ideologies and by a Western positional superiority which keeps relations between "East" and "West" or "South" and "North" deliberately unequal. Therefore, to understand what constitute interferences in intercultural goals, the politics of international relations must be carefully historicized.

Thirdly, from a diasporic perspective, gender-based interpretations of ethnicity must be complicated in connection with intercultural objectives and with international politics. To read a book that deals with misogyny in China, for instance, we should be able to draw, from the book, some adequate knowledge of the social and cultural sources of misogyny in the Chinese context; or we should be able to supplement our reading with such knowledge. Also, a criticism of sexism in another culture, especially when knowledge of this "other" culture is generally biased, should be made in such a way as not to promote a Western "positional superiority." For example, *The Woman Warrior* can be read to support the myth that feminism is a Western privilege in contradistinction with the supposed "lack" of feminist sensibility in a country such as China. However, the women's liberation movement is far from lacking in modern Chinese history, despite what one might conclude from reading *The Woman Warrior*. Thus, assigning too much authority to Kingston on the struggles of Chinese women might further enhance a fetishized knowledge of the "other."

I am ready at this point to engage Chin as a complex and problematic critic of Kingston. Chin argues that Kingston is guilty of promoting Western missionary mentality, thus identifying, in effect, Kingston's "foreign affairs" as a problem. (Note 5) Although I feel that Chin might also have sensed a certain misleading emotional power in *The Woman Warrior*, I do not think that our positions and outlooks are exactly the same. Chin and the *Aiiieeeee!* group are among those who spearheaded early Asian American cultural criticism by following a culturally nationalist and masculinist agenda. They featured, according to Sau-ling Wong, "certain premises--anti-Orientalism, valorization of working-class ethnic enclaves, "claiming America"--that explicitly or implicitly discourage, if not preclude, critical attention on things Asian" (3). In the case of Chin, his claims for the authentic Asian American identity is also underlined by a seeming contradiction. On the one hand, his following the agenda of "claiming America" led him to preclude C.Y. Lee, Lin Yutang and other foreign-born Chinese as authentic Chinese Americans (See "Backtalk"). On the other hand, he presents, in his *Aiiieeeee!* article, a stagnant vision of Chinese culture and on that basis accuses Kingston as a "fake." From my perspective, the contradiction can be explained as a deficiency in intercultural imagination. Philosophically, interculturality is embedded in the belief that any culture is constantly evolving, and that great opportunities abound in the continuous interactions between cultures. I consider the need for cultural translation a vital aspect of the diasporic. Therefore, I will outline two more specific differences between Chin's criticism of Kingston and mine.

1) I accept the existence of sexism in Chinese culture as a fact. What seems problematic to me is that Kingston's exposition of Chinese sexism also portrays, for whatever reason, what may be termed a mystified Asian night of irrationality, with which Orientalist discourse is fascinated. Chin, on the other hand, criticizes Kingston by utopianizing Chinese culture. He denies that male dominance has ever existed in Chinese culture. And he portrays Confucianism as a philosophy favoring individualism, not as a historically established superego that ensures that individuals do not stray from a set of ethics.

2) In order to prove Kingston a "fake" Chinese and to establish a line of reasoning through analogy, Chin names two other "fakes": Dr. Sun Yat Sen and Hu Shih, two political and intellectual figures who helped shape the course of modern Chinese history. According to Chin, they are "fakes" because they "wanted to Europeanize China" (11). The implied reasoning is against the evolution of the Chinese culture through its interaction with other cultures, whereas not only is such change the reality of China since at least 1911, but also the basic plotline throughout Chinese history.

Cultural Translatability and Cultural Untranslatability

With the parameters of a diasporic reading set, we are ready to ask: to what extent is cultural translation a mode in *The Woman Warrior?* And what should be the proper principle by which we assess Kingston's cultural translation?

Cultural translation, akin to the translation of linguistic constructs but semantically broader than the latter, is a consistent mode in *The Woman Warrior*. An examination of the narrative structure of *The Woman Warrior* shows that the narrator is placed within the stories, words, and images reported by her mother and her family, regarding the culture and history of China (symbolized as a "village"), in a mythical past, in the 1920s and 1930s, and in the "present" (the 1970s). The entire text is a process in which the narrator "translates" these narratives into a "self" that appears to be a synthesis of the mother's Chineseness and the daughter's Chinese-Americanness. This "translation" reaches a symbolically significant moment when the daughter announces that she has learned to give her own ending to the Ts'ai Yen story begun by her mother: "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (106). The sentence, which concludes not only "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" but also the entire text, states unequivocally: "It translated well" (109).

That this "translation" is *cultural* can be seen in a number of ways: the text produces an impression of culture and life in China by introducing, through Western cultural codes, materials from the Chinese language, culture, and history, as well as daily life in rural China; out of the narrator's conflicts and fascination with this culture, a semiotic distinctive of Chinese American identity emerges; the ethnic implications of *The Woman Warrior* then support the general perception that Kingston "translates" Chinese cultural heritage into her Chinese American identity. There is no doubt that this perception establishes *The Woman Warrior* as an ethnic text.

If we take Kingston's own word for it--as well as accept the widespread view--*The Woman Warrior* "translated well." However, if the text's international and intercultural dimensions are to be taken seriously, some basic elements in Kingston's narration should be re-considered. The mother is clearly a hyperbolic story-teller and a Chinese woman from a wealthy family (who can afford to buy slaves). She is not, I argue, a completely reliable narrator, even for that part of Chinese culture and history she reports, and therefore, is not an unbiased source from which Chinese culture can be deduced and "translated." To complicate matters, the daughter seems, as she listens to the mother, more confused about "what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies" (Kingston 6). Never having experienced life and culture in China first-hand, the daughter also mistakenly perceives her personal rebellion against aspects of the mother as her rebellion against sexism in Chinese culture. Yet, this is also how the text has been reproduced mistakenly in the Academy. I say "mistakenly" because sexism in China is equated with being Chinese culturally.

I am not exactly arguing for what is known in translation as "fidelity to the original." To explain this, I will try to answer the second question: what should be a proper principle for cultural translation? In line with what I discussed earlier about interculturality being translational in nature, about the delicate connections between interculturality and international politics, and about the need to complicate gender-based criticism in the international and intercultural context, I propose "cultural translatability" as that principle, and as a vehicle for my diasporic reading. Cultural translatability means that--despite the differences between cultures, and despite the hard-to-translate aspects of a specific culture--the general intentions of a culture are perfectly comprehensible, and thus translatable into the language of another culture. This principle affirms our common humanity or commonalty-in-difference. Used appropriately in the postcolonial context, the principle also helps correct the unevenness of cultural representations.

I borrow the principle from Walter Benjamin with only a minor modification. In "The Task of the Translator," Benjamin argues against the conventional wisdom that regards the primary goal in translation as "fidelity" to the original, and proposes a revolutionary revision by asserting that the real task in translation is to realize the "translatability" of the original. Replacing "fidelity" with "translatability" hardly means that the original should not be respected. "Translation is a mode," writes Benjamin, "To comprehend it as [a] mode one must go back to the original, for that contains the law governing the translation: its translatability" (70). Hence the importance of the original is affirmed. The problem with "fidelity," suggests Benjamin, is that it often becomes an excuse for literalness, that is incongruous with the creative nature of translation. With "translatability," Benjamin defends both the need to take the original seriously, and the need for creative freedom in translation. That translation must enjoy creative freedom also has to do with the paradoxical nature of translation as a mode: the translator must *move away from* the original in order to realize its translatability. This is because the translatability of the original is achieved not in the language of the original, but in a new and greater language being created. Translatability thus demonstrates "the kinship of languages" (72), and "the great motif of integrating many tongues into one true language" (77).

Insofar as Kingston's re-creation of Chinese women warriors such as Fa Mu Lan demonstrates a creative freedom, her cultural translation agrees, at least in part, with cultural translatability. In contrast, Chin's criticism of Kingston's creativity as "faking" seems, analogously, to side with fidelity as literalness. Worth mentioning also is the ending of *The Woman Warrior* which, concerning a Chinese village fond of dramas in general and of a reenacted drama of Ts'ai Yen in particular, indeed gives the impression that "a greater language" is found and formed. Moreover, the kidnapping of Ts'ai Yen by the Southern Hsiung-nu, her life among them, her singing to her children, and her return to China with the songs created while in exile in "the savage land" all become aptly metaphorical for the process of cultural translation.

Yet, *The Woman Warrior* at the same time conveys the false impression that Chinese culture is in some sense untranslatable. In general, there are two different situations in which we find "untranslatability." Also according to Benjamin, it is not uncommon that a translator finds certain phenomena untranslatable due to "the looseness [of] meaning" attached to a word or phrase. But such situations are *incidental* to translatability as a principle. As Benjamin emphasizes, "the translatability of linguistic creations ought to be considered even if men should prove unable to translate them" (70).

The translatability of cultures should be affirmed with the same conviction. This affirmation becomes political if we consider how often an artificial sense of cultural untranslatability, which results from willful dismissals of third world cultures and from exaggerating the incidental into a general rule, prevails in the Western world. Orientalism is a good example. The irony of Orientalism, writes Edward Said, is that it really "stands forth and away from the Orient: that Orientalism makes sense at all depends more on the West than on the Orient . . . various Western techniques of representation . . . rely upon institutions, traditions, conventions, agreed-upon codes of understanding for their effects, not upon a distant and amorphous Orient" (21-22). In other words, Orientalism as a discourse is guided by narcissistic and so to speak incestuous interests rather than by translational ones. (Note 6)

In exploring cultural translatability as a principle, I am not making too rigorous a demand that Kingston's cultural translation completely bring out the translatability of Chinese culture. One might say that no human translator can be a hundred percent successful in this respect. However, judging from her deliberate ways of addressing certain audiences about China and the Chinese, and by the fall-out effects from the phenomenon of the success of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston is guilty of at least resonances of Orientalism. I mentioned earlier that two groups of readers of Kingston's text are angry in equal intensity: many American readers who, like some of my students, are angry at the "repressive Chinese culture"; and many Chinese readers who, like H, are angered by Kingston's portrayal of Chinese culture. Both groups, one can imagine, might actually share the same images, from the book, that must include that of an entire village of nameless Chinese barbarians. Faced with "[t]he villagers [who] are watchful," you cannot help but be angry one way or the other. For Western readers, how far away are we, in this swirl of emotions, from the old feeling that the Chinese are "inscrutable" (see quotations from reviews below) or, to use my word, untranslatable?

Kingston's Ambivalence in the Context of American Culture

Before *The Woman Warrior* was accepted as an exemplary ethnic text by the American Academy, it got reviews from the mainstream culture, as the following:

Margaret Manning in *The Boston Globe:* "Mythic forces flood the book. Echoes of the Old Testament, fairy tales, the *Golden Bough* are here, but they have their own strange and brooding atmosphere inscrutably foreign, oriental."

Barbara Burdick in the *Peninsula Herald:* "No other people have remained so mysterious to Westerners as the inscrutable Chinese. Even the word China brings to mind ancient rituals, exotic teas, superstitions, silks and fire-breathing dragons."

Helen Davenport of the Chattanooga *News-Free Press:* "At her most obscure, though, as when telling about her dream of becoming a fabled 'woman warrior,' the author becomes as inscrutable as the East always seems to the West. In fact, this book seems to reinforce the feeling that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet,' or at any rate it will probably take more than one generation away from China.'"

Such comments, included in Kingston's "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," were inspired by the effects of Kingston's book (56).

Similar comments came from the *Journal Gazette*, *The National Observer*, *The Boston Phoenix*, *The Saturday News and Leader*, the *Clarion-Ledge* of Jackson, Mississippi, the *News Sentinel*, and so on. In fact, about two-thirds of the reviews were in the same vein. If it can be argued that these comments show more the biases of those reviewers, then it is important to note that some Chinese American communities were disturbed by the same kind of effect of *The Woman Warrior* as described in the reviews. The San Francisco Association of Chinese Teachers newsletter warned: "Especially for students unfamiliar with the Chinese background, it could give an overly negative impression of the Chinese American experience." (Note 7)

It is Kingston herself who included these samples of book reviews in her essay "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers." She was obviously unsettled by these reviews and wished to distance herself from them. Yet, as is her ambivalence, she also enjoyed the attention. "I pat [these reviewers] on the back for recognizing good writing," Kingston writes, "but, unfortunately, I suspect most of them of perceiving its quality in an unconscious sort of way; they praise the wrong things" (55). With hindsight, it is easier to see the situational irony: the wrong kind of praises may be what established the literary fame of the book in the first place; and, once the book moved from the hands of those reviewers to the hands of academic critics, the wrong kind of praises are either conveniently forgotten or the right kind of rhetorics somehow overcome the "wrong [kind of] things."

In "Cultural Mis-readings," Kingston offers a defense of her complete innocence of the "wrong things" said about her book. Yet, from a Chinese diasporic perspective, it is precisely this defense which reveals the roots of Kingston's problematic cultural translation. The defense has two parts. The first part is an appeal on the

ground of mistaken identity: your reviews identify me as a Chinese woman writing about things Chinese, but I am an American writing about my American experience. Kingston agrees that she is Chinese American, but she should be judged as an *American* writer who wants to write the great American novel. What is conveniently omitted, just as it is omitted in most academic interpretations, is that this great American novel attempts to include and translate materials of Chinese history and culture. It seems that such materials and the generalized impressions created of the Chinese are perceived by Kingston and others to be secondary, if not insignificant. In response to a reviewer who calls her "a Chinese woman," Kingston retorts: "*Because* I was born in Stockton, California, I *am* an American. I am also a Chinese American woman, but I am not a Chinese woman, never having travelled east [*sic*.] of Hawaii" (58).

Why does Kingston even respond with some anger to being called "a Chinese woman"? Or, rather, why is she eager to emphasize her Americanness over her Chineseness? If it is not because being a Chinese woman is something shameful, then Kingston must be re-affirming the prevalent belief that ethnicity means American(ized) ethnicity. I find the following passage taken from Kingston's essay discussion-provoking:

> And lately, I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the words on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today's world. (60)

If she is making a legal argument about citizenship, then her legal position completely misses the cultural valences of words such as "Chinese" and "American." In the cultural sense, in effect, that we give equal weight to the two words on either side of the hyphen must be, I would suggest, the minimal requirement for any endeavors in cultural translation.

The second part of Kingston's defense is an appeal on the ground of a writer's creative freedom. Kingston states that she writes first of all for herself, and then for readers who appreciate her puns and jokes, and writing. Two things can be said about this argument. One, creative freedom does not mean that an author is free from contexts with political implications; if anything, it means that s/he is free to choose any such association. Secondly, when Kingston suggests that the genre of her book is "memoir" in the tradition of Proust, that is still a partial truth: she still dodges the question of cultural translation as a mode in her book.

Kingston's Translation Considered in Historical Contexts

Historically, neither American writings on the Chinese nor the lives of Chinese Americans are free from modern Sino-American politics. In "The Production of Chinese American Tradition: Displacing American Orientalist Discourse," David

Leiwei Li points out that "[t]he history of American writing on/about the Chinese was significantly marked by the nature of the Sino-American exchange around the mid-nineteenth century" (320). Li names, among other elements of the exchange, two events: "First, the signing of the 1844 Wanghsia treaty [that] granted the United States all the advantages the British had gained over China after the Opium War. Second, large-scale Chinese immigration to America [that] began partly as a result of foreign invasions that subsequently dislocated the Chinese domestic economy" (320). It was the American entry into China, Li reports, that gave rise to a powerful and hegemonic American discourse which "provided a conceptual framework for viewing the Chinese and, by extension and confusion, the Chinese American" (320).

Although Li sets up such a context, he nonetheless includes Kingston as an example of the Chinese American discourse that is, he argues, opposed to the American Orientalist discourse. My own argument is that Kingston's case is not so simple. If an ethnic writer wavers in her task of bringing about the translatability of her *original* cultural difference, the ghost of Orientalism will inevitably haunt her writings.

There are signs in *The Woman Warrior* that are intended more to please some English-speaking readers than to translate an original difference. Take the word "talk-stories." It is supposed to be a translation of *jiang gushi*. In Chinese, *jiang* means "tell," a verb; *gushi* means "story," a noun. *Jiang gushi* involves no loose meaning and is therefore perfectly translatable. The Chinese don't say "*jiang jiang gushi*" (tell tell-stories or tell talk-stories) unless they are shivering or stuttering. Perhaps I am still too much of a foreigner to judge the effect of "talk-stories" properly in English. But I remember my British teacher, Mr. Barnes, once instructing a group of Chinese students including myself: "In English, you never 'talk' something but 'talk about' something unless, of course, you 'talk shop' or 'talk nonsense.'" I did hear a theory that "talk-stories" is a phrase in pigeon English which Kingston simply borrowed. However, that theory does not change the fact that Kingston is trying to describe the "stories" her Chinese-speaking mother tells.

The phrase "talk-stories" is emblematic of the problem in Kingston's cultural translation in that it creates a cultural and linguistic connotation which does not find an echo in the original, yet produces a crowd-pleasing effect in English. To make another culture--including its problemsintelligible to readers in another culture, a cultural translator, out of necessity, must borrow devices and codes from the target language (English in this case). Yet, since she should work to achieve the translatability of the original--and not crowd-pleasing effects, she has to be very careful with those connotative and symbolic codes that could be prejudicial to the original. That so many early reviews found Kingston's text inscrutably and exotically orientalist is an unfortunate commentary on such renditions as "talk-stories."

There are some more examples. In "No Name Woman," a *whole* Chinese village--men and women--are reported by the mother to have come out to raid "our house" on the night the baby was to be born. The narration portrays these villagers as a mob, shouting and walking "[l]ike a great saw, teeth strung with lights" across "our land, tearing our rice" (4-5). Very strangely, they behave like American Ku Klux Klan members, all wearing "white masks." The raid was by any standard barbarous: they decimated the house, they took things, they slaughtered animals. That night the aunt gave birth to a baby in a pigsty and drowned herself in a well. If we do not question the truth of this story, we still need to analyze the connotative codes inherent in the narration. The narration generates a semiotic distinction between "us" (with "our house," "our land") and them "villagers." The reader identifies with "us" and not "them." The "villagers" also fit the description of the Yellow Peril: faceless and without individual identification, they turn out in huge numbers and under the cover of the night. And why did they do what they did? It is suggested that in times of starvation "adultery is extravagance" and having a daughter a waste. This is almost a theory of modern cannibalism. To paraphrase it, the villagers could not afford to have one more mouth to compete with them, especially the mouth of a newborn girl. From this, one has to assume that the whole village was one economic unit which shared the crops from every family (but there was no such economic structure in China at the time). If the village was not such a unit, how could they come and take things from "our land" and "our house"? Unless, of course, they were mobsters and Chinese (whose motives and behaviours "we" don't need to understand). Also, if we follow the economic line of reasoning, an infant girl born from an adulterous affair should be equally acceptable as a girl born from a marriage under the law of the village. But that scenario, punishing a girl born from a marriage, would not be plausible even in Kingston's text and would be against the moralistic premise of the mother's admonition.

I would like to suggest a possible rationale for what happened. In pre-Communist (before 1949) China, it was not uncommon that rural villages which shared a same family name would have a *ci-tang*, a sort of family-tribe temple where ancestors were worshipped and where a selected group of elderly men met to discuss businesses related to the family tribe. Sometimes, these patriarchs made decisions about punishing people in their tribe for violating their tribal ethics. *Ci-tang* being the rural instrument of Confucian ethics, it was not unlikely that they punished people who committed adultery. Even if there was such a decision to punish Kingston's aunt, there was no need to involve the whole village. For whatever reason, the mother's story is a tall tale. Kingston does not seem to have any knowledge of social structures such as *ci-tang*. If she did, it would be more than remiss to leave out this patriarchal cultural practice from her feminist text. Furthermore, introducing such themes as *ci-tang* would identify sexism in China as a form of repression within an excessively civilized (in the Freudian sense of the word) society. But Kingston's text, offering no such explanation, satisfies a perverted Western fantasy that the Chinese villagers virtually kill and devour women and newborns in times of starvation. There is of course the implied excuse

that since the mother told the narrator only "the necessary parts," we as readers should not expect a full explanation about the context in which the crime against No Name Woman took place. If that excuse were acceptable, then Kingston would be justified in telling English-speaking readers only "the necessary parts" about the Chinese as "No Name Chinese." If one looks at their behaviors, how can one not be convinced that theirs is the fecund night of primitiveness out of which European rationality must develop? As if the emotional power of this message needed reinforcement, Kingston reports in "Shaman" about a "crazy woman" being stoned to death by the same villagers because they simply believed that she had signalled to Japanese planes. In such moments, I feel that Kingston forfeits any attempt at cultural translation.

American readers and critics often favor the second chapter and regard it as the climax of the book, believing that they find in it a feminist heroism representing the positive aspects of Chinese culture and cleansing them of the uncomfortable "emotion" they experience elsewhere in the book. But there is once again a situational irony. In the eyes of any educated Chinese, the various materials from Chinese culture juxtaposed in this chapter show a childish mixing of *kungfu* movies and dreams. The structure of the chapter is that of *kungfu* movies, discernable as a movement from the heroine's "lack" of power to her acquisition of "magical power," and then to her "revenge" with acquired power. Yet, the orientation of such "revenge" seems infantile as well as confusing: even in her waking moments, she fantasizes about "storm[ing] across China to take back our farm from the Communists" or "rag[ing] across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California. . . . Nobody in history has conquered and united both North America and Asia" this way (49). Nobody indeed. Furthermore, the particular arrangement of gods and historical figures would provide, to a Chinese reader, a different kind of amusement: it would remind him/her of a classical comic talk in which the famous comedian Hou Baolin describes a messy theater which is to stage Kuan Kung (a 3rd Century Chinese General) fighting Qin Qiong (a 7th Century General). A Chinese diasporic reader would find, in the colorful "multicultural" mixture of Chinese lion dances with African lion dancers amidst Japanese bells and Indian bells (27), only a superficial Western fascination with the exotic Orient.

Indeed, Kingston herself admits that she wrote this as a parody of her own childish play. Little did she know that in academic readings, the chapter has become almost your perfect example of postmodern "freeplay." Responding to readers who overestimate the second chapter, Kingston wrote in "Cultural Mis-readings," "But I put it at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, . . . 'The White Tigers' is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody" (57).

In the above examples, a *re-presence* of Orientalism, regardless of Kingston's intention, is evident. The Orientalist perception is characterized both by a Western

desire of the exotic Orient and by a fear that prevents the Westerner from a further inquiry into the reality of the Orient. When the Chinese are perceived as terrifying or exotically desirable, they are not like "us": they are not divergent, not plural, and they live in the clouds with fire-smoking dragons. Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, offers a psychological profile of Orientalism, suggesting that studying Orientalism is not so much a question of recognizing positive or negative images of the "other," but an understanding of the productivity of colonial power as "processes of subjectification," and its "regime of truth. . . . Only then does it become possible to understand the *productive* ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse--that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision" (67).

Limin Chu's doctoral dissertation, entitled *The Images of China and the Chinese in the Overland Monthly: 1868-1875, 1883-1935*, cites ample evidence of the kind of Orientalist texts found in the*Overland Monthly*, a magazine published in San Francisco, in a period when the needs in Sino-American relations varied. After 1844 when the asymmetrical Sino-American relations became the basis of American policy-making, there was always a "Chinese Question," as there was a Committee on the Chinese Question in the Senate. The flagrant anti-Chinese view, based on racial and economic fear, led to horrid stories about the Chinese, and to The Exclusion Act. When Bret Harte, in "The Heathen Chinee," expressed his anger that "we are ruined by Chinese labor" (qtd. in Li 321), "the Sino-phobic lynch mob marched toward the Chinese in San Francisco, chanting his infamous lines" (see Li, 321). What is shocking is that *The Woman Warrior*, even in part, shares with tales in the *Overland Monthly* narrative ingredients and connotative codes about the Chinese. Kingston's earlier reviewers seem to have a longer memory.

The Woman Warrior is also quite different from many other ethnic writings which are oppositional to the mainstream culture, and which are concerned with postcolonial critiques. Kingston's narrator wants "revenge," a word carved on the back of a re-created Fa Mu Lan. It is the spirit of "revenge" that makes the narrator feel that "the swordswoman and I are not dissimilar" (53). But in one sense they cannot be more dissimilar. Not knowing where her village is--the question of cultural location--is not a problem for Fa Mu Lan in the original versions. One might even argue that "revenge" is Kingston's motif, not Fa Mu Lan's. Since Kingston's narrator does not know her village, against what or whom does she seek revenge? She writes that she wants to turn her pen into a sword so that she can "report crimes." But since she admits that she is not even a "Chinese woman," on what ground of knowledge and narrative authority is she reporting such atrocities as a whole Chinese village turning on the No Name Woman, and stoning a mad woman to death?

Conclusion: Towards an Intercultural Feminist Reading

To complicate feminist readings of *The Woman Warrior* from a diasporic perspective, I offer a supplemental reading that is to serve as my conclusion.

My first comment has to do with the period of the 1920s and 1930s in China, since a sense of that era that any educated Chinese would possess is quite different from that which is presented in *The WomanWarrior*. One can assume that the 1920s and 1930s are the period in which most of the Brave Orchid stories took place, as she left China "in the winter of 1939" (96). It so happens that the period from the May 4th demonstration against the Peking government selling out China's interests to imperialist powers in 1919 until the Japanese bombing of Shanghai in 1937 was socially the most turbulent, and culturally the most fertile period. Brave Orchid's stories perhaps do reflect, to an extent, the dire consequences of local wars and poor harvests in rural areas. However, as these stories are told, received and retold in Kingston's book--in ways I analyzed above--China in that period appears the barbarous object that deserves to be conquered: there is no suggestion in Kingston that the consciousness of a new culture--including that of gender equality--was on the rise in China. In fact, China in those two decades underwent what historians call "the May 4th Era," which was characterized, culturally, by a radical revolt against Confucianist traditions, extensive translation of Western literature, the vernacularization of the Chinese language, and a heightened awareness of the need for gender equality. This changing--and also increasingly intercultural--Chinese culture is registered in a body of modern literature which, among other things, shows an intense passion for women's liberation. Most of the works showing a gender awareness are underlined by the Marxist belief that the liberation of women is linked with China's national struggle against feudalism and colonialism. Others, including Xiao Hong's *The Field of Life andDeath*, are free from nationalism and focus on the female body. (Note 8) In all these stories, the way women are oppressed is analyzed within China's changing historical and social atmosphere. As far as I know, in no text by a Chinese writer have crimes against women been presented so gratuitously as in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*.

My second comment has to do with Moon Orchid in "At the Western Palace." Many critics believe, as for instance Elaine H. Kim does, that "the maddening paradox is that the same culture [Chinese culture] that has produced the No-Name Woman and Moon Orchid has also produced Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid" (203). That the Chinese culture produces submissive wives is a logical conclusion one can draw from Kingston's text. However, agreeing with this feminist premise does not mean agreeing entirely with the implied suggestion that Moon Orchid goes mad because she is a submissive wife produced by the Chinese culture. Moon Orchid's madness deserves further study.

Most non-Chinese readers do not know that the chapter's title is a pun; it seems that Kingston herself has not suggested so in various interviews. I will focus on this pun to argue for a more complicated feminist reading. Besides its more obvious reference to Moon Orchid coming to a Western country, "the Western Palace" is

also a Chinese idiom for the "second wife." In feudal China, the Emperor's other wives resided in the Western Palace. Hence, the term "Western palace" (*xigong*) signifies, metaphorically, "the other wife" or "other wives." As a pun that links two languages, the title seems to raise the following question: who is the second (or other) wife? Moon Orchid or her husband's American wife? The question is connected with another question: by whose law? By American law, Moon Orchid is the second wife. By Chinese law, she is the wife. If I read the title in its double sense correctly, it is in *xigong*, the Western Palace of America, that Moon Orchid is reduced to become *xigong*, the second wife. To see Moon Orchid as a "mad woman at the Western Palace" in this light, several laws that work against her and drive her mad can be inferred. The following questions can then be asked. What caused the long separation? What changed her husband? Is not the husband, with a great deal of responsibility for Moon Orchid's tragedy, a product of Americanization? And, lacking English language skills and means of making a living, can Moon Orchid the new immigrant afford not to try to seek her husband out?

Yet, Kingston's text almost solely focuses on Moon Orchid as the submissive wife produced by the Chinese culture. By the suggestion of literary motif, we have to connect Moon Orchid's madness with the mad lady stoned to death by the Chinese villagers, and we would have to agree that Kim's reading is better supported by Kingston's text. If so, Kingston's feminist message is frustratingly simple-minded: most Chinese women cannot be free because they live in that culture. And if so, Chinese culture becomes the absolute Other to an author whose ethnicity is supposed to be rooted and at home in that culture.

Notes

1

Chinese immigrants are known to have reached Southeast Asian countries as early as the 4th century. They appeared in small communities in Latin American countries such as Mexico in the mid-17th century. Their scattering in the 19th century in large numbers to the Americas and other places was a result of the collapse of China's domestic economy, which was itself due, partially, to Western imperialist presence in China after the Opium War. Since the 1960s, a new generation of Chinese, from the People's Republic of China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, have been scattered globally. This generation includes the influx of Asian-born academics who are bilingual, bicultural, biliterate and have an interest in cultural transformation in a postcolonial context.

2

Academic interest in the subject began in the late 1980s. In 1989, the Association for Asian American Studies (AAAS) had, for its Sixth Annual Conference, the theme: "Comparative and Global Perspectives of the Asian Diaspora." There have been many scholarly essays and forums on the subject since. In the summer of 1996, a National Endowment for the Humanities seminar on "Chinese diaspora in Southern California" was held at California State University, Los Angeles. The author of this essay was a participant.

3

That I am a Chinese intellectual in diaspora can be supported, albeit superficially, by a brief *vita:* a "legal alien" by American law; born in China (the People's Republic of China) and continuous residence there for twenty some years; a translator with a modest record of publications and with a four-year working experience at the United Nations; educated in China, England and United States, with a Ph.D. earned in the US; currently an assistant professor of English in an American university.

4

An example of the "foreigner" in modern American literature are the Shirmedas and other Bohemians, in Willa Cather's *My Antonia*, who stubbornly retain in the United States their "foreign" language, customs and behaviors.

5

For details of Frank Chin's argument, see "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake" in *The Big Aiiieeeee*.

6

Said also provides two methodological devices for studying the orientalist authority: (1) "*strategic location*, which is a way of describing the author's position in a text with regard to the Oriental material he writes about," and (2) "*strategic formation*, which is a way of analyzing the relationship between texts and the way in which groups of texts, types of texts, even textual genres, acquire mass, density, and referential power among themselves and thereafter in the culture at large" (20).

7

Quoted in Kingston's "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" (62).

8

For a detailed analysis of this novel available in English, see Lydia Liu's essay "The Female Body and Nationalist Discourse: *The Field of Life and Death Revisited*" (37-62).

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