# The Nightmarish and Fantastic China in *The Woman Warrior*

Qin Liyan
*Peking University*



*The Woman Warrior* (1976) has become a classic of American literature, and its author Maxine Hong Kingston, whose Chinese name is Tang Tingting 汤亭亭, is now "the most widely taught living American author" (Kingston "Interview by Fishkin" 782). Part of the reason for the book's now canonical status is that many themes in it, including feminism, explorations of the life and psychology of ethnic minorities, especially its intertwining of ethnic identity and female identity, agree well with the focus on gender and race in recent Western academia. The woman's narration in Kingston's book can be placed in a tradition of writings by minority women, such as Jewish woman writer Anzia Yezierska's *Breadgiver*, and black women writers Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes are Watching God* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple*. That American scholar King-Kok Cheung compares *The Woman Warrior* with *The Color Purple* is telling of the canonical status *The Woman Warrior* enjoys and the direction of American academic research on it (162-74).

However, reading *The Woman Warrior* can be a harrowing experience for a Chinese reader. *The Woman Warrior* writes about China. For many Western readers, it contains a trove of Chinese history, Chinese stories, Chinese characters and Chinese emotions. For them, this is China, and they draw their conclusions about China based on it. In 1976, the book won the National Book Critics Circle award for nonfiction and was listed as one of the best non-fictional works by *Time* magazine. That the critics put the book in the category of non-fiction clearly tells us the way they receive it. In one book review, the reviewer writes that, after reading the book, she finds "America, for all its injustice and exploitation, has been kinder than that [meaning China], even to Chinese-Americans, far kinder to most of us," and "these are books to buy, to lend to friends, to give to adolescents," obviously because *The Woman Warrior* confirms the superiority of the United States in the last analysis (Park 594-5). On the

Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée
CRCL SEPTEMBER 2014 SEPTEMBRE RCLC
0319–051x/14/41.3/313 © Canadian Comparative Literature Association

other hand, the numerous obvious mistakes concerning China that are not so obvious for Western readers often make the book an uneasy read for a Chinese reader: Guan Gong becomes in it the Chinese god of war and literature, which he surely is not; famous Chinese poet Du Fu recites a line that he has never written; Confucius says that "[A] husband may kill a wife who disobeys him" (*Woman Warrior* 193). Even if mistakes are allowed in literature (but perhaps not in a non-fictional work), the overall image of China in the book is still foreign to the Chinese. Indeed, *The Woman Warrior* sets in motion debates on the issue of authenticity and on who can speak on behalf of whom. Who is entitled to speak for the Chinese culture in the United States? Does one have to know China enough before writing on China? How much knowledge is enough? In studies of the images and imagination of one country in another country, these are persistent questions. In China, many studies have been done on works by foreign writers who write about China. Is it a legitimate project to talk about the image of China in *The Woman Warrior*? Is it understandable for an autobiographical book that blends myth and fantasy to have many factual mistakes about China? Does Kingston have the duty to check the 'facts' in her work against facts, regarding who Guan Gong is, and whether Confucius or the poet Du Fu has said something that she quotes them as saying? Such fact-checking can be easily done, if she has the will and feels the need to do so.



Many Chinese-American writers get their knowledge of China mainly from their families, Chinese communities and Chinese schools in the United States. Their parents are the main channel through whom they know about Chinese culture, and are also the most important yardstick with which these authors judge China. Thus, in such books by Chinese-American women as *The Woman Warrior* or *The Joy Luck Club*, recognition or denial of China is often intertwined with the writers' attitude toward their mothers. At the same time, Chinese-American writers know about China in an American cultural context. This particular way of knowing China outside of China shapes their perspective. Kingston is sometimes aware of the limited nature of this perspective. In *The Woman Warrior*, she writes that "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 the movies?" (6). However, such self-consciousness is much too rare in *The Woman Warrior*. An American scholar believes that the criticisms of Kingston by some Chinese-Americans imply that life about an ethnic group has only one definitive version, presumably and preferably a favourable one (Wong 4). Here, we may ask, when China becomes an object to be written about or talked about, a resource to be claimed and employed, is any version acceptable and understandable? Is there a platform on which China can talk back?

With regard to gender, *The Woman Warrior* attacks patriarchy. With regard to race, it describes the experience of Chinese-Americans of being prejudiced against and being repressed in the United States and its psychological consequences. Feminism

in the book is pointed mainly against the patriarchal tradition in China. In the book, many parts about China are full of contempt and anger. If authored by a "purely" foreign writer, or if we view Kingston only as an American writer, it is easy for scholars to analyze and criticize the book, employing such theoretical tools as anti-orientalist critique. However, since Kingston is a Chinese-American woman, it seems difficult to criticize her, especially when the same text also attacks racism in the U.S. and tries to give a voice to Chinese-Americans. Indeed, the negative descriptions of China in *The Woman Warrior* can be placed within a long tradition of writing about China in the West, contains some persistent themes within that tradition, and wittingly or unwittingly agrees with a largely negative image of China in the American public at the time of its publication. Among these familiar themes are the cruelty of the Chinese, the anonymous and benighted Chinese mob, and the atrocities of the communist regime. The book represents the Chinese as prone to violence against women, animals, and children. The agent of violence is often not an individual person, but the nameless mob. Unlike the mob in the works of modern Chinese writer Lu Xun, Kingston's mob does not merely stare, but directly participates in violence. In addition to the violence instigated by traditional Chinese culture, Kingston also adds the violence of the communist state. She writes how relatives back in China report that other relatives are killed off by the communists, often in strange ways. In one episode, the communists give their axes to some old ladies and say "go and kill yourself, you are useless" (*Woman Warrior* 50). Published in 1976 during the cold war, the book's condemnation of Chinese culture and communism agrees well with the West's hostility against China in that era.



The traditional Chinese culture that we find in *The Woman Warrior* is mainly patriarchal. In the book, in 'real' China, woman is without rights, without voice, oppressed and repressed, persecuted and killed by the Confucian system. Such descriptions also go along with the image of the Chinese women in the West. Recent scholarship has challenged this image of traditional Chinese women as mere victims of a patriarchal society and depicted a more complex picture (Ko; Mann; Lu). The traditional Chinese women that emerge from these books are no longer passive and suffering, but are active participants and shapers of Chinese culture. Yet, the marginalized, suffering image of Chinese women still persists, and *The Woman Warrior* gives the image a more poignant and shrill twist.

In *The Woman Warrior*, when China becomes a psychological burden to the maturing female protagonist, and when she judges China as backward and cruel against a 'modern', i.e., Western, standard, Chinese culture becomes a part of her that she tries to get rid of but simply cannot, a hereditary disease, a nightmare from which she hopes to wake up. In the book, China is a place that the protagonist has not visited and does not want to visit, because there her father would sell her and her sister, and there he could have two or three wives (*Woman Warrior* 99). In the protagonist's identity, torn between the Chinese and the American, China belongs to the unconscious, sometimes unspeakable and often unpleasant. At these moments, for

the protagonist, the Chinese become 'they', an alien group to be condemned and even cursed: "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" (*Woman Warrior* 185; emphasis mine). Here, China imposes shackles on the protagonist, from which she struggles to break away.

Yet the Chinese dream, sometimes nightmarish, can also be fantastic. When Kingston writes about a situation where a woman can achieve full freedom, she again places it in China. Thus, China in *The Woman Warrior* seems to be dual: on the one hand, the more realistic and more probable China, nightmarish, where women are oppressed and can only gain power with suicide, madness or magic; on the other, the fantastic China where women are greatly empowered. However, as the following pages will show, this seeming duality is just two sides of the same coin.

*The Woman Warrior* depicts many Chinese women who are not just diverse creations of a novelist, but carry a persistent purpose. In spite of the number of women characters in the book, it has one main protagonist: the Chinese-American woman living in the interstices between China and the United States, trying to explore her many possibilities in the past and in the future. This protagonist searches for characters in family stories and the Chinese culture to be her examples, and these characters become the women warriors (Fa Mulan, the aunt who commits suicide, and the protagonist's mother). She also finds weak women that she does not want to end up like, who have no voice, no words, no opinion, and no control over their life. The women warriors are forerunners and inspirations for the protagonist, while the weak women serve to warn her of the consequences of being weak, lest she become them. The protagonist only pays attention to women who can be employed as positive or negative spiritual resources for her.



We can compare the two women warriors that the book represents in its first two chapters to see how the image of China unfolds, how two drastically different Chinas are presented, and what fates await women in these two Chinas. The two women warriors are respectively Kingston's aunt in chapter one, titled "No Name Woman," and Mulan in chapter two, titled "White Tigers." The "No Name Woman" chapter tells how, after Kingston's aunt commits adultery or is raped and her family is terrorized and raided by fellow villagers, she kills herself at night with her newborn baby. In the Mulan story, Mulan becomes a martial artist and later marches at the head of an army, kills the emperor and the local lord.

The aunt's story in "No Name Woman" is positioned in real historical time (after 1924) and located in a real place (a village in Guangdong), while the Mulan story happens in a vague China, undefined and un-locatable in time and space, with the only ascertainable place in the chapter being Beijing, where the emperor is. However, while the details are extremely difficult to pin down, the background of the story is still recognizably China. Reality and fiction are often intertwined in Kingston's works. These two chapters both start with words narrated by the mother, and where the mother's narrative leaves off, the imagination of the first-person narrator begins.

This narrator tries out different possibilities to the development of the story, and eventually settles for one version. In the first two pages of "No Name Woman," Kingston quotes the mother directly with quotation marks. However, the narrative by the mother, pragmatic, dry and didactically-aimed, cannot satisfy the first-person narrator's curiosity. The mother says that Kingston's father used to have a sister, who became pregnant when her husband was away. Their home was attacked by local villagers. After giving birth to a child, she jumped into the well with the child. The mother's narrative stops here, and she has only two sentences to describe the aunt's death: "[Y]our aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well" (*Woman Warrior* 5). Based on these meager 'facts', Kingston fleshes out her imagination and creates the image of the aunt as her predecessor and role model.

The mother's telling provides only a framework that can be rewritten in different directions, and we see the direction that Kingston prefers. She imagines various versions, but eventually settles for one version as the 'definitive' one, leaving in the text traces of her imagining process. The process shows the tension between two of her intensions: condemning patriarchy on the one hand, and creating a woman with full agency of her own on the other. If the patriarchal control is absolute, then heterosexual love is impossible in China. Thus, in the very beginning, Kingston imagines the relationship between the aunt and the man who impregnates her as rape. The man controls and coerces her, and the aunt has no other choice but obedience. He is very probably among the mob which attacks the aunt's house, and it may even be he who organizes the attack. This version, although good for revealing the crimes perpetrated by the patriarchal society, leaves the aunt a passive victim, incapable of being an inspiration and encouragement to the first-person narrator. The even stronger urge to find a predecessor and an inspiration leads Kingston to change her way of constructing the aunt's story. In this new version, she makes the aunt fall in love with a man, whose name the aunt does not reveal so as to protect him. She silently gives birth to the child by herself, and then commits suicide. Here, the aunt has more initiative and is more rebellious. She dares to love another man outside of her arranged marriage, and she dares to cultivate desire and dream for a man, which is itself transgression. After confirming that this direction is satisfying, the story of the aunt begins to settle down, and those words that are markers of uncertainty—"may have" or "must have"—are changed almost imperceptibly into the past tense, which is a tense for something that did happen. Conjecture thus becomes reality.



Likewise, the story of Mulan, "White Tigers," begins with what the mother once told the first-person narrator. What is different is that this time, the mother's words are not in the form of direct quotations but of indirect speech, leaving much broader room for the imagination and re-writing of the narrator herself. The author's imagination of the Mulan story also begins as conjectures with such markers as "would," and eventually slides into the past tense.

Both the aunt and Mulan are women warriors, one familial, the other national.

Both take revenge through violence. However, in the historically real China and in the fantastic China, what the woman warrior can accomplish is totally different. The aunt takes revenge against the mob that attacks her, and through it, against traditional Chinese culture, but her way of revenge is paradoxical and dubious. She kills herself and her child, and resists through silent violence inflicted upon herself. One can hardly tell whether it is revenge or self-destruction, and the effects of her suicide are presumably very limited. In contrast, Mulan's revenge is on a national scale and of national significance, not for personal hatred or grudges, but to destroy the political system and the powerful men who oppress women and the poor, to get rid of them in the name of the people. In the end, Mulan emerges easily triumphant. The rebellion of the aunt is still passive. She transgresses, but without much self-awareness. Mulan, on the other hand, has determined goals, an iron will and a career that is impossible for women in the aunt's world. The aunt's rebellion is still linked to marriage, love, family and child, yet in the case of Mulan, these traditional relationships that define women all become marginal. What is most important for Mulan is her career. In the chapter "White Tigers," Mulan moves in a space of activities much wider than the aunt's. The revenge of the aunt still has a tinge of self-destruction, while Mulan's revenge is pure and achieved through war. War has often been deemed a space specific to the male, but Mulan not only takes part in war, as the Mulan in Chinese traditional literature does, but is also a leader and general. She is not only herself liberated and free, but she liberates many other weak women imprisoned by men. She wears man's clothing after joining the army, and her individual strength, her capabilities to lead an army and her life centered around a career also make her like a man.



Many sharp contradictions we find in the aunt's story are avoided or circumvented in the Mulan story, which presents a much more powerful Chinese woman and a Chinese culture which is very supportive of women and which provides space for women's activities. In the aunt's story, we find demonic villagers, who are representatives of the patriarchal Chinese culture and its violence. When attacking the aunt's home, the villagers all wear masks, faceless and nameless, a sheer image of collective terror. The aunt breaches their moral codes, which is equivalent to an attack on them, so they want to exact their punishment. The family of the aunt, a typical, real Chinese family in the eyes of Kingston, colludes with the mob and is even a crueler persecutor than the mob. The mob inflicts its violence on the aunt's body, while the cold violence of her family is inflicted on her eternal soul, which is more important to her. Her family adopts the strategy of the reverse of ancestral worship, and forbids family members to remember her or to say her name, so that she will be completely forgotten and erased from memory, and her soul would be 'homeless'. In the end, the aunt and her child are alone facing the night, without any other support. Here, Kingston's view of the Chinese family is extremely grim and condemnatory, and there are sharp, irresolvable conflicts between women and their family, community and traditional Chinese culture.

Yet in the Mulan story, such conflicts are often safely averted, making Mulan a comfortable member of the community, representing its interests and gaining its approval and praise. The woman and the community become one collective 'we', while gender conflicts are often converted into class conflicts. Yet the circumvention of the conflicts itself shows glimpses of tension and anxiety. In this story, Mulan trains as a martial artist from 7 to 22 years old, in mountains far away from her parents. Thus, in the most formative years of her life, she is a girl without parents, without family and without community, which, for her, is not traumatic but emancipatory. In the mountains, Mulan has two masters, one male, the other female, but Kingston is quick to point out that, to the male master, the female master is "a sister or a friend rather than a wife" (*Woman Warrior* 28). This emphasis on the relationship between the masters shows that Kingston is more concerned about the status of the woman: the old woman master is not positioned as a wife or a mother, the two masters are not surrogate parents to Mulan, and she is not their child. The three are not structured as a family. These strategies ensure that Mulan is free of the familial bond. With the physical distance between her, her biological parents and her village community, she does not need to struggle with them and is beyond the socialization process of women in China. This does not mean that she has no knowledge of them at all. From a gourd of the masters, Mulan, while still in the mountains, can see her parents, but the knowledge is one-directional. She knows what they are doing, but they do not know where she is and are thus unable to intervene in her life. Yet even with this safe distance, the relationship with her parents still shows signs of tension. She calls them in her gourd, but "they were in the valley and could not hear me" (*Woman Warrior* 22). The psychological distance with the parents is translated into reasonable and explicable spatial distance, but all the same, the distance is there. The two parties of the difficult relationship are not reconciled, but separated from each other so that conflicts will not arise. Then, when Mulan returns home, her parents engrave words on her back, which could have been the most direct form of torture. Yet the engraving of the words empowers Mulan, who shares the same goals with her parents, and hence the colour of torture is diluted and downplayed. Indeed, the relationship between Mulan and her parents is now that of a son. In the "White Tigers," Mulan used to have a brother, who, in the later text, is nowhere to be found, and she and her parents do not seem to have been saddened by this because she has taken the place of the son.



In addition to the support of the parents, the villagers are also totally supportive of Mulan, not only as a soldier, but as a general. In contrast with the villagers in the aunt's story, they do not have doubt or prejudice against Mulan, but only respect and obedience. The ending of the Mulan story is also different from the aunt's story. The aunt is a woman without a name, erased from the memory of the family and the clan, while Mulan, even when living, has already become a legend. Kingston also makes Mulan equally successful in terms of marriage. The aunt in "No Name Woman" is trapped in an arranged marriage, while Mulan is married to a childhood friend. In

the text, the image of Mulan's husband is vague, who, as she assumes male power, seems to become feminized. When Mulan is in charge of the army, it is her husband who visits her and who takes the child away soon after it is born, as if the sole purpose of his appearance in the army is for her to have a child, and he conveniently disappears after that function is fulfilled.

However, the seemingly absolute freedom of Mulan is incomplete in many subtle ways. She only has power in the army when dressed as a man. Thus, to Kingston, Mulan's real identity as a woman, though fully acknowledged and accepted by her family and local villagers, is not acceptable to the Chinese community at large: "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students" (*Woman Warrior* 39).[1] As far as its knowledge goes, the army led by Mulan is not obeying a 'woman', but a 'man', a very 'normal' situation. After her adventures in the public world of revenge and of men, Mulan returns home, kneeling in front of her parents-in-law, saying that "[N]ow my public duties are finished...I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons" (*Woman Warrior* 45). It is noteworthy that she hopes specifically for sons, not daughters, belying the underlying conflict between her on one side, and Chinese culture and her gender identity on the other. With her actions, Mulan challenges the norm concerning what a woman can do in China, yet she does not violate the overall gender structure in Chinese society.



Thus, in *The Woman Warrior*, nightmares happen in China, and fantastical dreams are also located in China. This may seem to suggest the ambivalence and duality of Kingston's imagination of China. Nevertheless, within the duality, the aunt's story is much more realistic, while the supernatural elements of the Mulan story—birds leading the way for Mulan, rabbits sacrificing themselves for her, and flying swords manoeuvred by her will—clearly mark it as 'unrealistic'. The Mulan story invites a Freudian interpretation. We can take these supernatural elements as traces or hints left by Kingston, who expects the reader to read the Mulan story as a legend, a fantasy. It is a protracted, fully-developed dream, packed with meticulous details. In the dream, the first-person narrator is herself the strong and powerful Mulan. Back to reality, this narrator is again fragile, hurt, repressed, almost the opposite of Mulan. Thus, the freedom enjoyed by the woman in the Mulan story is shown as impossible in real China, and the acute desire to tell such a desire-fulfilling story is itself a symptom of its impossibility. A dark and negative Chinese 'reality' is the underlying, unspoken text in the Mulan story. The Mulan story tells us what Kingston desires China to be, which is the reverse projection of the 'real' China in her mind. The supernatural elements and the moments of anxiety—the distance with parents, the male clothing, the final return to the family role—are gaps that Kingston leaves in her fantasy, so that through them, we can glimpse the gloomy Chinese reality beneath.

*The Woman Warrior* has been canonized in the West. What is its reception in China? On this matter, Kingston is very confident and proud, saying, "so I have a place in the 'canon' of Chinese literature. I learned this when I visited China. They

consider me 'one of them.' My name in China is Hong Ting Ting. They feel that they cut off all their roots during the Cultural Revolution…They see me as one who was put in a very privileged position and continued writing on 'roots,' and they feel that I saved some of their roots for them" ("A *Melus* Interview" 790). When talking about contemporary Chinese literature, she obviously positions herself as an 'American writer' with a sense of superiority: "[T]hen I thought, I know why they invited us American writers there, especially me, because they felt that I was working in free conditions. Here I was in America, where I had free speech and free press. And I spent this lifetime working on roots. So what they were saying was that I was their continuity. And they wanted help in figuring out where to go" ("Interview with Fishkin" 65).

In actual fact, the influence of Kingston was very limited in China, which can be in no way compared to her status in the U.S. as a bestselling writer. Chinese scholars sometimes give allowances for Kingston's misreading of China. Wei Jingyi makes a distinction between 'intended' and 'unintended' misreading of China in *The Woman Warrior* (82), and Qin Sujue gives understanding to Kingston's intentional misreading: "what Chinese-American literature embodies can only be American culture…. Their basic aim of writing is to achieve equal rights in the political reality that is American society, not to propagate Chinese culture, Chinese history and Chinese tradition" (146-7). In an age of post-deconstructionist theories, misreading is surely no longer a problem. Yet, a systematic negative reading is often symptomatic of a discursive politics and power relationships. Even in an American context, to what extent can a systematic negative reading of Chinese culture enhance the understanding of the mainstream American culture toward the Chinese-Americans? Sinologist Bonnie S. McDougall praises Kingston for *The Woman Warrior*, saying that "the most notable feature is the author's extraordinarily powerful sympathetic imagination" (192). Yet I have to say that, while Kingston is imaginative when describing Chinese culture, she certainly is not very sympathetic. It seems that Chinese readers and Chinese-American writers still have a long way to go toward deeper and mutual understanding and sympathy.



## Notes

1. This is against traditional Chinese stories about female generals and women disguised as men to pursue their studies.

## Works Cited

Cheung, King-Kok. " 'Don't Tell': Imposed Silences in *The Color Purple* and *The Woman Warrior*." *PMLA* 103.2 (1988): 162-74. Print.

Kingston, Maxine Hong. 1975. Interview by Shelley Fishkin. "Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston." *American Literary History* 3.4 (1991): 782-791. Print.

---. Interview by Marilyn Chin. "A MELUS Interview: Maxine Hong Kingston." *MELUS* 16.4, *Toward the Multiculture* (1989-1990): 57-74. Print.

---. *The Woman Warrior*. New York: Random House, 1975. Print.

Ko, Dorothy. *Teachers of the Inner Chambers: Women and Culture in Seventeenth-Century China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 1994. Print.

Lu, Weijing. *Truth to Her Word: The Faithful Maiden Cult in Late Imperial China*. Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2008. Print.

McDougall, Bonnie S. "Review of *The Woman Warrior*." *The Australian Journal of Chinese Affairs* 7 (1982): 191-3. Print.

Mann, Susan. *The Talented Women of the Zhang Family*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: U of California P, 2007. Print.



Park, Clara Claiborne. "Ghosts on a Gold Mountain." *The Hudson Review* 33.4 (1980-1981): 589-95. Print.

Qin Sujue 秦苏珏. "Confusion and Reflection: Cultural Misreading in Chinese-American Literature with *The Woman Warrior* as a Key Example" (困惑与反思——以《女勇士》为例谈美国华裔文学中的文化误读). *Contemporary Literature* 当代文坛 5 (2007): 144-7. Print.

Wei Jingyi 卫景宜. "The Discursive Function of Traditional Chinese Culture in the English Works by Chinese-Americans: Interpreting *The Woman Warrior*" (中国传统文化在美国华人英语作品中的话语功能：解读《女勇士》). *Chinese Comparative Literature* 中国比较文学 4 (1999): 73-85. Print.

Wong, Sau-Ling Cynthia. "Necessity and Extravagance in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: Art and the Ethnic Experience." *MELUS* 15.1, *Ethnic Women Writers* V (1988): 3-26. Print.