1

(De)hyphenated Identity

The Double Voice in *The Woman Warrior*

Victoria Chen

San Francisco State University

> *It's difficult to hear the songs of more than one world at any one time. And yet sometimes it's necessary to forget the songs of one world and learn the songs of another, especially if you're a Chinese American.*
>
> —Laurence Yep

Maxine Hong Kingston's (1976) *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* tells the story of an American-born Chinese woman. In her nostalgic and yet critical voice, Kingston narrates her experience of growing up in Stockton, California, in the late 1940s as a second-generation Chinese American daughter. In her dramatic autobiographical style, she describes the ambiguity of living on the interface between two cultural traditions, the pain of defying some elements of her Chinese heritage, and the struggle to find a legitimate private and public voice in American society. In the process of trying to maintain a bittersweet relationship with her cultural heritage and with her Chinese mother, the champion storyteller, Kingston has herself become a powerful storyteller and one of America's most prominent writers. *The Woman Warrior* is one of the most widely studied works in American literature on college campuses. It opened the door for younger generation's Asian American writers to share their voices through writing.

I have chosen to write on the issue of bicultural identity using Kingston's autobiography. I was first introduced to this book when I was sitting in an Asian American literature class at University of California, Berkeley, in the mid-80s. I remember being totally enthralled by Kingston's magical storytelling. I could not put down the book and was captivated by the intricate and playful descriptions of her Chinese American experience that resonated with my own. Even though there are significant differences between the time, places, and families that we grew up with, Kingston's book introduced me to a world in which I could think, talk, and even write about my own bicultural experience, having lived in Canada, Asia, and the States. When I finally had the opportunity to meet Kingston seven years ago, I felt an immediate connection with the storyteller's warrior spirit that runs throughout *The Woman Warrior*. Reading Kingston's book and writing this essay about it provide me with a framework for hope, strength, and vision. I hope that through my interpretation and discussion of her "talk-stories," readers will gain a new critical insight into understanding and appreciating the dual cultural enmeshment that so many Americans experience.

There has been little work done in intercultural communication that has emphasized the importance of learning from literature produced by ethnic Americans. Research conducted from a scientific or critical approach may provide us with intriguing and valuable knowledge about culture and communication; however, we rarely learn how bicultural participants make sense of their personal experiences in their own words.

I begin with the assumption that ethnic American literature provides us with valuable knowledge of and insights into culture and communication from the point of view of those who have lived the experience. Writings by these Americans illuminate us with fresh, different perspectives and interpretations of their cultural experience

within the broader cultural milieu. Autobiographies are particularly enlightening about how authors construct their own cultural identities in response to changing family structures, traditional narratives, and social and historical contexts. As Fischer (1986) discussed, an autobiography is predicated on a vibrant yet ambiguous relation between a sense of self and community:

> Thus what seems initially to be individualistic autobiographical searchings turn out to be revelations of traditions, recollections of disseminated identities and of the divine sparks from the breaking of the vessel. (198)

Fischer also interpreted *The Woman Warrior* as "an archetypical text for displaying ethnicity processes analogous to translations of dreams" (208).

Autobiographical works such as *The Woman Warrior* present both intrigue and confusion to the reader. Kingston had to cross the boundaries of both ethnicity and gender to reach a mainstream audience. We can learn about a writer's work from the response that it generates. A look at some of the critiques of Kingston's widely celebrated book helps us to focus on the issues of cultural identity and bicultural voices. In this essay I use *The Woman Warrior* as my primary source of data to explore the marginalization of Chinese Americans and the possibilities of transcending hyphenated identity. I will first outline three critical views of Kingston's work, from "general" Americans, from Chinese, and from Chinese Americans. I will then discuss the notion of hyphenated identity and explain why I believe the expression "Chinese-American" should be dehyphenated as a means to empower a double vision for individuals who are simultaneously enmeshed in disparate cultural traditions.

Critiques of *The Woman Warrior*

Three broad critical viewpoints of *The Woman Warrior* can be identified. The first comes from the "general" American audience, readers who are not familiar with Chinese or Chinese American culture, as well as those who hope to find the "truth" about Kingston's life and cultural heritage. A typical response from these readers has been that the book is interesting but confusing: Kingston does not write clearly, and it is difficult to tell where her fantasies end and reality begins. While praising the charming, exotic myths and customs described in the work, these critics insist that clarity and certainty are the most important criteria by which to judge the quality of Kingston's autobiography. Furthermore, they feel that the real contribution of Kingston's work lies in how she reveals Chinese culture through her and her mother's storytelling.

One response to these comments would be that writing is a symbolic activity. It is not necessarily intended to reflect the *truth,* even in the genre of autobiography. There are multiple ways to be an ethnic American, as Fischer (1986) stated: "Being Chinese American exists only as an exploratory project, a matter of finding a voice and style" (210). Kingston found a new way to construct her life stories with a bicultural voice that is imbued with her imagination and dreams. The fictionalization of her autobiography conveys the idea that all cultural discourse is made up, fabricated, and reconstructed, always engaging the reader in an ongoing dialogue.

If these critics would be willing to suspend their disbeliefs long enough to fathom Kingston's talk-story, they might discover that Kingston herself, in her double voice, could not sort out which part of her childhood consisted of stories, which part was dreams, and which part was the real historical events that involved her family. As she said,

> Chinese Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is in the movies? (Kingston 1976, 215)

What these readers forget is that Kingston is not Chinese, but a Chinese American who comes from a specific family background and a lifelong struggle between disparate cultural traditions. It is no surprise to the Western eye that Kingston is inevitably "Chinese"; the customs and practices vividly depicted in her book are inexorably alien. Her "Chineseness" tends to overshadow the "Americanness" that she shares with "general" Americans.

The second critique comes from the "real" Chinese such as scholars or readers from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, who have mastered Chinese language(s) and grown up in Chinese societies. Although some of these critics highly praise Kingston's book, a typical response has been that, being Chinese American, she has somehow "misrepresented" Chinese culture by relating only the "negative" and "shameful" aspects of an ancient, laudable civilization that has eluded the American-born, culturally disadvantaged author. They contend that Kingston has rendered descriptions of exotic foods, Chinese superstitions, values, and customs that are not really practiced by many Chinese. They quickly dismiss *The Woman Warrior* as a "poor," "inaccurate," and "degrading" depiction of high Chinese culture in an attempt to pander to mainstream American taste. In some versions of the Chinese translation of *The Woman Warrior,* a few of Kingston's myths and stories were "corrected" by the translators in order to conform to the "Chinese" way of storytelling.

These Chinese scholars further warn readers that not all Chinese women are like Kingston's mother, who displayed all the "virtueless" behaviors of Chinese women—dominant, controlling, strong, and stubborn. American readers, they argue, should realize that, though her family is from a Chinese village, the American-born writer really does not know that much about Chinese culture; that, in fact, she is not even fluent in her Cantonese dialect, let alone Mandarin, the official Chinese language. These critics question Kingston's cultural credibility, despite the obvious fact that her autobiography is not about Chinese culture, nor is it intended to reflect any experiences other than her own.

The third critique comes from other Chinese American writers. Interestingly enough, it stems primarily from Chinese American male writers such as Frank Chin, Benjamin Tang, and Paul Chan. Though they are pleased that this enchanting work has finally made its way into mainstream America, they believe that *The Woman Warrior* does not speak for other Chinese Americans' experiences. Further, these critics scrutinize Kingston's ideology as an ethnic American writer. Kingston grew up in a very peculiar family and community, they contend; many Chinese American girls growing up in this country do not think or behave like her. Despite its widely acclaimed success, they argue that *The Woman Warrior* represents a distorted view of the Chinese American experience—a "fake" Chinese American culture. They further ignore the feminist ideas, insights, and practices found throughout the book and accuse Kingston of buying into the dominant American ideology, "whitewashing" her prose to seek out white acceptance. In their minds, she does not directly challenge the issue of racism that Chinese Americans experience in this society. In other words, she is simply not radical enough.

There is some irony in these accusations, given that, as Kim (1982) pointed out, "Among some contemporary Asian American male writers . . . a strident anti-female attitude can be discerned" (197). In an interview during a visit to the University of California, Santa Barbara, Kingston countered by saying,

> The content of this book is overtly feminist, although it is not the feminists' typically political rhetoric. The feminist side of this work is couched in a dramatic writing style. And the title *The Woman Warrior* was chosen to denote that throughout Chinese literature, there have always been knights and fighters who are women.

The most gratifying responses to *The Woman Warrior,* she claimed, have come from Chinese American women who not only have experienced Kingston's stories in

their own life, but also whose appreciation of her work is not mediated by the expectation of exoticism and foreign sensibility.

If all of us are indeed cultural interpreters, we should realize that the attempt to inscribe one's family life is no more or less than the multilayered reconstruction of what we call cultural experience. The insights into Kingston's work are derived neither from a "scientific" assessment of the veracity of Kingston's and her mother's narratives, nor by generalized comparisons of her personal life experience with that of other Chinese Americans. Rather, her revelations rely on the specificity, uniqueness, richness, ambiguity, playfulness, and sense of irony that characterize Kingston's talk-story. It is through her array of conversations, imageries, and communication practices that we learn about Kingston's bicultural experience and her ongoing struggle for a coherent cultural identity.

Despite all the controversy surrounding *The Woman Warrior,* the real issue of all these critiques is, what is this cultural construct that we call "Chinese American?" Who defines these ethnic Americans? Who describes, articulates, and represents their experiences? In our effort to understand the wide array of such diverse experiences, whose voices are heard, and at the expense of what other voices? Even more significantly, how do we even attempt to understand a Chinese American woman's autobiography when she is constantly weaving her stories (and "lies") from a hyphenated cultural world in which she is simultaneously enmeshed and marginalized?

As for any other ethnic group, there is no single, overall Chinese American perspective from which we can decipher the myths, dreams, and fantasies in Kingston's storytelling. Nor is she attempting to present a coherent set of Chinese American cultural narratives to the reader. Many Asian Americans' experiences can often be characterized by a kind of discontinuity and incoherence, combined with a sense of jarring reality and fragmentation, as depicted by such authors as Okada (1979), Sone (1979), Kadohata (1989), Kingston (1989), Tan (1989), Wong (1989), Ng (1993), Hong (1995), Lim (1996), and Zia (2000). Mixing fictional characters with autobiographical accounts, these writers probe into immigrant family histories and the precarious nature of riding on the hyphen commonly used to describe their identity as ethnic Americans. Although the term "hyphenated identity" may seem appropriate to describe the bicultural experience that Chinese Americans grow up with, I would argue that the hyphen marginalizes these individuals in American society and would strongly advocate the de-hyphenation of Asian Americans.

Hyphenated Identity and Marginalization

> *. . . the paradoxical sense that ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual and that it is often something quite puzzling to the individual, something over which he or she lacks control. Ethnicity is not something that is simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided.*
>
> —Michael M. J. Fischer

One way to conceptualize the term *identity* is not by trying merely to define who we are, but by contextualizing the term within our relationships, practices, actions, and experiences. Because our identity is inexorably bound with what we do and how we make sense of what we do, and the significance of our activities is interpretable only within the context of communication, identity can be viewed as "the actual experience of self in a particular social situation," as explained in *The Homeless Mind* (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973, 76). The authors described a phenomenon of the modern era: the pluralization or segmentation of lifeworlds, whereby the condition of modernity is characterized by the plurality and fragmentation of our identity. Berman (1982) made a similar point: Western cul-

tural history virtually compels modernists to go through life experiences feeling groundless, centerless, and filled with a sense of loss.

It is certainly not unusual that our ideas and cultural endeavors do not always coexist well together; we may even face a sense of contradiction, incoherence, struggle, loss, and unbelonging in our social relationships. Surely all individuals, regardless of ethnicity, may have experienced the crossing of boundaries between lifeworlds at various stages. However, Chinese Americans' bicultural experiences are especially characterized by this pluralization of lifeworlds. It can be argued that these homeless characteristics are accentuated or exacerbated by the fact that Chinese Americans are simultaneously enmeshed between two powerful cultural traditions.

One feature of this phenomenon of pluralized lifeworlds is manifested in the commonly adopted hyphenated designation. For Asian Americans, dual cultural traditions are separated *and* connected by the hyphen that is used to describe their identity. On the one hand, the hyphen reminds them that they have a distinct ethnic heritage and are somehow different from other immigrant Americans who descended from European ancestry but are referred to simply as Americans. On the other hand, the hyphen also draws attention to the fact that they are not Asian foreigners but Americans by birthright, born and raised in this country just like other Anglo Americans.

The hyphen used to designate different Asian American groups thus functions as a paradoxical boundary continuously mediating between the two disparate cultural baggages that these individuals carry, or sometimes abandon. In a larger context, the hyphenated identity of these Americans is also mediated by the "others," the constraints in the social and historical system, the dominant American cultural institutions, and the powerful persons in their life. This multileveled and multidirectional mediation creates an important part of the context by which we can meaningfully address the issue of bicultural identity.

Feminist writer Rey Chow (1990) argued that ethnicity in America is not "voluntary" in character, and that "the consciousness of ethnicity for Asian and other nonwhite groups is inevitably a matter of history rather than of choice" (Chow 1990, 45). We also learn from Richard Rodriguez' (1982) autobiography that one's ethnicity cannot be chosen, just as Rodriguez, an American of Mexican ancestry, did not consciously choose to end his "private" childhood to enter the "public" American life. "The day I raised my hand in class and spoke loudly to an entire roomful of faces," he wrote, "my childhood started to end" (28).

The hyphen lets us assume that the two cultures on either side of the hyphen are somehow connected, that Asian Americans somehow must think and act like Asians in some ways simply because their ethnicity is visually communicated. In *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston, living in the interface between her mother's Chinese myths and her American dreams, poignantly articulated the ambiguous identity of Chinese Americans. Blessed with the warrior woman's courage, Kingston demythologized the assumed continuity between the great culture of China and the American-born Chinese. In her double voice, Kingston told us that there is no such continuity, and that "even now China wraps double binds around my feet" (Kingston 1976, 57). Therefore, she must bridge the gap between China and America. Of course, we see the irony in Kingston's denial of cultural continuity, as the whole book is devoted to the memories of her mother's talk-stories.

Kingston's writing points out that the hyphen used to describe her "apparent" cultural identity only provides some connection that is taken for granted, yet is remote and ambiguous in relation to her ethnic heritage. What she and her siblings actually experienced in their childhood was their inability to penetrate Chinese wisdom and their frustration over their Chinese relatives' unwillingness to explain Chinese folklores and customs. She wrote,

> I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years.

> Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. (Kingston 1976, 216)

One characteristic of hyphenated identity is a sense of being marginalized as one strives for a coherent life script and legitimate Chinese and American voices. In her many stories, Kingston shares such experience with us. For example, her mother often referred to her children as "You American children." She would reprimand them, "Stop being silly. You Americans don't take life seriously" (Kingston 1976, 174). Later, the mother would scold her children, "What do you know about Chinese business? Do as I say" (175). This, of course, requires that children realize they are perceived as Americans who lack knowledge of Chinese culture; but at the same time they are also expected to act like good Chinese children, obeying the parents with total deference. Indeed, this double bind is a common feature of ethnic Americans' dual cultural enmeshment, and many do not fit comfortably in either world.

Kingston complained,

> They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghostlike. They called us a kind of ghost. (Kingston 1976, 213–214)

Non-Chinese are referred to as ghosts in the Chinese way of thinking. Kingston wrote,

> But America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts. . . . Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. (113)

To the Chinese, ghosts symbolize the alien, the strange, the incomprehensible, all with a pejorative overtone. Kingston's parents were often puzzled by their American-born and American-educated children's "foreign" behavior. The mother would complain in exasperation, "You children never tell me what you're really up to. How else am I going to find out what you're really up to?" (118). What is interesting about Kingston's case, as in other Chinese Americans' experiences, is that the "otherness" in their identity is being constructed by their family members, to whom they are ethnically related, as much as by Americans outside their families. In their own Chinese families, Kingston and her siblings were always the "other ghosts," the hopelessly ignorant and Americanized second-generation offspring. For many Chinese American children, however, ghosts are the residue of the fragmentary past, the family history, and the old tradition that seems so foreign to them, all of which must be exorcised and externalized. As Kingston wrote,

> Whenever my parents said "home," they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me. (116)

Being marginal also means being without a community. Just like the mythical Chinese warrior woman Fa Mu Lan, who felt that she must fight the battle away from home until her task and duty were fulfilled, Kingston found it ambivalent, difficult, and at times painful to be a Chinese American:

> I've stopped checking "bilingual" on job applications. I could not understand any of the dialects the interviewer at China Airlines tried on me, and he didn't understand me either. (Kingston 1976, 239)

And

> when I visit the family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I *am* worthy of eating the food. From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally. . . . I refuse to shy my way anymore through our Chinatown, which tasks me with the old sayings and the stories. (62)

Although Kingston's lack of Chineseness is ridiculed by her parents and relatives, in the larger society Chinese Americans are often portrayed as the "others" as well, the unassimilable Asians who are still sometimes told to go back to their own country after generations of settlement in America. Mainstream white America insists that

Kingston writes from an exotic Eastern perspective. In response to her critics, Kingston countered in exasperation,

> *The Woman Warrior* is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the Americanness of it, nor the fact of my own Americanness. (Kingston 1982, 58)

Chinese American women indeed experience a double alienation, from the mainstream American culture because of their race, gender, and ethnic heritage, and from their own Chinese communities because of both their inevitable Americanization and the traditional Chinese marginalization of women. This double-edged social displacement can leave them homeless; Kingston found that she had to escape to survive. Even though the children told one another, "Chinese people are very weird" (Kingston 1976, 183), she still pleaded, "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them" (62). Where is home for individuals like Kingston? And how do they build a new route to "return" home?

Dehyphenated Double Vision

> *Postmodern knowledge . . . refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.*
>
> —Jean François Lyotard

Like many others, I have argued that the identity of Asian Americans is not an *either/or* choice, but a *both/and* transformation; a new kind of integration, or sometimes a lack of integration, of two cultural lifeworlds. One reason that the use of the hyphen to designate Asian Americans has been challenged is that even the third or fourth generations of Asian Americans have a difficult time being accepted as "fullfledged" Americans in white America. Toni Morrison (1992) in *Playing in the Dark* argues that

> Deep within the word "American" is its association with race. . . . American means white, and Africanist people struggle to make the term applicable to themselves with ethnicity and hyphen after hyphen after hyphen. (47)

Although Asian Americans' physical characteristics may remind others that their ancestry is indeed from a remote land, a significant part of their cultural history and knowledge is at the same time deeply rooted in American tradition. The hyphen may give the false impression that there is some middle point along the Asian American continuum that poses the ultimate triumph for these ethnic Americans—to find that golden mean which bridges the gap between Asian wisdom and American dreams, allowing any individual to be fully integrated into and accepted by both worlds.

In reality, many Asian Americans would find it indeed an American dream to conflate the hierarchical structure of the two cultural impositions. The reality is that there is a qualitative disjunction between Asian and American cultural experiences and practices. The imaginary balancing point wrongly assumes the possibility of converging the two cultural worlds into the same sphere of discourse. I have suggested that some of the intergenerational conflicts between the American-born Chinese and their immigrant parents are incommensurate, that there is no shared discourse upon which the conflicting ways of life can be adjudicated or even discussed (Chen 1992). The hyphen thus serves not only as a political boundary between Asian American and white American, but more as the illusion of an imaginary bicultural ideal than as a connective means to a perfectly blended and integrated bicultural reality.

Although I am not presuming that the simple elimination of the hyphen in describing Asian Americans would solve all the issues involved, I do believe that the hyphen is a metaphor which highlights the boundary between minority Americans and white Americans. The hyphen often provides the locus for homelessness while marginalizing the social position of Asian Americans. To dehyphenate Asian Americans would enable us to recognize and accept their ambiguous, unequal, and often

imbalanced cultural worlds, to survive the lack of continuity in their ethnic heritage with a sense of irony, and to invent new, creative ways to experience and appropriate from different cultural traditions. As Fischer (1986) pointed out, the struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is the reinvention and discovery of a vision for the future.

Kingston chose to write her autobiography as a way to sort out her childhood memories. An irony in *The Woman Warrior* is that she opens it with the chapter "No Name Woman" wherein her mother warned her to forget about a disgraceful aunt, whose name should remain unspeakable in the family history: "You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you" (Kingston 1976, 3). Kingston, however, rebelled against her mother's wish and gave this woman's life back: "My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her. . ." (19). "They want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (18).

The end of *The Woman Warrior* realized the making of a storytelling Chinese American daughter. Despite all the "lies" that Kingston accused her mother of telling, she let the lying go on by retelling us her mother's lies and recounting to us her own stories, which in a sense are lies themselves.

> 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 1976, 240)

The family tradition is not only "passed down" but also reinvented and made real:

> Hong Kingston grows up a warrior woman and a warrior-woman storyteller herself. She is the woman warrior who continues to fight in America the fight her mothers fought in China. (Trinh 1989, 134)

Kingston transformed the cultural myths and family stories through her fascinating double voice: "And I have so many words—" (Kingston 1976, 63).

Dreams, imagination, ambiguities, and visions pervade Kingston's storytelling. The entire book is full of ironies and paradoxes beyond the simple contradictions between so-called Eastern and Western philosophies. What makes Kingston's feminist work so intriguing and powerful is the array of rich, specific, intimate, and personal stories that are characterized by intense conflict between the loved ones, ambivalence toward one's own family and cultural heritage, and paradoxical choices made through a double identity, which ultimately refer back to the choices that were left out. As Kingston said, "If one lives long enough with contradictions, they will form a larger vision" (Kingston 1976, 35).

Living on the fault line between cultures and trying to hold them together is like oscillating between choices in a double bind. But if indeed "modern man [*sic*] has suffered from a deepening condition of 'homelessness' " (Berger, Berger, and Kellner 1973, 82), all of us then share this sense of living on the margin at one time or another in a culture that is rapidly changing. Perhaps real people *are* hyphenated people after all.

One way to transcend the double bind that traps Chinese Americans is to build a community in which dehyphenation and double vision are the central practices. The notion of double vision for bicultural individuals points to their ability to see things from multiple perspectives, to live in these paradoxes without being entrapped by them, to appreciate the ambiguity of their bicultural world, and to create new possibilities from these paradoxes. As Kingston explained during an interview, "Even in America there's still some heritage of mythical women. Women must find a new way of being a knight in the U.S." Accompanying this double vision is what W. E. B. Dubois called "double consciousness," multiple cultural insights to construct meanings out of chaos, to deepen our awareness of the plurality of our cultural interpretations and practices. To deny this characterization of ethnic Americans is to neglect an opportunity to transcend their marginal status in this society. Perhaps the

celebration of marginality is the beginning of a joint effort by all ethnic Americans to once and for all center their social marginality.

The idea of double vision takes a critical look at the cultural construction of the metaphorical hyphen. It empowers ethnic Americans to use their marginality to create a new community, a community where their double voice is articulated and heard, a community where one is steeped in several cultural traditions and discourses, and a community where multiple subjectivities are encouraged and even celebrated. One of the important messages in *The Woman Warrior* is that a marginal person derives power and vision from living with paradoxes. As Kingston put it, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (Kingston 1976, 35).

Reconceptualizing one's hyphenated identity is the ultimate act of self-affirmation and cultural continuation. Kingston emphasized the importance of Asian Americans recognizing themselves as warriors instead of victims. Being a true warrior requires wisdom and courage. Even Kingston's act of writing *The Woman Warrior* rode on the precarious and marginalizing hyphen, risking "misinterpretation" and criticism from both sides of the hyphen, thus rendering her vulnerable in both Chinese and American communities. Nonetheless, she was determined to make public the memoirs of her girlhood among ghosts. Writing her stories thus became a powerful source of Kingston's strength as a woman warrior. In presenting her private words and feelings to the American public, Kingston also immortalized the *No Name Woman,* giving new meaning to her life. Fischer (1986) insisted that ethnic memory is and ought to be oriented toward the future, not the past. Writing *The Woman Warrior* dehyphenated Kingston and empowered her with a futuristic vision to transform the alienation and marginalization imposed by the hyphen. Kingston not only continued but even surpassed her mother's talk-story tradition; she found a home in America. As she told her mother,

> We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we're no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot. (Kingston 1976, 125)

Inherent in Kingston's writing is the uncertainty and ambiguity of her bicultural identity, as well as the ongoing, at times turbulent process of trying to make sense of the confusion created by the hyphen. As readers, we feel the pain in her talk-story; but we also taste her triumph. Although Kingston's creative style of writing presents a challenge for the reader to decipher multifaceted cultural imageries, she also found some stories difficult. As she wrote,

> To make my waking life American-normal . . . I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories. (Kingston 1976, 102)

How do we recognize what is American-normal to Chinese American women? What are their dreams? What are Chinese dreams? How do we enter their impossible stories, written in such incommensurate language? How do they do it themselves, being enmeshed in and marginalized by two disparate narratives?

Even Kingston herself was confused:

> I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living. (Kingston 1976, 239)

Perhaps once this sorting begins for us as readers and students of other cultural experiences, we can redefine our questions about cultural identity, ethnicity, marginalization, and America. Without doubt, this is an ongoing effort with no guarantee of ever finding the "correct" realities, just as we never can be sure if Kingston's life stories were not mixed with "lies."

If open-ended ambiguity is an inherent feature of a woman's autobiography, per-

haps it is also what empowers Kingston's double-voiced talk-story. *The Woman Warrior* symbolizes a journey of searching for self-realization and self-creation which remains still unfinished at the autobiography's close. The ultimate feminist moment in *The Woman Warrior* comes at the end, when

> two powerful woman storytellers meet . . . both working at strengthening the ties among women while commemorating and transmitting the powers of our foremothers. At once a grandmother, a poetess, a storyteller, and a woman warrior. (Trinh 1989, 135)

And in Kingston's own words,

> 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 1976, 24)

Maxine Hong Kingston has triumphed as an enchanting storyteller, a true warrior—a Chinese American woman warrior. Her double voice has translated well.

References

Berger, P., Berger, B., and Kellner, H. (1973). *The homeless mind.* New York: Vintage.

Berman, M. (1982). *All that is solid melts into air.* New York: Simon and Schuster.

Chen, V. (1992). The construction of Chinese American women's identity. In Rakow, L. F. (Ed.), *Women making meaning: New feminist directions in communication* (225–243). New York: Routledge, Chapman and Hall.

Chow, R. (1990). Politics and pedagogy of Asian literatures in American Universities. *Differences,* 2 (3), 29–51.

Fischer, M. M. J. (1986). Ethnicity and the postmodern arts of memory. In Clifford, J. and Marcus, G. E. (Eds.), *Writing culture: The poetics and politics of ethnicity* (194–233). Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hong, M. (Ed.). (1995). *Growing up Asian American.* New York: Avon Books.

Kadohata, C. (1989). *The floating world.* New York: Viking.

Kim, E. H. (1982). *Asian American literature.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

——. (1987, Spring). Defining Asian American realities through literature. *Cultural Critique,* 6, 87–111.

Kingston, M. H. (1976). *The woman warrior: Memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts.* New York: Knopf. Reprint New York: Vintage. (All references are to the Vintage edition.)

——. (1982). Cultural misreadings by American reviewers. In Amirthanayagam, G. (Ed.), *Asian and Western writers in dialogue: New cultural identities* (55–65). London: Macmillan.

——. (1989). *Tripmaster monkey: His fake book.* New York: Knopf.

Lim, S. G-L. (1996). *Among the white moon faces.* New York: The Feminist Press at the City University of New York.

Morrison, T. (1992). *Play in the dark: Whiteness and literary imagination.* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Ng, F. M. (1993). *Bone.* New York: Hyperion.

Okada, J. [1957] (1979). *No-no boy.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Rodriguez, R. (1982). *Hunger of memory: The education of Richard Rodriguez.* New York: Bantam.

Sone, M. [1953] (1979). *Nisei daughter.* Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Tan, A. (1989). *The joy luck club.* New York: Putnam.

Trinh, T. M. (1989). *Woman, native, other.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Wong, J. S. (1989). *Fifth Chinese daughter* (rev. ed.). Seattle: University of Washington Press

Zia, H. (2000). *Asian American dreams.* New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux. ✦