Journal of American Studies of Turkey
1 (1995): 57-63.

Maxine Hong Kingston
Languages and Silences of Being Chinese-American

Sibel Irzik

Julia Kristeva has said that "it is only by translating the mother that we live: orphans but creators, creators but abandoned" (181). In these general psychoanalytical terms, growing up is a painful movement away from the threat that the archaic mother presents, the threat of a total absence or loss of self. It is a liberating exile into subjectivity and language (Nikolchina 233). I believe that the same terms (translation, orphanage, abandonment, exile) are even more poignantly relevant to what we might consider a secondary process or a special case of growing up as it can be traced in the works of Maxine Hong Kingston: growing up into the hyphenated subjectivity of a Chinese-American self and into a language both primary and foreign, a native tongue that is different from the mother tongue. In this modified scheme of things, the mother is not only the actual and archaic one, but represents also a much more general sense of a lost origin that is both sought and feared, an origin that uncomfortably brings together the figures of the mother and the father within the more encompassing image of China. The movement away from China is a movement away from silence into voice, from a frozen past into the enabling openness of the present, from the erasure of self into a sense of individual identity.

Or it would have been; if the story had actually started in China, and if Kingston's China were a real place, and if such linear paths of development were available to human lives, and also if voices did not need silences in order to be heard. But none of these is exactly the case. Maxine, the narrator and the protagonist of Kingston's first two books,*The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, is a Chinese American woman who has never been to China. She grows up hearing constant talk about "returning" to China, but for her, it is a question of whether and how one can return to where one has never been before. For the Chinese American male protagonist of the third book,*Tripmaster Monkey*, there is no possibility of such a question arising in any meaningful way. Moreover, even for those who have been there, notably the mother and the father of the first two books, China is not so much a physical place as it is a construct they use in order to define their own identities (Juhasz 174). It becomes a different place with each new letter that arrives from home, with each change that occurs in their lives in the United States, and in each new story that

they tell about the past. One cannot simply grow out of such beginnings. One has to discover, or better yet, to invent them first, and then to return to them so as to have a point to depart from.

Something similar is true for the relationship between silence and language. There is no simple passage from silence to words, because silence can be known only as the absence of words, in the context of other words that *are* uttered in one form or another. One must listen to those other words in order to hear the silences, the gaps between them, and to learn to make them speak, often in other languages than those that surround the original silences. Kingston's works accordingly describe a shuttling motion, a going back and forth between the past and the present, reality and fiction, Chinese and English, and this motion gradually achieves the shape of the creative act. Each book is an account from a different perspective of finding an identity as a storyteller, a writer, and of what such an identity means in a multicultural society. Again, according to Kristeva, "each creative strategy is an elaboration of nostalgia, but at the same time it is a movement further and further away from the site of the primeval loss. The very impulse to go back multiplies the territories and the distances, thrusts us further and further into space" (qtd. in Nikolchina 235). For the immigrants, and even for the children of immigrants, the site of the primeval loss is the country of origin. The nostalgia and the freedom that are produced by that loss are best expressed and experienced in the telling of stories, which is the ultimate subject of Kingston's writing.

Maxine Hong Kingston has written two books of nonfiction about ghosts, dragons, demons and warriors, and a book of fiction about San Francisco in the 1960s. *The Woman Warrior* won the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. This book and *China Men* together, the two works on which this study concentrates, are introduced to the reader as a two-volume autobiography, but both are full of imagined stories about lives other than the author's. Especially in *China Men*, Kingston does not exist at all, except in her capacity as the narrator. The only work of fiction, *Tripmaster Monkey*, bears the subtitle, "His Fake Book," signalling, as it were, the possible presence of an authentic one which we never get to read. Already on the covers of these books, then, we encounter paradoxes which, I suggest, might be seen as ways of coping with the paradox that we call multiculturalism.

The Woman Warrior starts with a paradoxical invitation to silence:

> "You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born" (3).

The sister, the narrator's aunt, has killed herself because she has brought disgrace to the family by getting pregnant in the absence of her husband who has left her to make his fortune in the Gold Mountain that is America. The mother's telling of the

story is paradoxical in the trivial sense in which all confidings of secrets are paradoxical, the telling of what must never be told. However, the paradox goes much deeper than that. The denial of the existence of a person who has brought shame to the community is a tradition, and traditions can survive only by being passed on. It is a mother's duty to pass this story on to her daughter. The secret exists in order to be told. At the same time the telling is a violation of tradition because the silence that surrounds the aunt is her punishment. To mention her is to end the punishment. By the time we reach the end of this chapter, which bears the title "No Name Woman," the story has been told many times, yet remains untold. The aunt still has no name. The mother's account does not qualify as a story in the eyes of the American daughter for whom stories are about individuals that have names and faces. In an attempt "to see [the aunt's] life branching into [hers]" (10), the daughter imagines and narrates several alternative versions of the story, providing the aunt with faces, clothes, motives, the props of possible identities. She speaks Chinese, but she has no language in which to speak to her parents about the true story of the aunt: "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that" (6). So she writes, and she writes in English, giving the no name woman new lives in a language which that woman has never heard. And she is not even sure that the aunt will appreciate the gift:

> My aunt haunts me--her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water. The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute (19).

Once again, to tell the story is both to revoke the punishment and to betray the aunt. The substitute that the ghost pulls down into the well of silence might well be the narrator herself, since the aunt is both her creation and her double, and she might have created the wrong aunt, told the wrong story, or used the wrong words to tell the story. (Repeatedly in the book, the narrator looks in dictionaries as she writes.)

This first chapter of *The Woman Warrior* is a model for the entire book in that it is a story begun by the mother and, inconclusively and ambiguously, finished by the daughter; a silence translated into words, Chinese translated into English, a talk-story translated into writing, and all this in the absence of an original. Throughout the book the narrator both blends her voice with her mother's and separates it from hers, becoming a woman warrior who fights the Chinese silences that multiply around her, using her own language and writing as weapons. In her version of the legend that she has first heard from her mother, the woman warrior carries the names and addresses of her relatives and ancestors carved on her back. "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar," she writes,

What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms of revenge are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance--not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words--"chink" words and "gook" words too--that they do not fit on my skin. (62-63)

The words do not fit on the skin, and they do not always harmonize together. This vengeance in the form of reporting requires a constant doubling of voices and identities. "A dumbness--a shame-still cracks my voice in two," the narrator says, "even when I want to say hello casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver" (191). Just as her Chinese lack of voice obstructs her American voice in the real world, her American voice interferes with the construction of her imaginary existence in China. For instance, one of her Chinese doubles, the woman warrior, when asked if she has had dinner, replies in the proper Chinese way by lying and saying that yes, she has. In parantheses we read: " 'No, I haven't,' I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. 'I'm starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies' " (25).

She encounters another double in the Chinese school in America in a Chinese American girl slightly younger than herself who never utters a single word, except when reading aloud. She traps her in the girls' lavatory at the school one day and tries to force her to speak, pinching her cheeks, pulling her hair, offering bribes, and making threats: "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality," she keeps saying, "You'll have no personality and no hair" (210). She ends up joining the little girl in her tears, though, and spends the following year and half in bed with a mysterious sickness. At the end of this ritual death that is caused by the killing of the silent double, when she is reborn into her American life, her voice has not really changed, but she has learned to talk the ghosts down, just as her mother is supposed to have done in one of her many ghost stories. Her voice still sounds like "a crippled animal running on broken legs." "You could hear splinters in my voice," she writes, "bones rubbing jagged against one another. I was loud, though. I was glad I didn't whisper" (196). Thus, when China once again comes to haunt her in the form of a retarded and silent Chinese American boy who, she suspects, has been chosen by her parents as a husband for herself because he is rich and she is quite unmarriagable, she uses the newly achieved loudness, and the list of grievances that has grown inside her, to chase this ghost away. "Get that ape out of here," she yells to her mother,

I'm going to college. And I'm not going to Chinese school any more. . . . And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You wont't tell me a story and then say, "this is a true story," or "this is just a story." I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. Ha! You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work . (235)

The mother has indeed performed an operation on her tongue:

My mother cut my tongue. She pushed my tongue up and sliced the frenum. Or maybe she snipped it with a pair of scissors. I don't remember her doing it, only her telling me about it, but all during childhood I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry--and then, when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird's, cut. The Chinese say "A ready tongue is an evil." (190)

But again, inevitably, the mother has another version of the same story that gets recorded alongside the daughter's, in the same book:

I cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it. (190-91)

Both versions of the story are true, of course, and together they point at the violence and the act of love, the crippling and the enabling, the lack and the excess that have made this book possible and necessary.

If *The Woman Warrior* is a reaching back towards beginnings in China, the second book,*China Men*, is an attempt at reconstructing the beginnings in America. The movement this time is toward and away from the father. Both America and the father stand for voices and experiences that were not available to the narrator of the first book and leave their stamp on the structure of this second one. Coming from China to America is an act of crossing boundaries in space, not only in the imagination. It is an attempt at appropriating new territory, reaching out for new possibilities. The world of the father in the new land is a public world unlike the private one delineated in the mother's stories to grow up on. The father does not begin stories for his daughter to finish, but that is all right, because the daughter is no longer in need of an independent voice. This is apparent in her choosing to start the book by directly addressing the father in the second person. The public nature of the world we thus enter makes itself visible and audible in the quick multiplication of the different personas of the father in the form of grandfathers, great uncles, brothers, and many other China Men who are not related to the narrator by blood. It is also evident in the multiplicity of languages and texts that coexist in this book without requiring transitions and blendings. There is an entire section in which the history of the immigrants is recounted in the objective, factual mode of Western discourse that the daughter has now mastered. There are numerous recordings of the stories that the China Men tell each other for the pure enjoyment of stories and laughter, and not to pass on limitations to younger generations. The narrator joins these men in their orgies of tricks and stories by adding her tricks and stories to theirs. There is a section, for example, in which she retells the story of Robinson Crusoe, only with a Chinese man as the protagonist. This repetition of the archetypal western story of appropriation is an act of appropriation in its own right, only not in space but in literature. It is thus not surprising that Guan Goon, the Chinese god of War and Literature, who was only mentioned once in *The Woman Warrior*, puts in a much more striking appearance in this second book. In fact, one of the grandfathers, whose name is also Guan, goes

to a theater in an American city and his heart leaps when he recognizes this hero on stage, complete with his red face, long beard, and puppet horse:

Guan Goong, the God of War, also God of War and Literature, had come to America--Guan Goong, Grandfather Guan, our own ancestor of writers and fighters, of actors and gamblers, and avenging executioners who mete out justice. Our own kin. Not a distant ancestor but Grandfather. (149-50)

All this is not to say, however, that *China Men* is a book that is free from silence and pain. Both coming to America and gaining the right to stay there are accomplishments that require deaths and rebirths much more numerous and violent than the ones the women of the first book undergo. In one of the various alternative accounts of the father's journey to the Gold Mountain, for example, he is nailed inside a crate and loaded onto a ship to be smuggled into the new country. When he is finally allowed to come out of this coffin, he has to learn again how to use his muscles to keep his body erect. The legal father, the protagonist of another account, does not fare much better during the interrogations in the purgatory that is Ellis Island. The most striking and ironic image of rebirth, however, is that of the collective one following the San Francisco earthquake and fire:

It was a miraculous earthquake and fire. The Hall of Records burned completely. Citizenship Papers burned, Certificates of Return, Birth Certificates, Residency Certificates, passenger lists, Marriage Certificates--every paper a China Man wanted for citizenship and legality burned in that fire. An authentic citizen, then, had no more papers than an alien. Any paper a China Man could not produce had been "burned up in the fire of 1906." Every China Man was reborn out of that fire a citizen. (150)

This fire could be seen as a violent and magnified version of the silence which the father imposes on himself and his family in that it is a legitimation of the present brought about by the annihilation of the past. The China Men are reborn as American citizens when the recorded past disappears. Similarly, the father is an immigrant who tries to protect his American present by being silent about his Chinese past. "You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China," writes the daughter:

There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes, nor against Chinese landscapes. Did you cut your pigtail to show your support for the Republic? Or have you always been American? Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past ? (14)

Every New Year's Eve the father phones the Time Lady, listens to her tell the minutes and seconds, then adjusts all the clocks in the house so their hands reach midnight together. It is as if, finding the only possible definition of self in his status as an immigrant, he is forever repeating the act of immigration; fixed on the idea of a beginning, the break from the past, the fear of a foreign future, and the clinging to the present for survival. "You must like listening to the time lady," writes the daughter, "because she is a recording you don't have to talk to. Also she distinctly names the present moment, never slipping into the past or sliding into the future" (15). It is clear, however, that this strategy cannot work, because just as silence can

exist only in sound, the present has no existence other than in relation to the past and the future. The father's silence is indeed surrounded with his swearing and his screams in the night. It becomes a punishment for his family and himself, rendering them "invisible, gone" (14), like the no name woman of the earlier book. It creates a gap inevitably filled with fear: "We invented the terrible things you were thinking: That your mother had done you some unspeakable wrong, and so you left China forever. That you hate daughters. That you hate China" (14).

Similarly, the forgetting of the past makes its invention necessary: "I want to be able to rely on you who inked each piece of our own laundry with the word 'Center,'" writes the daughter, "to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people" (14-15). The book called *China Men* is the proof and the fulfillment of this need. With the stories she invents about her father's immigration, Kingston tries different pasts, different identities on him, hoping, perhaps, that he will reject the ones that do not fit, and thus reveal the one that does. This, of course, does not happen, and all she is left with are the stories again. The triumph of the book, however, is that this search for the father gives birth to many fathers, and many generations of fathers, bringing a collective Chinese American past alive.

The Woman Warrior had ended with an image of a lone woman singing among the barbarians in a foreign language, but somehow harmonizing with the music of their reed pipes. *China Men* also contains an image of itself. It is found in the story of a group of Chinese railroad workers in America who are not allowed to talk during the long working hours because it would slow them down. One night Great Grandfather Bak Goong silences all the men by talking an apt story, the story of the king who had a son with cat ears, and who, when he could no longer hold this secret inside himself, scooped out a hole and shouted his secret into it. In the spring when grass grew in the field and when the wind blew through it, the people heard words that grew into a song. After hearing this story the workers organize a big shouting party. They purposefully dig a large hole into the earth with their tools, and shout anything and everything into it:

```
"Hello down there in China!" they shouted.  "Hello, Mother."
"Hello, my heart and my liver."
"I miss you."
"What are you doing right now?"
"Happy birthday.  Happy birthday for last year too."
"I've been working hard for you, and I hate it."
"Sometimes I forget my family and go to clubs.  I drink all night.
"I lost all the money again."
"I've become an opium addict."
"I don't even look Chinese any more."
"I'm sorry I ate it all by myself."
". . . and I fell to my knees at the sight of twenty waterfalls."
"I saw only one sandalwood tree."   (117)
```

"They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets" (117), writes Kingston, "soon the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the

cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell" (118). *China Men* is the ear dug into America, and the wind that sings the secrets shouted into it.

The protagonist of the third book is a young Chinese American man whom his father has tried to name after the most American of American poets, Walt Whitman. Wittman Ah Sing, however, bears the mark of this ambitious Chinese father, not only in his last name but also the first, which has become "wit man" with the inevitable spelling mistake, just as his last name, one of the most Chinese of Chinese names, is also an English word, and perhaps also an American imperative: "sing," "express yourself," "have a personality." He is indeed an unstoppable, word-drunk playwright, poet, and talker. He is also a "wit man" in many ways, but especially in his consciously cultivated similarity to the monkey of Chinese legend. "I am really the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys," he boasts. The monkey of Chinese legend is a combination of saint and trouble-maker who helped a Chinese monk bring the Buddhist scriptures from India. He is a trickster and a survivor, probably very closely related to the signifying monkey of African American oral tradition, if not the same one. I think that Wittman Ah Sing identifies with this monkey because he also is a bringer of a new text to his country, the United States. His dream is to write and stage a huge and impossible version of several interwoven Chinese novels and folktales, and he does exactly that at the end of the novel. The hero of the play is, again, Guan Goong, the Chinese god of War and Literature, the god of actors, writers, warriors, gamblers, and travellers, who has indeed come to America, and is there to stay.

Wittman Ah Sing's play is a truly Bakhtinian carnival paying tribute to and parodying the canonical texts of Western culture as well as the Chinese. It also gives his friends an opportunity to act out and improvise the characters they always wanted to play, but were never cast for because of their Asian looks. Being an unstoppable talker, Wittman follows the second performance of the play with a long speech about the various frustrations of being Chinese American--being an American, that is, in whose face people see nothing but Chinese. The patronizing reviews of the opening of the play are a case in point. "East meets West," "Exotic," "Snaps, crackles and pops like singing rice," "Sweet and Sour," cheer the reviews. "There is no East here," Wittman answers them, "West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West. This is a journey *in* the West" (308). I think that this may well be the moral of the story, and an apt image, not only for the book, but also the reality that surrounds it. Multiculturalism is America meeting America.

Works Cited

Juhasz, Suzanne. "Maxine Hong Kingston: Narrative Technique and Female

Identity." *Contemporary American Women Writers*. Eds. Catherine Rainwater and W. J. Scheick. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1985.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. *China Men*. New York: Knopf, 1980.

------. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. New York: Knopf, 1989.

------. *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Knopf, 1976.

Kristeva, Julia. Soleil Noir: *Depression et Melancolie*. Paris: Gallimard, 1987.

Nikolchina, Miglena. "The Lost Territory: Parables of Exile in Julia Kristeva." *Semiotica* 86. 3/4 (1991): 231-46.