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## **An Exploration of Self-Construction Through Buddhist Imagery in Maxine Hong Kingston's the Women Warrior**

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AN EXPLORATION OF SELF-CONSTRUCTION THROUGH BUDDHIST  
IMAGERY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*

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May 1999

Submitted in partial fulfillment of requirements for the degree

MASTER OF ARTS IN ENGLISH

at the

CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY

December 2011

This thesis has been approved  
for the Department of ENGLISH  
and the College of Graduate Studies by

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**ABSTRACT**

Buddhist imagery in *The Woman Warrior* can be interpreted as part of a Buddhist journey, a journey to observe and realize the nature of the self as mutable and indefinable; this concept of self becomes transcendent through the novel to the reader by a participatory process which calls for insight beyond the illusion created by the narrative itself. Through an exploration of Buddhist inspired images – silence, seated meditation, the concept of the self as observer, koan, martial arts, the role of suffering and even aspects of transmigration and time – the struggle or journey to define a self transcends the idea of cultural identity and linear narrative that adds to existing critical discussions of the text.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

Published in 1976 as a work of nonfiction, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* is comprised of multiple personal stories interwoven with elements of classical Chinese myths, such as her infamous retelling of the Fa Mu Lan ballad. Kingston's unique approach, which challenges typical definitions of nonfiction, memoir and translation, has produced mixed reactions among critics. Although the book won the National Book Critics Circle Award (1976) for the best nonfiction work, there was initially much negative criticism regarding the book's classification and the duties of the author to her audience and her parent culture.<sup>1</sup> As Paul Outka summarized in 1997 "debates and discussions continue over whether the book is fiction, history, autobiography, or some strange mix, and over Kingston's fidelity to her sources and culture(s)" (1). Central to the arguments concerning classification of the novel is the role of her unreliable, unnamed narrator, commonly referred to by critics as Maxine.<sup>2</sup> In the chapter "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", the narrator admits that she not only embellished the story of Moon Orchid's visit to her husband, but may have fabricated the majority of the retelling: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going

to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 164). Much of the novel in fact is "twisted into designs" as Kingston utilizes the narrator's voice and retells stories of her matriarchal lineage, imagining whole episodes, while interlacing the myths (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 164). But it is not just the binary opposition between Chinese and American culture that permeates the memoir: Kingston draws on a rich heritage of influences spanning a multi-generational lineage. It is these influences which allows for such a wide range of criticism on the work itself.

After the initial criticism and reviews of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston offered a response in her article; "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" to those who she suggests misinterpreted or marginalized the book's intention in favor of their perception of the exotic fantasy. The article also addressed Kingston's intention of utilizing the text to transcend stereotypes and the failed interpretation of this intent: "I believed that I had written with such power that the reality and humanity of my characters would bust through any stereotypes of them...I had not calculated how blinding stereotyping is, how stupefying" (Kingston, *Cultural* 55). Eventually, critical writings on the book moved towards looking at how language, images and themes worked to achieve Kingston's goal of transcending stereotypes or definitions of cultural identity and polarization in mixed identities. Critics such as Lauren Rusk explored the aspect of speech in *The Woman Warrior* and its relationship to identity, while Marlene Goldman and others explored themes in a postmodern context. Paul Outka explored the themes and images of food and hunger and their relationships to the construction of self. Yet, other critics, such as David Leal Cobos have explored the idea of Jung's archetypal myth of the hero in the Fa Mu

Lan story and its impact on identity. Indeed, the criticism on the work has been varied, but a central concern or theme has commonly been found regarding the building of a sense of identity. Kingston's success in transcending the universal, or presenting an idea or construction of self that transcends cultures is subject of debate. Additionally, Ruth Jenkins would argue that some images in the work have been marginalized in favor of the "Eurocentric canon" (61). In her article, "Authorizing Female Voice and Experience: Ghosts and Spirits in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Allende's *The House of Spirits*," Jenkins suggests that "connections between the supernatural and female voice" in Kingston's work have been marginalized in favor of "Western culture, which privilege[s] formal realism, the understandable and ordinary rather than the unexplained and fantastic" (61). Similarly, aspects of spirituality in the work have yet to receive due criticism.

Despite over thirty years of study and discussion, not until John Whalen-Bridge's 2004 interview with Maxine Hong-Kingston were Buddhist themes and traces in her works, such as *Tripmaster Monkey*, *The Woman Warrior*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace* addressed with the author. In fact, an MLA search on "Buddhism" and "Kingston" reveals a total of two works: one dissertation written in 2001 on *Tripmaster Monkey*<sup>3</sup>, a text which directly parallels the familiar journey of monkey in retrieving Buddhist texts in *Into the West*; and a journal article regarding *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003).<sup>4</sup> As John Whalen-Bridge and Gary Storhoff write in the introduction to their book, *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*<sup>5</sup>, Whalen-Bridge's interview with Kingston is "revelatory" "because it is the first time Kingston has discussed her Buddhism explicitly" (13). Whalen Bridge writes:



Raised by Confucian parents, Kingston says she first felt a strong connection to Buddhism by reading the Beats. Yet she herself cannot call herself a Buddhist because ‘it all seems so narrow, even Buddhism.’ Presumably, in resisting a too – hasty religious identification, Kingston (in the words of Maxine in *The Woman Warrior*) ‘makes [her] mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes’ (*The Woman Warrior* 29). Nevertheless, Whalen-Bridge’s groundbreaking interview will inevitably call for a reexamination of Buddhist themes and traces in *The Woman Warrior*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, and *The Fifth Book of Peace*, among her other works.

(13)

Indeed, *The Woman Warrior* is rich in traces of Buddhist themes and imagery. Through Buddhist images, silence becomes transformative rather than viewed as the previous oppressor. The struggle or journey to define a self transcends beyond even the image of finding a voice or identity. While others have seen the voice as a construction necessary to finding the self, a need which reflects the Western individualistic notion of assertiveness, the Buddhist images of silence, as viewed through meditation, koan study and even chant, suggest that the self must first be observed and therefore realized before it can be transcended. Additionally, Buddhist inspired notions of time, while coinciding with other themes at work in the novel, reinforce the idea of the Buddhist concept of the self as impermanent and mutable. Explorations into the Buddhist ideas around death, suicide, immolation and transmigration, show purpose for the need of the novel to display a circular and reflexive concept of time, rather than a linear concept, while the role of martial arts explores themes such as the limitations of the self when confronted with

duality and the place of aggression and war. If Kingston's narrator can transcend culture, she can achieve the universal as illustrated by Ts'ai Yen's song at the end of the work. She must break barriers and the idea of self, as well as transcend cultural definitions, to realize the universal self. Kingston draws on a rich heritage of influences, which, like her skill for talk story, encompass her matriarchal lineage and her own dynamic influences: "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 206). Instead of exploring cultural identity, Kingston uses Buddhist themes and imagery to explore the illusions of self and culture, themselves polarized identities. An exploration of *The Woman Warrior* for Buddhist themes and images exposes Buddhist inspired notions of silence, seated meditation, the concept of the self as observer, koan, martial arts, the role of suffering, and even aspects of transmigration and time. These images work harmoniously to explore, deconstruct and to create anew a universal identity that is ever-changing and adaptive. While discussing Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and its "humanistic undercurrent," Sonshi.com asks Kingston "How would you define a Woman Warrior? In other words, what would she be like, her attributes, her outlook?" Kingston responds, "I am working on a Buddhist definition. With his/her sword, Manjusri<sup>6</sup> cuts through ignorance and wrong view and delusion" (Kingston, Sonshi.com). This Buddhist version of a warrior is a concept that can be explored in *The Woman Warrior*. The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* journeys through several identities, and through various states of juxtaposition with the female characters within the novel. Through these characters she does experience birth, death and even in a sense with the no name aunt, rebirth. The novel then can be interpreted as part of a Buddhist journey, a journey to

observe and realize the nature of the self as mutable and indefinable; this concept of self becomes transcendent through the novel to the reader by a participatory process which calls for insight beyond the illusion created by the narrative itself.

## CHAPTER II

### SILENCE, SEATED MEDITATION AND THE CONCEPT OF SELF AS OBSERVER

Many passages in Kingston's text allude to the negative and mysterious aspects of silence that the narrator persona has encountered. Indeed the first chapter, *No Name Woman*, begins with the story that should have never been told: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (Kingston, 3). From the very beginning as well as throughout the text, notions of silence and a found voice permeate the novel; as Lauren Rusk notes:

*The Woman Warrior* begins with the idea of compulsory silence, which introduces the tale of an isolated woman who kills herself, and it ends with triumphant song, with a life recreated and renewed through communion. Kingston's identification with a speechless, unspeakable aunt-ghost sets in motion the narrative journey that culminates in her identification with an eloquent, historically named survivor.

(24)

Finding her voice is central to the narrator's success in defining her identity, developing her concept of self and transcending the universal. As Ruth Jenkins observes Kingston "explores the tension between silence and voice" (62). The narrator's voice which she

describes as “unreliable” can at times be crippling for the young narrator (Kingston 49). As the narrator tries to find her voice to speak to her employers about the injustices that she sees or feels she “whispers” and squeaks (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 48). Indeed as Bonnie TuSmith notes “verbal articulation is necessary to survival...people deprived of speech, as are the various crazy women cited in the text, do not survive” (285).

The narrator’s remark that she “knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” shows that she equates her awkward inability to express herself with part of her dual cultural identity (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 166). Silence for the narrator, also becomes a shared oppressor when she torments a fellow Chinese American school girl for not speaking. Although at first the narrator seems to relentlessly torment the young girl, her torment eventually becomes a mutual oppression: “Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing wildly off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternating” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 181).

But the transcendence through silence is more than just the ability to learn to speak. As Lauren Rusk concludes in her article “Voicing the Harmonic Self; Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” “potent self-expression involves more than the unleashing of thoughts and emotions. She must strike an artful balance between expressiveness and responsiveness” (23). The novel’s concern with a found voice and transgression through silence to ultimately become a voice like that of Ts’ai Yen, a voice which is capable of transcending binary cultural identities and becoming universal seems contradicted then in “White Tigers” when the narrator is instructed by the old woman to learn to be quiet: “‘The first thing you have to learn,’ the old woman told me, is how to be quiet.’ They left me by streams to watch for animals. ‘If you’re noisy, you’ll make

the deer go without water” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 23). “White Tigers” is a chapter that is known for the Kingston's retelling of the Fa Mu Lan chant. Unlike other chapters where the narrator's words are in clear juxtaposition to the words of her mother, Brave Orchid, in “White Tigers” the mythic and the real become blurred (Smith 64). As Sidonie Smith notes, Kingston appropriates “not only the chant but also the very body of that legendary woman warrior: The identities of woman warrior and of woman narrator interpenetrate until biography becomes autobiography, until Kingston and Fa Mu Lan are one” (64). Quiet, or silence, the previous oppressor, becomes introspective and transformative. The method which Kingston describes is not so strangely dissimilar to the Buddhist meditation method of shikantaza or zazen.

During shikantaza, or seated meditation, “thoughts well up in our mind moment by moment. But we refrain from doing anything with our thoughts. We just let everything come up freely and go away freely. We don’t grasp anything. We don’t try to control anything. We just sit” (Okumura 109). The purpose of this introspective meditation is to create a mind that is “unburdened with thoughts” or to release the “karmic self” which “always wants to be satisfied (Sheng-yen 116, Okumura 109). In this way, seated meditation is a method of releasing ideas or needs of the self to draw awareness inward and to ultimately realize the true and universal nature of the self. Bringing the narrator to the stream to learn seated meditation implies that the training that she will endure as a warrior is more than just physical training, it is a training to know the self.

Dogen<sup>7</sup>, among many other early Buddhist masters of this practice, gave strict instruction as to the nature of performing shikantaza. While, there were and are, of course, variations on this practice, it is the aim of the practice is to be able to sit for a long

duration of time without unnecessary movements and while keeping the breath even (Dogen 19-20). The young warrior in “White Tigers” undergoes breath training, an integral part of this type of meditation. When the young girl first arrives the old couple who will train her “tucked [her] into a bed just [her] width” and instruct her to “Breathe evenly” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 21). As she later sits by the stream the narrator observes that her “breathing became even” during the seated practice (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 23). Kingston’s narrator remarks, “When I could kneel all day without my legs cramping and my breathing became even, the squirrels would bury their hoardings at the hem of my shirt and then bend their tails in a celebration dance” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 23).

During her seated meditation then, the young warrior is still aware of the world around her, but is not acting on it. In shikantaza, a person is not “oblivious to the surrounding sense world. But while the practitioner remains aware, sense phenomena do not become objects of attachment, or objectified at all” (Leighton 4). This Buddhist method “leads to building up a stable internal ‘observer’ who is not buffeted by conflicting emotions or swept up by the flow of association or rumination” (Magid 279). This practice seeks to unburden the observer from illusions of the concept of self or identity by giving them the tools to become one who is simply present, or one who is observant. As Barry Magid states in chapter six of *Psychoanalysis and Buddhism*, “old dualistic patterns of organizing one’s sense of self and the world are made manifest and challenged by this practice” (279). For Kingston’s young warrior in “White Tigers”, this practice of sitting by the stream is suggestive of a way to becoming a person who is able to observe and challenge their sense of self and dualistic identity. Indeed as Kenneth B. Klucznick

observes in his conclusion of his article, “It Translated Well: de Man, Lacan, Kingston and Self at the Borderline of Other,” the narrator

no longer drives to make these stories clearly meaningful for her understanding of herself. Her stance partakes of what Lacan, in his presentation of what in the feminine falls outside of the symbolic, calls the ‘not-all.’ She does not search for intention and desire in these stories; rather, she simply offers them. The only way she is present in the stories is implicitly, and as a listener. She lends an ear to them without attempting to translate them into her self. The translation she mentions in closing is only that, translation...The self, the autos, indeed becomes implicated in that translation, in hearing, in the otos.

(193).

Klucznick observes that Kingston’s narrator has become an observer of the experiences that construct her identity or self. She is an observer of the very stories that she writes. Her ability to observe is brought forth by the transformative nature of the silence and through the ability to meditate on the stories and myths that she offers.

Later in “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, the narrator again becomes self observant when she is stricken by the “mysterious illness” and takes to a “rented hospital bed in the living room” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182). She observes things that are going on around her while not participating in them. The narrator observes when stricken, “My bed was against the west window, and I watched the seasons change the peach tree” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182). Yet at the same time, the stricken narrator does nothing to interact with the world, even going so far as to allow herself to be taken care of completely by her family: “my family cranked me up and down;” “I used a



bedpan;” “I saw no one but my family, who took good care of me” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182). In fact, the narrator remarks that it “was the best year and a half of [her] life. Nothing happened” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182).

The unexplained sickness, which is brought on after the narrator torments the young Chinese girl for her lack of voice and lack of individuality or identity resembles more of a psychological sickness rather than a physical sickness: “There was no pain and no symptoms, though the middle line in my left palm broke in two” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182). Tormenting the young girl is an action that is brought on by the frustrations and inabilities of the narrator to grasp her own identity and voice and the resulting sickness is possibly meant to be the narrator’s internalization of the torment that she is responsible for causing and which mirrors her own internal turmoil. In an article for *SGI Quarterly: A Buddhist Forum for Peace, Culture and Education*, Maxine Hong Kingston is quoted as saying, “Whether we know it or not, each of us has Buddha nature, which will not let us get away with hurting others”. Perhaps it is her conflict with her Buddha nature which brings on sickness for the narrator. Indeed, the altercation with the silent girl illustrates the narrator’s own internal conflict. Once the narrator returns to school she has to “figure out again how to talk” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182). It is as though she has spent this time in her bed in silence. This image of the narrator as bedbound, like one of the “Victorian recluses [she] read about” represents the double bind or paradox that silence creates within the novel (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 182).

## CHAPTER III

### KOAN AND ITS RELATIONSHIP TO SILENCE AND SELF

Like silence, the idea of paradox permeates *The Woman Warrior*. The narrator's struggle to understand her identity is made increasingly difficult by the unreliable and often contradictory facts that she encounters through her mother's lessons and stories. As Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong recognizes "The many questions about 'facts' plaguing the narrator...function much like a series of Zen *koan*, frustrating because impossible to answer by appeal to an external authority" (47). The narrator continually receives contradictory information about simple facts such as the mother's birthday and whether or not the narrator had older siblings in China who died. Other questions that plague the narrator are more complex and regard her identity on a more personal level; such as, the position of her voice, and her role as a female. The narrator struggles between misunderstanding and paradoxes with her mother over the idea of a voice. When the narrator finally tries to tell her mother how she feels she accuses her mother of "[trying] to cut off [her] tongue" to "stop [her] from talking (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 202). This admonition comes as an "outburst" after the narrator has hidden her feelings on the subject for years (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 202). In return, the mother says, "I cut it to

make you talk more, not less, you dummy" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 202). The narrator often questions whether or not the tongue was cut at all and what the purpose of the cutting was. The purpose of the tongue and subsequently her voice become a koan for the daughter to solve and interconnect with the larger image of transcending silence.

The narrator also encounters questions regarding her role as a female in Chinese-American culture. Brave Orchid's stories and attitude toward her daughter often offer conflicting views of the position of females in the new society and expectations of their role within the family. The narrator laments how she would throw a tantrum when neighbors would remark that "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 46). These tantrums illustrate a young narrator's anger and confusion toward the attitude of girls as inferior. Brave Orchid adds to the confusing attitude with statements such as, "During the war, though, when you were born, many people gave older girls away for free. And here I was in the United States paying two hundred dollars for you" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 83). Statements like this illustrate a belief of worthlessness for girls. As the narrator famously remarks: "There is a Chinese word for the female *I* – which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 47). Paradox enters the narrator's mind, however as she searches through the mother's stories for meaning: "She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 20). The choices in the narrator's possible identity options at this time seem to be either a wife and a slave, or a warrior. This choice illustrates the idea of a dualistic identity.

The koan-like lessons however function similarly to the method of seated meditation

in Buddhism. The opening story of the *No Name Woman* is told to the narrator to warn her against humiliating her family: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 5). The narrator remarks: “Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 5). The idea of testing established realities defines the purpose of a koan. The koan, another type of meditation technique in Buddhism, is traditionally utilized to assist the student in transcending the illusory images of the self in order to gain a better understanding of the self and its transformative and impermanent nature.

In Zen koan study the teacher encourages the student to meditate by letting there be just that question – the koan itself – letting unrelated matters pass and returning to the question. By not aiming to solve it or find an answer, this investigative method facilitates, not an answer, but an unfolding realization of the question. Koans are metaphorical narratives, usually drawn from spontaneous, everyday encounters between student and teacher; they are the folk stories of Zen (Bobrow 235).

When she is able to allow the koan to simply be present without the idea of resolving or solving it, then she will finally be able to transcend her perception of self. Much like the observer of seated meditation, the ability to transform the perception of self is only available when a person is able to let go of the illusory images that the self creates and become an objective observer. Whether or not this transcendence takes place within the context of the novel, or is part of some ongoing transformation is unclear.

Wong implies that the narrator is eventually freed through Brave Orchid’s koan

lessons from the need to define her identity: “In the end, realization of their impossibility frees her to explore the fecund uncertainties of her Chinese-American existence” (47).

Similarly, present day Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh<sup>8</sup> states that “A koan cannot be solved by intellectual arguments, logic or reason, nor by debates such as whether there is only mind or matter...Once we have penetrated a koan, we feel a sense of relief, and have no more fears or questioning. We see our path and realize great peace.” (Hanh, Bat Nha).

The koan lessons imply that a participatory process is necessary for the narrator to realize her identity is ever changing and indefinable from moment to moment. As critic, Bonnie Melchior further notes: “A self is not a product that is made, but a participatory process. Neither is the meaning of a text (or a life) linear. Her text constantly folds back on itself, reflexively contradicting meanings it had seemed to support, as the very title illustrates. This is autobiography that inhabits a postmodern world” (282). The structure of the book then is noted as conducive to mirroring the structure of a self. Resistance to the koan lessons becomes a struggle for the narrator when she tries to grasp the meaning of her mother’s contradictory stories. In fact, when the narrator torments the silent Chinese girl it is as though she is reenacting her struggle to comprehend paradoxical lessons on her classmate. The narrator mirrors her mother when she torments the young girl with questions such as:

you’re going to tell me why. You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you?

Do you want to be like this, dumb...Yeah, you’re going to have to work because

you can’t be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a

housewife. And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That’s all you are if you

don’t talk. If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality.

(Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 180)

These questions reflect some of the attitude that is seen in Brave Orchid toward her children and also toward her sister, Moon Orchid. When Moon Orchid suggests that Brave Orchid teaches the girls to be demure, Brave Orchid retorts, "They *are* demure. They're so demure, they barely talk'" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 133). Additionally, Brave Orchid complains about the children not being marriageable or independent: "'I don't see how any of them could support themselves,' Brave Orchid said. 'I don't see how anybody could want to marry them.' Yet, Moon Orchid noticed, some of them seemed to have a husband or a wife who found them bearable" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 132). These contradictions and conflicting messages about expectations and identity become part of a larger koan or paradox that the author explores.

Moreover, the narrator mirrors the mother's methods of teaching in her rendering of the novel. The conflicting stories and perspectives of the narrator become a koan for the reader. When the narrator remarks: "In fact, it wasn't me my brother told about going to Los Angeles; one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs," the reader gains a sense of the narrator as unreliable (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 164). Applying the purpose of koan study practices to the novel as a whole would suggest that only through experiencing the paradox and the conflict can the reader truly relate to the narrator's feelings of paradox with her mother's lessons and relate to her need to explore her idea of self. This concept further mirror what David Fontana suggests in his article, "Self-Assertion and Self-Negation in Buddhist Psychology," that in Buddhism the self must ascertain knowledge for itself and not rely upon outside authority: "the Buddhist

conception of the self...lays emphasis not upon accepting things upon the authority of other people, but upon employing techniques for discovering these things for ourselves” (177).

The study of koan traditionally produces the opportunity for the student to look at facts and experience in a non linear way. Moreover, resistance to the koan lesson is created through the insistence of linear thought in order to find a resolution. As John Daido Looi, a Zen Buddhist rōshi, wrote:

That’s what happens with koans. Students read the question and when they don’t immediately understand it, they begin to think about it because that’s the way we’ve all been taught to solve problems. That’s the way we’ve earned our little A’s in college – through good old, linear, sequential thought. But thinking doesn’t help in seeing a koan. A whole other aspect of consciousness needs to open up. We need to exhaust that process of linear thinking, and when the minds finally stops functioning, out of the blue the realization of the koan appears.

(140)

Looi was not writing about Kingston’s novel when he gave this example, but the direct parallel to the question of the grades that the narrator receives and the grades in Looi’s example is illuminating nonetheless. In *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator is confused about her achievement in school because of her mother’s response. As the narrator declares, “I got straight A’s Mama” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). The mother responds, “Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). The narrator’s achievement for the grades is severely downplayed by the mother’s apparent attempt to undermine her achievement with an example of a

greater achievement. Additionally, as the daughter relates her individualistic achievement, the mother counters with a communal achievement, lending preference to the idea of the self as communal rather than individual. This rendering becomes another koan for the daughter. The narrator further remarks, “I could not figure out what was my village. And it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can’t eat straight A’s” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45-46). The narrator does not see her achievements in America equating to the achievements of a daughter in Chinese culture. Additionally, there is always a question for the narrator of whether or not the mother is offering a “true story” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). David Fontana might suggest that this interplay between the mother and the daughter is an exploration between self-assertion, self-negation and self-affirmation (193). Fontana argues that through a continual interplay of these three states the Buddhist interpretation of self is realized. When discussing Western child-rearing practices in conjunction with Buddhist psychology, Fontana argues that:

Buddhist psychology maintains that in life we should first pass through the phase of self assertion...and then move into the phase of self-negation. In the Western world, however, we find that these two phases are often reversed. In childhood, particularly during the formal educational process, the social and cultural constraints generally impose self-negation upon the child...Self assertion is often interpreted as insolence or insubordination, and is suppressed rather than guided and understood.

(184-85)



However, Fontana concludes that the reversal of this interpretation occurs when children reach adulthood and are rewarded for self assertive behaviors (185). This interplay in *The Woman Warrior*, then between the mother and the daughter may suggest a tumultuous process of dually integrating the daughter in both Eastern and Western educational methods simultaneously in an effort to foster her construction of self. At the same time these lessons are a building of self, they are also a necessary negation of the self. Necessary because “With self-negation comes the knowledge that there is nothing permanent or substantial about the self” (183). It is the culmination of all these paradoxes and questionable information that creates the overall koan regarding, among other things, silence, culture, identity and self, for the narrator.

As Loori wrote however, it is necessary for “A whole other aspect of consciousness” “to open up” in order to realize the answer for the koan (140). Just as Ruth Jenkins observed “alternative insight” is required to see the answer to the koan: “For Kingston, her ‘zero IQ’ and blackened pictures, misinterpreted as a lack of aptitude and vision, instead reveal both – requiring alternative insight” (Jenkins 64). Jenkins further applies this insight to the novel as a whole when stating that “rather than read such narratives as a lack of artistic vision, [the] reader must learn to interpret the unfamiliar as evidence of alternative experience, even as ethnic resistance to prescribed scripts for literature” (64). Further, Klucznick notes that the idea of translation, the presumed goal of the novel, itself becomes a koan or a paradox: “This idea of translation presents the paradox that is identity in this final section in that translation both preserves and offers up anew” (192). This interpretation illustrates the struggle for identity that the narrator faces. She must preserve both her Chinese and American cultures, while simultaneously combining them

and creating anew something that is not definable even as Chinese-American, but something that will transcend beyond definition itself, and she must further draw her audience along in the quest. In order to do this however, alternative insight to the novel must be applied and the reader must be drawn in to observe in a non-linear construction of the self.

Meditation and koan study foster transformative silence. It is through silence that the nature of the self or identity is able to be explored and experienced through observation. Maxine Hong Kingston talks about silence and meditation as transformative to the process of writing in a 2007 interview with Bill Moyers over a discussion of her work with veterans of war and her role in the writing and publishing of the book *Veterans of War; Veterans of Peace*. She responds to Bill Moyers's question "Why does it make a difference whether you tell it or write it:"

I think more of a transmutation takes place – more of a transformation. War is very noisy. The people are hurt by this noise. The sound of the bombing would be all of the world, I felt that silence would be an antidote to this noise and so when we gather, we have meditation. We take a vow of silence. So in this silence we are able to hear ourselves think, we are able to hear the music that's in the world. And in the silence is where the writing takes place. It's safe, you can tell the truth, without anybody reading it. You can tell all your secrets, and nobody gets to interrupt or argue against it, or nobody could say, 'I don't believe you.

Klucznick suggests that it is only in the observing and the hearing that the narrator persona participates in her story. However, on another level, the act of writing is not merely Kingston's observations on the stories; it is her participation in the journey and

acknowledgement of their necessity to her identity and construction of the self. While Kingston's narrator is not an observer who is tries to grasp meaning, or grasp the translation, much like the practitioners of seated meditation or koan study, she does ultimately acknowledge that these stories, are a part of her being: "the ending, mine" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 206). While writing regarding Dogen's teaching, Shohaku Okumura makes an observation of the study of self. Dogen famously taught that: "*To Study the Buddha Way is to study the self*" (Okumura 105). Okumura observed that "A human being is a living being that needs to study the self to become the self" (Okumura 106). But this sense of studying, is "not simply intellectual study," it is an experience of ourselves (Okumura 106). What the narrator's observation allows her to grasp then is the experience of a self: a self that operates as part of the stories and myths that it simultaneously deconstructs and creates anew. Kingston's attitude toward writing and revision reveals her thoughts about the need to constantly challenge and build the idea of self. In an interview with Marc Schuster for Philadelphia Stories Weblong, Kingston remarks:

in college, there isn't time to do multiple rewrites. At most, people have time for one. And that improves it a little bit, but if you can work on a story over many months, many years, and finding the excitement, the drama, the rest of the story, we come to a great work.

Additionally, in the aforementioned interview with John Whalen-Bridge, Kingston reveals that "*China Men* is a book about all the omissions from *Woman Warrior*." (183) She further states that "Each book – every book- contains everything I know. And then when it's published I think, 'Oh my gosh. It's not enough.' Then I do the next one"

(Whalen-Bridge 183). For Kingston as writer, her books are part of the experience of self and its ongoing process of deconstruction and re-creation.

CHAPTER IV  
BUDDHIST INSPIRED NOTIONS OF TIME

The imagery of the self as mutable, and that of a koan as being solvable through a participatory process, invokes the necessity to look at the author's use of linear time and chronology verses circular patterns of time, and indeed is reminiscent of Buddhist inspired notions of time. In her article which looks at deconstructing the autobiographical self, Bonnie Melchior incorporates the work of Elise Miller and observes that

There is no sense in this text of linear, casual time, a sequence of chronologically ordered events that leads us to understand why the person is what she is. Instead, time loops" the past is not distinct from the present but is part of it. We see people weaving themselves into each other's stories. Repeated yet varied patterns replace 'cause.' Roles are simultaneous, making us aware of the recursiveness of revision in writing and of how this defines the self. From a psychoanalytic perspective, such an organization argues that identity formation 'circular and regressive,' that 'a quest for women warriors and shamen must also include a recognition of weakness and madness' (287).

The lack of linear time and chronology in *The Woman Warrior* is conducive to the

narrator's necessity to wade through her mother's koan lessons, and is thereby also conducive to the koan lessons that are projected to the reader. This idea of providing an atmosphere for "alternative experience" creates an environment that is linked not only to koan meditation but to the meditation method of sitting meditation. (Jenkins 64)

In his essay regarding the practice of "silent illumination" in *The Art of Just Sitting*, Buddhist master Sheng-yen writes that "when silence is achieved, time has no duration. It is only because thoughts come and go that we are aware of time" (119). In other words, when the practitioner of seated meditation has achieved the ability to become an observer, time is no longer defined as a series of events; this experience resembles the answer to a koan which is perceived through non-linear thinking. Sheng yen further writes that

because our sense of time comes from the endless succession of thoughts and images passing through our minds. This flow of experience also gives rise to a sense of a separate self. If you could cease the march of thoughts through your mind, and fix on just one constant thought of Silent illumination, time would freeze.

(120)

The belief then in Buddhism is that when time no longer is definable by a "succession of thoughts" that, the illusion of a separate self becomes recognizable and the practitioner is able to realize that their sense of self is not separate or dualistic, but is "not a stable entity" rather it is "constructed and reconstructive" (Sheng yen 120, Melchior 286).

Additionally, as critic Ruth Jenkins notes, the construction of time as circular contrasts historical narratives which are usually construed as patriarchal: "In contrast to the linear,

temporal histories recorded by Western, patriarchal narratives, this monumental time measures cyclical experience” (68). This realization also lends credibility to the novel as an exploration of women's roles: “Woven throughout *The Woman Warrior* are examples of women transforming traditions, and, in doing so, representing what Kristeva would name ‘women’s time’” (Jenkins 68). Since time is cyclical rather than linear, the narrator is able to see the life of her ancestor branching into hers: “Kingston reconstructs a woman, a warrior against custom, silenced by her own culture and as a result engenders her own voice, her own identity” an identity that extends, not only throughout the text, but possibly well beyond (Jenkins 65). This realization, this acknowledgement, is only made possible by the circular nature of time. By realizing the plight of her ancestor within herself, Kingston lends a permanent voice to those who had no voice or “no name.” Indeed, “Kingston avenges the silence imposed on her aunt’s history; by recording the aunt’s story” as Jenkins notes (66).

## CHAPTER V

### DEATH, SUICIDE, IMMOLATION AND TRANSMIGRATION

This branching of the ancestor's life into hers also serves the purpose of the narrator being able to assist the spiritual needs of the deceased "no name aunt." In Buddhism "life is an opportunity to work for transcendence beyond transmigration<sup>9</sup>, for awakening to our original purity, for full development of our innate potentials, and for compassionate service to all sentient beings" (Lin 3). As a service to the aunt, the narrator is recognizing her death after so many have been forced to forget or negate her existence entirely. The narrator declares: "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" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 16). According to Dr. Yutang Lin,

The Buddhist teaching of no killing applies to all sentient beings, including oneself and unborn babies. Sentient beings who have died of suicide or abortion are also considered to be in great need of spiritual help. Rituals of elevation and acts of merits should be performed for all these cases of death to lessen their suffering and to reduce the chances of their haunting the living.

(5)



Kingston's narrator is given the opportunity to elevate the deceased aunt through the novel. As the narrator notes when referring to the aunt's ghost: "My aunt remains forever hungry" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 16). The image of the aunt as a "forever hungry" further echoes the Buddhist notion of hungry ghosts. As aforementioned, Bonnie TuSmith suggested that the crazy women in *The Warrior Women* needed to develop verbal articulation in order to survive; but it is more than merely verbal articulation that is necessary to development, without self-assertion, self-transcendence is not possible, and self-negation is a necessary duality to this process (TuSmith 285, Fontana 183, 193).

Moon Orchid is a character who could be argued to encompass the Buddhist notion of upādāna, translated as attachment or clinging (Fontana 183). Because she is unable to adapt to her new life and clings to a former illusion she "is left with the suffering that comes from seeing the things to which...she is attached change and pass away" (Fontana 183). Through her vigilant clinging and inability to develop self-assertion and self-negation properly, Moon Orchid is not able to survive. Likewise, the nameless aunt, unable to cope with her own loss of identity and fearing the impending struggle of identity for her child, is unable to foster either self-assertion or self-negation for herself or the child, and both are drowned in family drinking well. Yet, the apparent murder of the child through the aunt's suicide is justified by the narrator with these words: "Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along. It was probably a girl; there is some hope of forgiveness for boys" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 15). This justification is confusing unless the child can be viewed as someone without identity or as someone who can never develop identity. Then the murder or negation of the child can be viewed

as loving because it is the acceptance of something that can never truly exist, or the embodiment of the child's identity being intertwined with the mother's and unable to ever be a self of its own.

The concepts of suicide and death are also explored during the chapter "White Tigers". While the young warrior is in training on the mountain, she is left by her two old teachers "to survive bare-handed" on the mountain (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 24). During this training, when the warrior runs out of food and is sitting by the fire, a rabbit jumps into the flames offering itself as a sacrifice for her:

But it [the rabbit] did not stop when it got to the edge. It turned its face once toward me, then jumped into the fire. The fire went down for a moment, as if crouching in surprise, then the flames shot up taller than before. When the fire became calm again, I saw the rabbit had turned into meat, browned just right. I ate it, knowing the rabbit had sacrificed itself for me. It had made me a gift of meat. (Kingston 26)

This episode with the rabbit strongly resembles one of the Buddhist stories regarding the Buddha's former births. During this particular story, *Sasa-Jātaka*, the Bodhisatta, or future Buddha, appears as a hare who sacrifices himself through immolation by jumping into a fire to serve as food for Sakka<sup>10</sup> (*Jātaka* 34). Sakka is so impressed by the hare's sacrifice that he does not allow the rabbit to burn in the flames and immortalizes the hare's image by creating a likeness of the rabbit on the moon to serve as a permanent reminder of his sacrifice (*Jātaka* 34). Aside from presenting a cultural myth about the moon presenting a likeness of a hare, this myth serves to instruct others in the Buddhist ideals of sacrifice and almsgiving. The death of the rabbit is considered a sacrifice rather

than a suicide because it is an intended act done to show generosity to another.

In “White Tigers”, the warrior honors the gift of the rabbit by eating the meat, even though she had given up meat. Later, when she is again with the old people, the warrior declares:

I had met a rabbit who taught me about self-immolation and how to speed up transmigration: one does not have to become worms first but can change directly into a human being --as in our own humaneness we had just changed bowls of vegetable soup into people too.

(Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 28)

The warrior seems to infer that through the act of eating the rabbit, she absorbs its nature. In this way, the rabbit has become a part of her, just like vegetable soup becomes a part of her. As a larger metaphor it could imply that bringing experience or knowledge into your being makes it a part of you. Hence, participating in the observations of the narrator brings those observations to the reader, transcending the book itself and reinforcing the postmodern aspect of the book as participatory.

There is also a possible real world parallel to the story of the rabbit for Kingston. Maxine Hong Kingston has widely discussed her involvement as a protestor of the Viet Nam War. Additionally, *The Woman Warrior* also includes many references to the Chinese Zodiac. At the end of “Shaman”, the mother who likes to say the opposite, as the Chinese do, affectionately calls her adult, dragon daughter “Little Dog” (109). The narrator describes “that endearment” as “a name to fool the gods,” invoking the act of protection for the daughter by the mother (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 109). The reference to the dog in light of the fact the narrator reveals that she and her mother are

both dragons reinforces the paradox between the mother and the daughter themselves. In the Chinese Zodiac, the dragon and the dog are adversaries. In a way, the mother is recognizing the daughter as her adversary, but also admiring and wanting to protect her, revealing much of the mother's true intentions for the daughter. Aside from the Zodiac images of the dragon and the dog, the rabbit is also an animal of the Chinese Zodiac.

In 1963, the year of the rabbit, Thich Quang Duc, a Buddhist monk, immolated himself. This immolation was well documented in the media and is discussed as being pivotal in The United States involvement in the Viet Nam War. What Western religions might term a suicide, however, has a distinct and different meaning in Buddhism. Thich Nhat Hahn describes the difference in this way:

In the Buddhist belief, life is not confined to a period of 60 or 80 or 100 years: life is eternal. Life is not confined to this body: life is universal. To express will by burning oneself, therefore, is not to commit an act of destruction but to perform an act of construction, i.e., to suffer and to die for the sake of one's people. This is not suicide. Suicide is an act of self-destruction.

(Hahn, In Search)

For the Buddhist community then, this immolation was not considered a suicide but a sacrifice, or a silent protest, to show the world that the people of Viet Nam were suffering. Thich Quang Duc's action then was meant to transcend through silence and reach out to the world to invoke them to participate in the ceasing of suffering for his people. Likewise, the rabbit's sacrifice to the narrator is recognized by the narrator as she accepts the gift of meat. Also, it is suggested that the narrator absorbs the nature or the lesson that the rabbit wishes to teach by recognizing that the rabbit's nature is now a

part of her being – allegorically, a sort of communion as it were.

CHAPTER VI  
THE ROLE OF MARTIAL ARTS

In her own life, Maxine Hong Kingston has been a part of a community that has struggled with the aftermath of war: her writing workshops with Veterans. The struggle to comprehend the atrocities of war, or the place of war, also becomes a struggle to comprehend the dualistic nature of the warrior as both an aggressor and protector, and the warrior's obligations to self or communal cause. The chapter "White Tigers" deals with this struggle through the reimagining of the myth of Fa Mu Lan. As Kingston states during an interview:

*The Woman Warrior* was already struggling with the question, what good does war do? I put the Woman Warrior story in the middle of *The Woman Warrior* because I wanted to test that myth. And I say something like, any problems that we have, what good does it do to find this horse and ride off with a sword? I cannot solve any of my problems by using those techniques.

(Whalen-Bridge 182)

Additionally, Kingston is widely quoted as declaring that she placed "White Tigers" "at the beginning to show that the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for.

Also, 'The White Tigers' is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody" (Kingston, Cultural 57). As a "childish myth" "past," the function of "White Tigers" then can be interpreted as contrary to Ts'ai Yen's universal songs, the seemingly successful myth. Yet, the symbolism in "White Tigers" is not all unsuccessful to the building of an identity or self, it must be included as it is also part of the narrator's self. It is the idea of war itself then that becomes interpreted as "childish."

As a "kung fu movie parody," many elements in "White Tigers" resemble wuxia literature, a genre of Chinese literature that inspired kung fu movies and their tropes and plots. When the narrator observes that "the old man and old woman walked so lightly that their feet never stirred the designs by a needle," this is an example of the wuxia trope, Qinggong, or lightness skill (McNeil). This is further seen when the narrator describes the wind buoying her up yet decries that she "could not fly like the bird that led [her] here" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 24). In Qinggong, the martial arts master cannot fly but can appear so light that it is possible for them to "run across the tops of tall grasses and even across the surface of water (McNeil). Wuxia influence can also be seen in the training of the young warrior. When the narrator describes holding birds in her palm as "I could yield my muscles under their feet and give them no base from which to fly away," it resembles a skill to "rearrange the flow of qi," or internal energy (McNeil). Yet wuxia stories exhibit more than just fantastical elements of a warrior's training. As Simon McNeil writes in his article "The Anatomy of a Wuxia Novel," "Wuxia stories are, at their most fundamental level, about the development of a person from childhood to adulthood". Indeed, "White Tigers", even *The Woman Warrior* resembles that journey. Underlying the choreography, the violence and the spectacle then, is a story about

building a self. Subtly, once again, Kingston draws the reader to a place where alternate insight is needed to look beyond the spectacle or the myth past.

Certainly, the embodied Fa Mu Lan possesses powerful and even violent skills as she exacts revenge upon the barons and oppressors of her people. As Deborah Madson writes her article which compares the female archetypes in *The Woman Warrior* to the films *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle*, and *Kill Bill*: "In Kingston's writing and in the recent movies...the martial arts theme functions as spectacle, as a choreography of violence that displays the female body and the Asian female body specifically as strong, aesthetically pleasing, yet violent" (178). Yet, many martial arts forms were first cultivated in Buddhist temples and therefore, contain aspects of spirituality that work to cultivate meditation, observation and transformation:

The martial arts ultimately aim to cultivate a contemplative state of mind, rather than simply fighting techniques: Therefore, martial philosophy harmonizes with the meditative disciplines and draws on the same transformative powers as does meditation.

(Suler 164)

As with the image of the young warrior being taken to the river to learn seated meditation, there are other aspects of the training and myth that foster "transformative power" or hint at a larger meaning (Suler 164). The styles of kung fu<sup>11</sup> that the young warrior learns reinforce reoccurring images of female prowess and circular forces.

The first time a white tiger is mentioned is when the warrior is left to survive alone. She hears "the white tigers prowling on the other side of the fire" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 24). Tigers are next mentioned as the source of one of the kung fu styles that the



warrior learns: “Copying the tigers, their stalking kill and their anger, had been a wild, bloodthirsty joy” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 28). Certainly, white tiger is a style of kung fu. Interestingly, according to the Shaolin Gung Fu Institute, this “style provides a lead to ruby dragon kung fu” (“White Tiger kung ku”). After returning to the old people for further training, the narrator is trained “in dragon ways” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 28). Dragon style kung fu is an interesting choice of styles because it “does not depend on a person’s size or weight,” therefore it is an effective style for women” (Neuweld). Given that so much of *The Woman Warrior* struggles with the identity of the author as a Chinese-American female in American society, this choice of style reinforces the images of empowered women that weaves through the work itself. Additionally,

One of the trademarks of the style is the concept that body energy is most efficient when it is used in spiral motions. Like a dragon, who coils and uncoils, the spiral movements are interlinked so there is a continuous flow of energy...It gives effective self-defense since the hands and feet are constantly moving, leaving no openings or ‘doors’ for an opponent.

(Neuweld)

The spiral or circular motions in the kung fu style echo the nature of the narrative itself as circular. While the dragon imagery in the book is used to relate to both the mother and daughter, it is also used in “White Tigers” as a metaphor to envision the dragon in all things: “The dragon lives in the sky, ocean, marshes, and mountains; and the mountains are also its cranium. Its voice thunders and jingles like copper pans. It breathes fire and water; and sometimes the dragon is one, sometimes many” (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 29). The dragon is also an animal of Buddhist symbolism, examples of which can readily

be found in temple artwork and sutras.

The coincidence of the style choices provides subtle reinforcement to the themes already at work in the novel, but it is the act of training that is symbolic of the narrator's trials to build an idea of self. As John R. Suler states in his book *Contemporary Psychoanalysis and Eastern Thought*, "Nearly all the great masters of the martial arts emphasized that their discipline was much more than a system for fighting and warfare. It was a way of life" (166). By paralleling the training of the narrator with kung fu, the argument can be made that Kingston offers an exploration of the notion of opponent or enemy. Suler writes that

The masters emphasize that the ultimate battle is not with the adversary, but with oneself. The student's deepest struggles are not in learning techniques or developing physical prowess, but in confronting and mastering the insecurities, obsessions, fears, and misconceptions that threaten to block one's progress. A Chinese adage states the secret of victory is to know both oneself and the enemy. Funakoshi (1981) described his students' confusion when he told them that to learn karate you must become weak, rather than strong. 'He who is aware of his own weaknesses will remain master of himself in any situation; only a true weakling is capable of true courage'.

(168)

The idea of becoming strong by becoming weak echoes the old woman's training for the narrator to learn to be quiet despite the overwhelming need in the previous chapter to find identity and voice (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 23). This reinforces the notion that to find a voice or an identity, one must first find silence in order to observe that which already is

present objectively. The Fa Mu Lan tale does not offer much commentary regarding the narrator's struggle to build a sense of self. The warrior of "White Tigers", in fact, seems more concerned with her communal identity, rather than her individual identity. After her revenge is exacted she "went home to [her] parents-in-law and husband and son" to do "farmwork and housework" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). The warrior even hopes that her "legend" will be 'about [her] perfect filiality' (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). Consistent with Confucian teaching, for the feudal warrior, "The code dictated that the warrior serve his family and village, and in turn, his identity was sustained by that communal self" (Suler 165). Outside of the Fa Mu Lan myth the narrator still struggles with the precept of aligning her duties to community or "village" with those of self (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45). Moreover, the narrator struggles with her American-feminine identity and the indefinable or untranslatable precepts of the Confucian system, as related to her through her mother.

In addition, typical martial arts training includes the building and breaking of spirit.

As Suler further writes:

The sensei breaks down the students so he can then help build up their 'spirit.'

Training throws them into the dynamics of omnipotence and shame. To pass through this dynamic is to attain spirit – the humility of recognizing one's limitations, the respect for an art that has an infinite depth beyond one's abilities to master it all, and the determination, nevertheless, to pursue that art".

(171)

This notion reinforces the mother's use of the koan lessons throughout the narrative. The koan lessons seem to break down the narrator, as when the straight A's are not rewarded

(Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 45-46). Yet, simultaneously, a building of spirit is occurring, perhaps within the narrator herself or even to the audience outside the novel as they observe and are drawn in to participate in the narrator's tale.

The role of the warrior as both aggressor and protector is also explored in this chapter. After childbirth, Fa Mu Lan carries her baby inside her armor, exhibiting her roles of mother-protector and warrior-aggressor: "We made a sling for the baby inside my big armor, and rode back into the thickest part of the fighting" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 40). Moreover, there is a strong dualistic nature present within the myth that portrays Fa Mu Lan with the righteous or good and her enemies as evil. But, Kingston the author, struggles with the idea of war itself. This dualism, of good and evil, which is possibly easily overlooked because of the stereotype of the exotic spectacle and familiarity of the hero archetype, is simply another duality that needs transcending. When quoting Tohei, Suler writes that "The universal Tohei claimed, is an absolute with which we have no cause to fight. Battles arise first when the idea of duality appears. They clothe the universal in the guise of good and evil, justice and inequity, victory and defeat" (174). In reality, perspectives of good and evil may not be clear as they are in the myth, or may not be so clearly overcome as they are with sword and war. This is perhaps the message that Kingston is exploring through the reimagining of the Fa Mu Lan myth. However, Suler argues that for the martial artist, or warrior, experiencing the opponent or the other through aggression is a way of experiencing the self, and a necessary component to empathizing with the other:

In both psychotherapy and the martial arts, where the encounter with the other invariable stirs hostilities, aggression can serve the goal of enhancing the demarcation of

the self and its goals...Through hostility we experience ourselves and others more fully. As a manifestation of the creative, willing self, aggression can simultaneously connect the self to the other and aid in the separation and individuation of self. For Winnicott, aggression was a source of vitality and motility. We need it to bump up against the other, to experience the boundaries between self and other. It helps us recognize that there is something outside the self, the not-self, that can be engaged, encouraged, and struggled with...By possessing the knowledge and techniques to maim or destroy the other, we arrive at the realization of and respect for the aliveness of the other (Suler 173-174). Perhaps Kingston is struggling with the necessity of having to realize the other through hostility, or through duality, before it can be appreciated as similar to the self that recognizes it. This is likely a component of the struggle to rationalize the place or necessity of war in general, as well as the struggle to comprehend the dualistic nature of the warrior as both an aggressor and protector. For the narrator, this myth of Fa Mu Lan cannot translate successfully into her life, she can only invent "gun and knife fantasies" to avenge her parents "when urban renewal tore down" their laundry (Kingston *Woman Warrior* 48). But as aforementioned, this myth is a reflection of that which is "childish" and "past" (Kingston, *Cultural* 57).

## CHAPTER VII

### THE ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS OF MYTH, MUSIC, CHANT AND SILENCE

Kingston's novel ends with the words "It translated well," referencing the songs of Ts'ai Yen while consequently paralleling the novel itself (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209). These words are often invoked to imbue the goal or purpose of the novel. While some may argue that the novel does meet its purpose, Kenneth B. Klucznick does not believe that this goal has been met (193). He remarks: "No clear goal of that translation is offered. The songs by Ts'ai Yen are already in Chinese, only the music seems to need translating" (Klucznick 193). However, it is not the music which needs translating, nor is it the language of the verses that accompany the music that require any such translation. As sung by Ts'ai Yen, the music and verses are already universal and require no translation: hence the narrator's declaration that "It translated well" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209). The need for translation has become obsolete as the music and verses represent the universal.

To understand the place of music as universal, the function of myth in Kingston's work and the role of chanting need to be explored. The most critically acknowledged myth in the book occurs during "White Tigers", when Kingston reinvents the myth of Fa

Mu Lan. One explanation for the rendering of this myth is to “explain her process of identity construction allegorically” (Cobos 19). The format of the myth works to align the audience with the desires and plight of the narrator which are represented in the merging of Fa Mu Lan and the narrator persona:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report it 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.

(Kingston 53)

As David Leal Cobos remarks in his article, “Towards a New Identity,”

Archetypes affect and influence people, and, even, entire societies because they are images and emotions at the same time...The archetypical myth of the hero is the epitome of this influence. One of its final aims is to create a relation of identity between the hero and the audience. That is the aim of Kingston in her election of the archetypical myth of the heroine Fa-Mulan.

(19)

Cobos implies that the merging of Fa Mu Lan and the narrator persona occurs to align the narrator’s appeals for identity with the character of Fa Mu Lan and also the audience.

Chant is referenced in the novel as the conveyance method of the Fa Mu Lan story:

After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father’s place in battle. Instantly I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother

about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman.

(Kingston 20)

As the roles of silence and meditation are linked, so too are the roles of silence and chant. While chant is not exclusive to Zen Buddhism, the role of chant and its relationship to meditation, silence, music and universal language is important. In *Discovering Spirit in Sound: Chanting*, Robert Gass writes that "Chant is a pathway from manifest sound to the soundless sound, or in the words of Sufi teacher Allaudin Mathieu, "The bridge between sound and silence" (192). Chant is traditionally taught as containing the silence that follows it. Quoting Benedictine monk David Stendl-Rast, Robert Gass further writes that

When chant music stops...an audible silence reverberates through the room...the silence is not merely sound's absence, but a mysterious presence, the immense nothingness that is our origin and our home. If we listen carefully, we discover that when all is said and done, chant inducts us into this silence that is the ground of our being (192).

The role then of chant is similar to the meditation methods of sitting meditation and koan study, it is a method meant to induce a state of observation and thereby allowing for reflection and transformation.

The description of chant is not used by the narrator in reference to the songs of Ts'ai Yen, or songs that supposedly translated well. Yet, the chant of Fa Mu Lan is referred by



the narrator as both chant and song. Additionally, Kingston's narrator does not claim the same linguistic or archetypal heroic alignment with the persona of Ts'ai Yen. That the poetess exists outside of the identity of the narrator may imply that the universality of the translation is ongoing, persisting even outside of the work itself. Nonetheless, the relationship of silence is important to the songs of Ts'ai Yen.

Out of Ts'ai Yen's silence comes the song. As Robert Gass writes, "To listen to the inner music, we need silence" (192). It is not mentioned whether or not Ts'ai Yen spoke the barbarian language; however "Her children did not speak Chinese. She spoke it to them when their father was out of the tent, but they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 208). It can be implied that Ts'ai Yen was possibly the only person who spoke Chinese in the camp, and therefore, she participated in an imposed silence of never speaking her language aloud in or at least in public: "She spoke it to them when their father was out of the tent" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 208). It also appears that her language was the object of reminding her of her difference from the others in the camp: "They imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 208). From the story of Ts'ai Yen, the reader gathers a sense of a woman who does not fit into her adopted culture: her "tent...was apart from the others" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209). These images of Ts'ai Yen mirror images of the narrator herself.

Eventually Ts'ai Yen hears the pipe music of the barbarians: "Night after night the songs filled the desert" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 208). At first, the songs "disturbed her so that she could not concentrate on her own thoughts" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 208). However, out of her disturbance and silence Ts'ai Yen comes to her song which

joins with the flutes in a way that enables the barbarians and her children to understand her longings. Kingston writes:

the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, that it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians.

(Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209)

That "her words seemed to be Chinese" allows for ambiguity (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209). The words which are neither wholly Chinese, nor wholly barbarian imply a language that is universal. Additionally, the words are accompanied by music. A music that Ts'ai Yen is able to match with her voice: "a song so high and clear, that it matched the flutes" (Kingston, *Woman Warrior* 209). The image of her voice being able to match the flutes also implies a universal nature, or that the music and voice became one and were able to transcend the need for translation.

In her interview with Susan Brownmiller, Kingston admits that she "went through *piles* of anthropology books" (177). It is no surprise then, that the relationship between myth, language and music present in *The Woman Warrior* resembles Claude Levi-Strauss's work in *Myth and Meaning*. As Levi-Strauss writes: "music emphasizes the sound aspect already embedded in language, while mythology emphasizes the sense aspect, the meaning aspect, which is also embedded in language" (53). Klucznick does recognize that "It is as though listening itself is translating" (193) Indeed, through the act

of listening the observer translates the song into herself, or rather recreates the song to represent her own personal identity. Ts'ai Yen's music which stems from her endured silence becomes a universal song. So universal that it can accompany barbarian music, which reveals that their music is also universal to her. The barbarian music inspires her words and her words need no translation to be understood. The words and the music carry the message together and it is such a universal message that all understand its sadness even through the centuries.

## CHAPTER VIII

### CONCLUSION

To state that spirituality in *The Woman Warrior* is solely based on Buddhist precepts would be limiting. Just as Kingston, herself, would not be defined as Buddhist, this work would gain even greater perspective if analyzed for elements of Daoism, Confucianism, and even Native American Spirituality, among possibly others. In the article entitled, “The Journey as Meditation: A Buddhist Reading of O Chǒng-Hŭi’s ‘Words of Farewell’,” Hyangsoon Yi, proposes that

The motif of journey is a key to understanding samsāra, one of the central concerns in Buddhism. The term literally means ‘the act of going about, wandering through, coursing along, or passing through a series of states or conditions, specifically the passage through successive states of birth, death and rebirth’.

(58)

In *The Woman Warrior*, in order to relate past and future, universal identity must be present. The narrator persona is not Chinese, nor is she American; she uses Buddhist imagery to collaborate with a myriad of other images in the novel to strip herself of these and other identities, so that her identity can become as universal as Ts'ai Yen's song. As

Kingston remarks in her interview with John Whalen-Bridge when discussing whether or not *The Woman Warrior* is a Buddhist book:

No, I don't think it's a Buddhist book. And I think we always have an identity. I think we're born with identities, but we're not aware of it. That's all. For some people, there comes a time when they're aware of it and they can tinker with it or try to grow it better, or they can grow up...I think in the Buddhist sense, proper selfhood involves the sense that all living beings are connected. I can just feel this ring of connection, or I can also see it as an electrical grid in which we're all connected to it and we're all life. And I guess that is what 'no self' is. It's just...all of us.

(182)

Kingston's book, like herself, encompasses paradox. Her belief of the self, is to show how the self, once revealed is part of a larger connection, a universal connection.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sau-Ling Wong's article *Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior and the Chinese American Autobiographical Controversy* summarizes the conflict while Frank Chin has earned a reputation as the primary voice of dissention regarding the nonfiction label of the memoir and accuses Kingston of violating legends and history with her retellings.

<sup>2</sup> Although never named the book, this is a common reference for the narrator directly associated as representing Maxine Hong Kingston herself. In an interview with John Whalen-Bridge Kingston admits that she never refers to the narrator as Maxine. However, in *In Literary Tricksterism Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Bonnie TuSmith distinguishes the differences between the writer and the persona of the narrator. For the sake of consistency, the narrator is referred to as narrator or narrator persona throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Tripmaster Monkey: Generic Weaving, Comic Fantasy, and Buddhism in Maxine Hong Kingston's Tripmaster Monkey By Xin Zuo. Found in Dissertation Abstracts International, Section A: The Humanities and Social Sciences. (DAIA) 2002 Apr; 62 (10): 3395. Texas Tech U, 2001 *Abstract no:* DA3030385

<sup>4</sup> Shuo gu shi, chuang xin sheng: Xi lun Tang Tingting de Di wu he ping shu by Shan, Dexing Shaun, Te-Hsin, published in *EurAmerica: A Journal of European American Studies* 2008 Sept; 38 (3): 377-413.

<sup>5</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston wrote the Foreword to *The Emergence of Buddhist American Literature*

<sup>6</sup> Manjusri is the bodhisattva personifying wisdom.

<sup>7</sup> Founder of the Soto Buddhism in Japan.

<sup>8</sup> Thich Nhat Hanh is a well known Zen master and founder of Plum Village, a Buddhist community in exile in France. Maxine Hong Kingston has a well established relationship with this Zen master and can often be found quoting his teachings or appearing in the same publications.

<sup>9</sup> Transmigration is a belief that the soul passes from one body to another.

<sup>10</sup> Sakka is the ruler of the lowest level of heaven in Buddhist cosmology.

<sup>11</sup> Kung fu is also known as gung fu. For the sake of consistency, kung fu is used throughout.

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