



Research Paper

## "I Alone devote pages of papers to her": Kingston's Blurring of Generic and Gender Boundaries in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*

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**ABSTRACT:** *Maxine Hong Kingston's first two novels are set in a "Border Country" that is situated at the intersection between 'The Gold Mountain' and 'China'. The first text spans the life experience of the female Chinese subject ( mythical, family member , immigrant) as well as all the male descendants , (immigrants) who travelled to the gold mountain. Kingston writing aims to subvert an old tradition of silence in the two continents. First, the two books begin with instances of obstructing communication. In The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid warns her daughter —You must not tell anyone (11). In China Men, old women threaten to sew Tang Ao's lips shut warning him —The less you struggle, the less it'll hurt (1). Second both novels close by casting one's voice while having another —I'll listen and recognize them. Therefore the purpose of this article is to delineate the border space where gender and generic boundaries blur and the Chinese/American subjects operate within moveable limits.*

**Keywords:** *Crossing boundaries- gender- genre- break the silence- moveable boundaries auto/biography-fiction -storytelling- history – identity.*

Maxine Hong Kingston's first two novels, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are retrospective prose narratives that focus on Kingston's memoirs both as a girl among ghosts and as a second generation Chinese immigrant in America. She retrieves biographies of her family, which intersect with her own autobiography, thus transgressing time and space boundaries. Indeed old biography that takes place in old China intersect with another one in Stockton. Likewise her male forebears' biographies relate different places with both ancient and modern times. Therefore —the present and the past, the fictive and the factual: boundaries may frequently be transgressed in postmodern fiction, but there is never any resolution of the ensuing contradiction (Hutcheon 72).

Kingston's two texts further cross the boundaries between —the fictive and the factual. In *China Men*, she so tellingly represents the acts; quotas and driving out the Chinese were subject to. This factual account is the theory that generates the text and the fiction is an illustration of that theory. Furthermore, the narrator subverts the authority of —The Laws— by representing the untold histories. Another dimension in crossing boundaries and subverting the conventions is writing 'the' storytelling. Kingston revises, recreates and writes oral stories. Hence storytelling is a technique which begins and ends the two novels. "There is no —resolution of the ensuing contradiction as Kingston asserts a self that is —not singular but several, not fixed but fluid, shifting, dialogic intersubjective, communicative, communal" (Zamora 4). Therefore in this paper I will try to show that in the two texts biographies interpenetrate autobiographies, historical facts account for and theorise narrative fiction and an oral tradition is translated into a written one.; the novelist deviates from multiple conventions and crosses generic boundaries.

Linda Anderson asserts in her book *Autobiography* that since the eighteenth century autobiography has been recognized as a literary genre and a testing ground for controversies about authorship, selfhood, representation and the division between fact and fiction (1). Besides autobiography being a ground for multiple controversies, "it is —[a] retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the development of his personality" (Philippe Lejeune cited in Anderson 2). Thus the autobiographer writes the life stories of her female and male ancestors in the two texts, blurring the boundaries between biography and autobiography.

In the first text, there are five narratives—*The No Name Woman*, *Fa Mu Lan*, *Brave Orchid*, *Moon Orchid* and *Ts'ai Yen*— all of which interpenetrate one another. In the second text the stories of the father both

in China and in America are an extension of those of the grandfather in the Sandalwood Mountains or the Sierra Nevada Mountains. Consequently the biographies shape the author's autobiography in *The Woman Warrior*, just as the grandfather's stories inform and shape those of the father and his children. Kingston's autobiography is articulated through her past experiences. Thus recreating the past can be viewed as a healing process through which Kingston writes the biographies of her relatives and that of Chinese Americans as an ethnic minority; they therefore interfere with her autobiography, blurring the boundaries between biography and autobiography, as well as family stories and those of the narrator.

In recreating the life experiences from childhood to young womanhood, Kingston refers to the past. And if we are to accept the Freudian view that —the past creates the foundation for the present and the future and illuminates the flaws, diversions and normal pattern for individual growth (cited in Anderson 61), Kingston's flaws and diversions may be the attack on the sixth grader, her identity crisis in kindergarten (black covering) and her silence at school, at home and at work. Consequently the past enters the present. Yet Anderson states that remembering is not recalling a lost event, it is finding a —link in a chain which was previously missing (61). In recounting her personal experiences, Kingston fills in a blank page in her personal and family history.

Kingston's autobiography is composed of her past experiences and feelings. —The past asserts Anderson —lying dormant within the subject, comes from outside his/her lived experience as a violent shock (61). Hence Kingston's list of over two hundred things to tell her mother makes her —throat hurt constantly, vocal chords taut so snapping (*The Woman Warrior* 179) and shouts —items...ten years old already (181). In telling her past experiences that were lying dormant within her she discovers that the telling grows till she expresses herself assertively before being a story teller. Consequently, Kingston's autobiography can be seen as a healing process. She develops from a silent girl listening to her mother's admonition —not to tell to a storyteller, articulating her life story.

The first text, comprising five narratives of five characters ranging from relatives to the mother to the mythical figures, is a text that crosses the boundaries of biography and autobiography. Indeed, Sidonie Smith contends that the two lives of *The No Name Woman* and Kingston interpenetrate and cross narrative boundaries in the text as Kingston weaves childhood experiences in the immigrant community with the imaginative biography of her aunt (156). While reconstructing her aunt's story, Kingston retrieves childhood memories of her parents both in China and in America; as well as the immigrant's life.

Moreover, in recreating her aunt's biography, Kingston considers —my aunt my forerunner (The *Woman Warrior* 15). Hence this ancestor paves the way to —cross[ed] boundaries not delineated in space (ibid). The aunt is acting as if she —could have a private life, secret and apart from them (19), which Kingston does with a vengeance. Kingston crosses many boundaries in her life—as portrayed in the book. She not only refuses arranged marriages but also subverts the traditional role assigned to women while carrying out her studies and having a career. She crosses boundaries not delineated by her ancestors anywhere, since she acknowledges her aunt's existence and —devote[s] pages of paper to her (22). The penetration of the aunt's biography with Kingston's autobiography is reflected in the latter's statement that —Unless I see her life branching into mine she gives me no ancestral help (16). Consequently, though their life stories are different and separate across time and space they go the same way of rebellion, self-assertion.

Furthermore, in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston not only tells her autobiography and family biographies but also constructs the biography of a mythical figure Fa Mu Lan. Then the identities of the swordswoman and Kingston interpenetrate until biography becomes autobiography (Smith 157). Fa Mu Lan's biography starts with the narrative voice of Kingston labelling Fa Mu Lan as she —she was combing her hair...she teased it ...she asked... (The *Woman Warrior* 25). Then we have the 'I' of the narrator —I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story (25). After this, we find Fa Mu Lan's 'I' narrating her training, fighting and returning home after her —public duties are finished (47). And the section ends with narrative voice of Kingston. What follows from this is that the swordswoman and Kingston —are not so dissimilar (53). The switch and doubleness of the personal pronoun 'I' between the two selves reflect the resemblance between them. Kingston asserts —what we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are report a crime and report to five families. The reporting is the vengeance-not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words (53)

Sidonie Smith's reading of this declaration as an appropriation of the pen, that surrogate sword and her public inspiration of the story of her childhood among ghosts as reporting the crime is quite right (160). The critic compares the sword used by the swordswoman to Kingston's pen that reports the crime and writes her memoirs among ghosts. Reporting to five families stands for Kingston's first text, being composed of five sections in which she inscribes her childhood memoirs. In the —Introduction: Moveable Boundaries-Public Definitions and Private Lives, Lois Parkinson Zamora declares that —individual identity...depends upon the recuperation (or creation) of a stable communal past (3). Accordingly Kingston's autobiography and family biographies spring from her quest to assert her individual identity through reconstructing a shared past.

Ultimately, the family biographies shape the autobiography of Kingston since one life branches into another and they constitute a —stable communal past. Kingston rewrites the stories the way she likes them to happen —with new dialogue, feelings and resolutions of episode (Giddens 72).

Thus, we notice elements of certainty and possibility in reconstructing the family biographies. In this respect Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong shows that the text moves from the subjunctive to the declarative (32) and cites three instances. First, the No Name Woman's story begins with *'perhaps'* and *'could have been's'* (ibid). Likewise, Fa Mu Lan's myth's is described through the recurrence of possible conditions —the call would come from a bird...The bird would cross the sun...I would be a little girl of seven (ibid).Third, we are given two accounts of Brave Orchid's encounter with the sitting ghost, which Wong deems cannot have been definitive as the event happened before the birth of the daughter narrator (ibid).

Furthermore, Moon Orchid's story is not a straightforward narrative. Kingston rewrites the story told by her brother to one of her sisters who informed her. Thus it is —a third hand fictionll (Wong 32). There is a distance between the reconstruction and what happened. Consequently the recurrence of —I would've told...I would've gone...There must've been more...she must've said (The Woman Warrior 147). Hence Kingston's reconstructing of her family biography reflects her personality andhyphenated identity. Kingston's autobiography is not a chronological account of her life. It is so engrossed with family biography that the boundaries between biography, autobiography, facts and myths blur. Hence, The Woman Warrior is —recollection, speculation, reflection, mediation, imagination (Wong 32). Furthermore the referential grounding of The Woman Warrior speculates Wong, is presented in a misleading manner since a few public places and events in the —outer world are recognisable from what we know concerning the author's life (32). Consequently, Kingston uses autobiography but deviates from it.

Furthermore both The Woman Warrior and China Men are —the kind of work that sits on the borderline between fiction and personal history, either biography or autobiographical (Hutcheon 161). This said, in the two novels there are fiction, biography and autobiography. The three genres exist, yet the distinction between them raises the controversy to which we add breaking the generic boundaries between history and fiction. Since —autobiography as Julia Swindells points out —now has the potentialto be the text of the oppressed and the culturally displaced, forging a right to speak both for and beyond the individual (cited in Anderson 103-4), today, we know the history of the Chinese and their descendants in America —through the traces of its historical events: the archival material, the narrative of witness...and historians (Hutcheon,1988 36) all of which is present in China Men. Kingston represents the acts, quotas and driving out the Chinese was subject to, and ironically attacks and subverts their authority. Besides she represents the untold, hidden histories in The Laws'

The Laws a middle chapter in China Men, lists the Chinese exclusionary acts and quotas that defined the American attitude toward the Chinese for one century: from 1868to 1978 . Kingston attacks the dominant culture's laws against various issues as naturalization, immigration, education, extending and repealing exclusion acts, ownership and refugee's entrance and tax-paying (fishing tax, miner's tax, police tax, and a queue tax). Consequently the description of the Chinese experience —represents not just a world of fiction (...) but also a world of public experience (Hutcheon 1988 36) is what Linda Hutcheon labels as historiographicmetafiction.

To analyse Kingston's crossing the boundaries between fiction and history;I will be using the New Historicist methodology of reading, which does not recognize the limits between history and fiction. Indeed New Historicism, according to Stephen Greenblatt in his article —Resonance and Wonderbelieves that the selves that are —conditioned by the expectations of their class, gender, religion, race and national identity are constantly effecting changes in the course of history ( 74). Therefore history is constructed and produced by a subject who is already the outcome of an entire cultural organism (class, gender, religion, race...) Moreover, Greenblatt—who prefers cultural criticism or cultural poetics to New Historicism considers —writing that was not engaged, that withheld judgments, that failed to connect the present with the past seemed worthless (76). In this context, Kingston's writings are situated since they are engaged with resisting all forms of constraints imposed on the Chinese subject. Likewise in the two texts the past is weaved within the present regarding family stories, myths, biographies and history..

China Men, a historiographicmetafictional work then, can be seen as portraying —the histories(in plural) of the losers as well as the winners, of the regional(and colonial) as well as the centrist, of the unsung many as the much sung few and I might add, of women as well as menll (Hutcheon,1989 66). For instance, throughout the text, Kingston describes a pillar of patriarchal structure—The Laws——in which sexism becomes allied with racismll (Goellnicht 196) .In The Woman Warrior and China Men, two postmodern texts, history is the theory which generates the fiction. Brenda K. Marshal defines history: History in the post-modern moment becomes histories and questions. It asks: whose history gets told? In whose name?For what purpose? Postmodernism is about histories not told, retold, untold. Histories forgotten, hidden, invisible, considered

unimportant, changed eradicated. It's about the refusal to see history as linear, as leading straight up to today in some recognizable pattern. (5).

Consequently Kingston is telling the histories of the oppressed to elucidate the consequences of the acts, quotas and driving out the Chinese were subject to. Besides histories of the —Chinese ambassador, humiliated by the immigration officers, killed himself (China Men 152), —no other race or nationality was excluded from applying for citizenship (153). Also —the only California fishermen forced to pay fishing and shellfish taxes were the Chinese (151), are histories untold, forgotten and invisible. Kingston devotes one section to represent the histories and answer the questions. In this section, we encounter the laws that restrict male immigration and forbid females. They create —bachelor Chinatowns devoid of women (Goellnicht 191), as well as forcing the Chinese to take up jobs usually assigned to women, since they are not allowed to own estates or land, to be hired in official jobs or to have business certificates. The Chinese also cannot marry American women—for they cause them to lose their citizenship—and Chinese females cannot immigrate. Hence the discriminatory acts join sexism with racism.

The Laws' section is a —purely factual account of the discrimination levelled against the Chinese who come to America, for its accurate record of the legal history presented through —substantial documentary material (Sledge cited in Goellnicht 196). In this recording of the legal history we get —the histories (in the plural) of the losers as well as the winners (Hutcheon 1989, 66). In this respect the losers are the Chinese and the winners are the dominant white culture. Kingston retrieves Chinese history through documents, and the testimony of witnesses among her relatives.

The juxtaposition of the histories of the losers, the silenced and oppressed with the dominant white culture, is stressed through the use of irony. It would be useful to establish a definition for the concept of irony which further illustrates these ironic moments, mainly in Kingston's treatment of history in China Men through our reading of —The Laws section.—Irony consists of saying the opposite of what you mean, or inviting an interpretation different from the surface meaning of your words (...). An ironic statement is recognised as such in the act of interpretation (Lodge, 179). Irony is revealed in Kingston's description of the laws as well as in the laws themselves —irony surfaces bitterly from the facts themselves states Goellnicht (196). My interpretation of some facts leads me to construe the irony displaced in them. Concerning the right of ownership, Kingston reports in China Men that —[T]hough the Chinese were filling and leveeing the San Joaquin Delta for thirteen cents a square yard, building the richest agricultural land in the world, they were prohibited from owning land or real estate (151). In the above quotation, Kingston is overtly ironic. She inscribes her male ancestors as the founding fathers of the richest agricultural land in the world, yet they don't own a square yard. She generates an ironic effect by opposing what they built to what they don't own.

Moreover, we have Kingston's statement that —Federal courts declared some of the state and city laws unconstitutional ... on the ground that —it was wrong to invite the Chinese to come to The United States and then deny them a livelihood. The repealed laws were often re-enacted in another form (151-2), is ironic in two ways. The assumption that Federal courts repeal state and city laws is later subverted through an indirect enactment of the law and the recognition that the Chinese—as guests—are denied a livelihood. Consequently irony lies in two instances where it invites a —different interpretation from the surface meaning (Lodge 179). An example that illustrates the above ironic statement is —San Francisco supplemented the anti-Chinese state laws with some of its own: a queue tax, a —cubic air ordinance requiring that a residence have so many cubic feet of air per inhabitant, a pole law prohibiting the use of carrying baskets on poles, cigar taxes shoe taxes, and laundry taxes (China Men 151). Here the irony is oriented towards the arbitrariness of legal legislation: a queue tax, a cubic air ordinance, cigar taxes, shoe taxes and laundry taxes.

In China Men, the documents of the American law regarding Chinese citizens as immigrants are juxtaposed with the fictionalized narrative of the actual realities of the American treatment of Chinese workers (Hutcheon 1988 88-9). The documents of the laws are represented in a section entitled —The Laws while the fictionalized narratives are the remaining chapters related to Kingston's ancestors. At this level one can refer to the Foucauldian view of history which is —the articulation of the series of practices (archives, historical a priori) that accounts for our current practices (Flynn 40). Consequently, the laws cited in —The Laws are practices that account for previous and current practices.

Through incorporating the section —The Laws—Kingston comments on the whole text. The Laws may be regarded as a theory which generates the work of fiction. Indeed, the stories of the father, grandfathers, uncles, brothers and the Chinese are tainted by these laws. Besides, the section is an instance of self-reflexivity; The Laws' accounts for the text and the text illustrates the laws; hence the interconnectedness between The Laws' and the stories. This section is the source Kingston uses to write her text. In this respect Linda Hutcheon asserts —It is worth noting, however, that in fiction like this, despite the metafictional self-reflexivity, the general apparatus of novelistic realism is in a sense retained (Hutcheon 1989 89). Consequently, The Laws' section theorises the text, is self-reflexive and reflects the reality lived by the narrator's male ancestors for over a century.

In tackling the issue of history and fiction, I should treat The Laws restricting Chinese immigration to the United States, which I view as important facts generating the racism and sexism directed against the Chinese subject. The acts and driving out of the Chinese subject dated back to 1868 with the Burlingame Treaty which was modified—limited—then suspended. Moreover, —the first Exclusion Act was passed in 1882 (China Men 155). And up to 1898 the Chinese born in the United States is granted citizenship (153). However it was only in 1952 that —the first time Chinese women were allowed to immigrate under the same conditions as men (156). Since before that time Chinese women were not allowed to immigrate to America, and Chinese men were under the threat of the immigration authority, hence the bachelor China towns and the silence—which Kingston associates with Chineseness in her first book—are justified.

The Laws' section not only theorizes the fictionalized narratives but also historicizes the self: this section unravels how the self is shaped by history, then how it shapes history. Therefore William Wei—in his book *The Asian American Movement*—points out that Asian American is writing —history from the bottom, giving voice to the silent (55) as —what one was heavily influences what one is and will be (54). This quotation exhibits the continuity between the past, the present and the future which is echoed in Hutcheon's view that —the reader cannot ignore the lessons of past about the past or implications of the lessons for the historical present. (Hutcheon 1988 88)

Although Kingston elucidates the impact of the American acts, quotas, driving out for one century, for example, her father living fifteen years a bachelor life before his wife's arrival, marginalised, illiterate in English and —scream [ing ] and curs[ing] ...say [ing]nothing (China Men 10), she contests the authority of these laws. Indeed in *China Men* , —documents are shown to be extremely unstable sources of identity: American citizenship, papers, visas and passports are all bought and sold with ease (Hutcheon 1989; 81). This translates Kingston's conception of the laws as —the families unburied their documents—visas, passports, re-entry permits, American birth certificates, American citizenship papers—and distributed them...they were interested in purchasing papers (China Men 42).

Consequently everything that epitomises American authority such as visas, passports, birth certificates are buried/unburied, bought and sold. Therefore there is an insistence on the triviality of these documents. Moreover; —when a Sojourner retired from going out-on-the-road-or died he made another slot. Somebody took his place. The last owner of the papers taught their buyers the details about the house, the farm, the neighbourhood, the family that were nominally his own (42). Even the father, a scholar turned an illiterate travelled with —two sets of papers: bought and his own (43). Kingston's subversion of the American documents occurs in the fictionalized narratives, that is to say in the sections prior to and after —The Laws. Thus undermining the legal documents which are —unstable sources of identity and showing the extent to which they determine their life then and afterwards. Moreover about putting =The Laws' in the middle, Kingston asserts in an interview with Donna Perry,

I put it that way because I found that readers don't have the information. OK, somewhere are you going to put the information? Do I do an appendix? No, they'll skip the appendix. Do I do an introduction? No, they'll skip the introduction. Do I do footnotes? No, because that's too scholarly. Can I trust the reader to be interested enough to go to the library and do their research? No she laughs. So, I'll put it right in the middle (Skenazy 179)

Therefore Kingston's ultimate objective behind =The Laws' is to represent —histories forgotten, hidden, invisible...changed, eradicated, as well as to inform and oblige the reader to be exposed to their sufferings and struggles with racism. Consequently she subverts —the implied assumptions of the historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality and transparency of representation (Hutcheon 1989; 92). Kingston blurs the boundaries between history and fiction in a biased, subjective text that deconstructs the usual belief that history is objective and neutral.

The third boundary crossed in Kingston's first two novels are writing and storytelling. The texts start with storytelling which is altered into writing. As defined by Huntley, storytelling is community discourse and an inherited oral narrative tradition which blends family tales, history, folklore, myth, heroic stories and didactic and cautionary statements passed on through generations within clans (66). In the two texts storytelling is a practice which blends family tales of the grandfathers in the Sandalwood Mountains, in the Sierra Nevada, of the father in China and in America, of the brother in Vietnam, as well as of the two aunts in old China or in America. Furthermore, the oral tradition, which Kingston translates into a written one, juxtaposes history with myths and folklore. Therefore —In the works of Maxine Hong Kingston...storytelling is not presented as a privatized form of experience but as asserting a communicational bond between the teller and the told within a context that is historical, social and political as well as intertextual (Hutcheon 1989 50-1). Thus stories mark the beginnings and ends of her first two texts. While blurring the boundaries between a narrative tradition and a written one, the narrator emphasizes storytelling as an empowering source.

Kingston is brought up in a storytelling environment and becomes a storyteller. She admits that —As far back as I can remember, I was a storyteller, and before I could write I was inventing stories...I was raised in

a storytelling culture (Skenazy 122). In *The Woman Warrior*, she describes that —Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep (25). So being exposed from an early age to stories, she creates mental images, heroines and gives them voice, which accounts for her vivid imagination. As far as her first text is concerned, the sections open with the mother's stories and end with Kingston's. The first, section—*The No Name Woman*—starts with the mother's admonition —You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you (11) and closes by —I alone devote pages of paper to her... I am telling on her (22). Kingston builds the whole section on her mother's cautionary story and provides multiple versions using her imagination. She asserts that —I don't know which one of those things happened. That's why I put so many questions and doubts into the story (Skenazy 118). Kingston summarises her objectives behind translating her aunt's story into a written one and reconstructing it.—I gave her a life. I gave her a history, I gave her immortality, I gave her meaning(...) I retrieved her from the no-nameness, the nothing and created her again... She lives because of your having read that story and having questions about it (Skenazy 119).

Likewise, the second section starts with the mother and daughter singing the chant of Fa Mu Lan. The third section begins also with the mother's stories of *The Keung School of Midwifery*. The fourth section opens with a family tale about *Brave Orchid* and *Moon Orchid*. Ts'ai Yen's story terminates Kingston's quest to —report a crime and —report to five families in a five-section novel. In altering the community discourse into written stories, Kingston provides the reader with multiple versions of the same story, such as *The No Name Woman*, and her father's immigration stories. Indeed, she explains the ambiguity in this way —I try to keep the reader with that extra little doubt in them. I throw it in. I can't help it; it seems to be part of every story (Skenazy 31). Then, in another interview, she asserts that different versions of one story are —the way narration and memory and stories work in our culture (74).

When Kingston tells a story in her first two texts, she relies on her memory. Then she imagines the missing parts to make it complete. Furthermore being raised in a storytelling culture, she is free to transform the stories according to her needs. However, she confesses a tension in her writing as —The oral tradition is very different from the written, and I see the oral tradition as being very alive, very immediate. It has the impact of directly influencing actions. Also the oral stories change. A story changes from telling to telling (Skenazy 31). The tension in her writing originates at the moment of inscribing those stories, for they become static, printed and cannot be changed.

The same pattern—storytelling starts and ends the text—governs the second text. The first chapter is about Tang Ao's story in *The Women's Land*, and in the last one —On Listening' young men are listening to a storyteller. —A group of Chinese Americans were gathering around the Filipino scholar (China Men 308) telling the story of the Chinese who —came to the Philippines to look for the Gold Mountain (308). Therefore —in reclaiming the Gold Mountain asserts Goellnicht, —Kingston —puts her faith in the next generation of Chinese American men. The narrator is now listening for the next generation of young men to respond with their own dialogical voices, to claim their America (206). In the last chapter, Kingston extends the ability of listening to the young generation of Chinese Americans. She describes them as so interested that they inquire and contribute to the stories: —said a young man ...said another...said someone else (308-9). The young generation asks the scholar multiple questions that reflect a spirit of inquiry, of which the narrator is proud —Good. Now I could watch the young men who listen (China Men 309)

When Chinese women entered America they carried with them their oral narrative tradition, which they practise and handed down to Chinese American women. Goellnicht sees storytelling —a source of empowerment for Chinese women (206). The first instance in which storytelling is a source of empowerment concerns Fa Mu Lan. This mythical figure carries a message of revenge on her back. Her father carved oaths and names not only to empower the warrior daughter, but also in case she —got killed, the people could use [her] dead body as a weapon (*The Woman Warrior* 38). Therefore Fa Mu Lan's story is meant to empower the narrator, and proves to be a source of empowerment for the whole clan since —a list of grievances is inscribed on her back with —words in red and black files, like an army (38).

Furthermore, Ts'ai Yen resorts to singing to express —sadness and anger (186) yet strangely enough her songs —matched the flutes. Her singing may have a healing power, for her song —Eighteen stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe translates well (186).

In writing Ts'ai Yen's story Kingston celebrates her being —a story talker. She introduces the story as —Here is a story my mother told me... The beginning is hers, the ending, mine (154) Thus in revising Ts'ai Yen's story, Kingston —transforms her community from oppression and victimization to self-affirmation and cultural survival (Huntley 94). Self-affirmation and cultural survival are sought by the Gold Mountain Sojourners through storytelling. Indeed in *China Men* many characters are storytellers. Everyone has a story to tell: ocean people, land people, opium people, workers, wagoners... As they are gamblers and opium addicts they are talk addicts and they have talk-story time after dinner.

Consequently in recreating a Chinese collective core—talk story—Kingston revises, recreates and writes oral stories transmitted by a mother —who is a champion talker (*The Woman Warrior* 118). Her mother's

stories that record cultural values, histories, family tales are the roots of her two texts, which she uses to educate and inform the reader, to heal wounds caused by a century of discriminatory acts, quotas and driving out. Furthermore, writing storytelling is a technique used by Kingston to reconcile her day to day American life in which she feels uneasy living in an ethnic minority in the United States. Kingston not only recreates storytelling but also subverts the stories. Indeed as Leslie W. Rabine contends, writing oral stories denies the power of the community which maintains its cohesiveness through the oral tradition (95). Kingston disconnects the community members while writing down their stories, mainly if—as Rabine puts it—a story that is oppressive when orally transmitted within family and community is liberating when written (95). This is explicit in The No Name Woman's story being transmitted orally and only when needed, is no longer oppressive, or secret when written.

In giving her aunt a history, immortality and a story, Kingston subverts —the power of patriarchy which is maintained and confirmed by the spoken word (Rabine 100). Within this context, I situate Kingston's assertion that in *The Woman Warrior* —I was always imposing my view point on the stories. In *China Men* the person who talks—story is not so intrusive. I bring myself in and out of the stories (Skenazy 18). However, the narrator confesses also that a great many of the men's stories were ones I originally heard from women (18). Then since storytelling belongs to the realm of women...writing belongs to the realm of men (Rabine 102), Kingston blurs the boundaries between the two realms. She portrays a silent-father and a champion talker mother. She inherits the oral tradition from her mother and the written tradition from her father, he is running the gambling house. Another function of storytelling is identified by Caroline Ong's view that it is an alteration from a story on patriarchal authority to one that glorifies feminine freedom (cited in Rabine 100). The stories as recreated by Kingston have multiple meanings. This is the case of Fa Mu Lan's story. It is originally about filial duties, in Kingston's alteration it is related to the mother/daughter relationship, defying gender discrimination and leading an adolescent to maturity, likewise the No Name Woman's story and Ts'ai Yen's.

Both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are postmodern texts; thus they —confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular/the general and the present/the past. And this confrontation is itself contradictory for it refuses to recuperate or dissolve either side of the dichotomy (Hutcheon 1988 ;105). In the two texts, the two texts boundaries between biography/autobiography, history/fiction and orality/writing are blurred. The two texts' encompass contradictory representations which makes categories between genres blur and makes —*The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* required in courses in gender studies, philosophy, anthropology, history, teaching methods, counseling and psychology (Huntley 62).

Kingston in her first two books crosses not only generic boundaries but also gender boundaries as far as her fe/male characters are concerned. Thus there are no limits between the female and the male categories. For instance, female elements cross to male ones—as in the case of Fa Mu Lan—and male characteristics cross to female ones—such as Tang Ao. Therefore, there are no gender essences in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* (Rabine 88) though in the two texts, gender determines one's place in the family and society (ibid).

Gender is —the way that a given culture or subculture sees them (females), how they are culturally constructed (Beters 98). Thus feminine and masculine roles are cultural constructions and are —culturally assigned to countless generations of women. The same holds for masculinity, with its connotations of strength, rationality, stoicism, and self-reliance (ibid). We can see that masculinity and femininity are cultural constructions in Kingston's violation of the opposition between men and women. Since the male and female are cultural constructions, Kingston substitutes the original construction with another one. In other words, Kingston constructs women crossing male territory and men crossing the female one. Therefore in the two cases the subject—whether a woman or a man—is an effect of previous behaviors and acts, which is central to Judith Butler's theory.

Gender is a cultural and discursive construct as women are taught how to become women through discourse. Hence the element of becoming is introduced. Butler considers that —if there is something right in Beauvoir's claim that one is not born, but rather becomes a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightly be said to originate or to end (Butler 33). Then the interpellation woman is a process that has no beginning or no end. One is shaped into a gendered category through discourse and the culture that makes it. Therefore —gender is the repeated stylisation of the body, a set of repeated acts (Butler 33). —It is something one does, a sequence of acts, a verb rather than a noun, doing rather than being (25). Then gender is what we perform, we do what Butler labels performativity. It implies that what we perform is already constructed by culture and uttered through discourse. In this guise woman is not a doer, she is a doee.

Kingston describes the transformations undergone by Tang Ao in the —*Women's Land* and portrays Fa Mu Lan taking her father's place in wars and leading an army and wearing men's clothes, despite the fact that —the Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought (*The Woman Warrior* 42). As a result, the two books use cross-dressing figures as crucial icons (Huntley 67). The two instances of crossing gender boundaries can be seen as a narrative technique used to

assert a hyphenated self that is —several, fluid, shifting (Zamora 4). In this guise gender dichotomy is unstable in the two books. Moreover, Kingston emphasizes the gender boundaries between the two books to recognize and play with these boundaries within them (Rabine 88). In this respect and as far as the structure of the two books is concerned, Kingston considers that she wrote the two texts simultaneously although the books seemed to fall into place as two separate books because the power in *The Woman Warrior* has so much to do with feminist vision and feminist anger, and so it became a coherent work without the men's stories. The men's stories were sort of undercutting the women's stories, so it fell into two books (Skenazy 35-6). In *China Men*, Kingston depicts the experience of her male ancestors who—voluntarily—travel to the Gold Mountain where they are subjected to humiliation and effeminising tasks. In this construction, Kingston portrays them as the white dominant discourse does. Thus she considers gender as constructed both culturally and discursively. Kingston asserts in an interview that —I am a woman going into the Land of Men and what will become of me; I become the kind of Woman that loves men, and I can tell their story without judging them (Skenazy 36). *The Woman Warrior* deals with —a feminist vision and feminist anger; as a result, the logic of the —difference between genders in the two books and the logic of the difference within each gender within the same text (Rabine 88) governs the two texts. The first book is about female characters and the second one is about the male figures. Hence, the difference between genders in the two books. After that each gender within the same book crosses other boundaries.

In subverting the gender of Tang Ao, Kingston displays her position towards women's situation both in China and in America. This technique reveals her positive position towards women's equality, as she probes the tortures of women via foot binding (Gao 58). Furthermore Kingston describes several traditional practices that subjugated women. In China women's wrists are shackled, their ankles chained, their toes are broken and their feet are tightly bound (*China Men* 1). They were also fed on women's food. In this respect the female subject performs what culture and tradition shape and other females execute. So culture constructs the female self and instructs women to torture other women.

Tang Ao's gender subversion points to —the subjugation of women both in old China and in America (Goellnicht 194). Since Tang Ao is originally a male traveller, Mary Slowik considers —any sailing away from China is a sailing into China, its tradition enforced with vengeance (1). Moreover, —treating a man like a woman is in itself a form of revenge (Gao 75). What follows from this is that Kingston —seems to take a feminist delight in inverting the gender roles and giving men a taste of the medicine they have forced their women to drink (Amy Ling cited Gao 58). Yet in treating Tang Ao like a woman, Kingston describes that stereotypes—since China men were known to the public as restaurant-cooks, laundry workers and waiters (Cheung 113-4) are a cultural construction uttered through the discourse of the majority victimisers. In addition, Kingston seems to suggest—according to Rabine—from Tang Ao's myth —the arbitrary and fictional quality of gender [are] both unstable and rigid (99). Gender, a cultural construction, bears the instability yet rigidity of the discourse that translates it. Thus —like the feminine writing of Cixous and Irigaray, Kingston's writing violates the law of opposition, making gender dichotomies proliferate into unresolvable gender differences (Rabine 87).

Kingston's violation of gender boundaries enhances the multiple factors contributing to construct the Chinese identity fluid, shifting. Yet the oppositional gender dichotomies become —unresolvable gender difference, mainly if Fa Mu Lan leads an army, marries and gives birth to a son. And *Brave Orchid* is both physically and morally strong; she confesses that “your father couldn't have supported you without me. I'm the one with the big muscles (*The Woman Warrior* 97). Fa Mu Lan transgresses gender boundaries in her fifteen-year training and becoming a fighter, through which Kingston complicates and questions gender roles. The swordswoman inspires her army, feeds them, sings glorious songs to them and —brought order wherever they went (40). However she is beautiful, pregnant, a mother and a daughter-in-law. She confesses —now my public duties are finished I will stay with you, doing farm work and house work, and giving you more sons (47). Consequently, Kingston treats gender as —a site of difference (Schuller 58).

Though the Chinese —execute women who disguised themselves as soldiers, the swordswoman disguises herself, kills the baron and is accepted. She lives outside society's laws, duties and classifications though she is an honoured member (Rabine 103); and in this context the swordswoman's gender is a site of difference. A culture of oppression and devaluation constructs the female, passive, timid self and the strong rational male self denies the female self crossing the male space but accepts the swordswoman's behaviour. The same culture acknowledges *Brave Orchid*'s strong personality and medical practices, yet punishes the *No Name Woman*'s privacy and *Moon Orchid*'s shyness and passivity. Consequently the swordswoman —avenges... the hierarchical gendering she has been subject to (Schuller 56). Ultimately the swordswoman avenges the oppressed females the same way Kingston avenges her male ancestors and subverts a racist stereotype imposed on them. So —Gender-crossing is a condition that highlights the instability of gender definition, especially in the context of slippery cultural and ethnic geographies (Huntley 67).



Indeed gender and gender boundaries are not natural. They are constructed and they become more problematic in specific conditions of oppression when crossing them becomes a necessity to survive, like China men, who have to adopt feminine traits to survive in a Gold Mountain—a place of exile—they invented. The Chinese and later the Chinese American who travelled to America lost their homes. And as Rabine puts it, to be a man who loses one's home is to cross over into the feminine gender (92) If crossing boundaries is a necessity to survive, so —transgress[ing] the conventions of literary genres and history, fact, legend, myth, biography, autobiography and fiction go hand in hand. Authors operate along the moveable boundaries of genres (Zamora 6)

Concerning the legend of Tang Ao and that of Fa Mu Lan, Goellnicht argues that they act as controlling myths (192). In changing her gender, Fa Mu Lan sets up a gender contrast that is continued through the book and stresses the female psyche, identity and values that shape the author's personality and influence her decisions. The No Name Woman's story appears in the first book and Tang Ao's myth in the second; yet there are some affinities between them. In this regard Goellnicht points out that — The no-name aunt had been affected by — a rare urge[ to go ] west[which] had fixed upon our[ Maxine's ] family and so [ she ] crossed boundaries not delineated in spacell by disobeying patriarchy, while Tang Ao —crossed an ocean to the west and had his gender changed (192).

Both Tang Ao and The No Name Woman transgress boundaries set by the ruling dominant majority. That's why they are punished. As for the aunt, —the real punishment...was the family's deliberately forgetting herll (The Woman Warrior 23). She betrays her family and village. Consequently she is oppressed alive, through the raid, and after death. Tang Ao crosses an ocean and is captured by women, locked in an apartment, feminised, enslaved and emasculated. If Tang Ao stands for early Chinese male immigrants, then I read the aunt's story and her crossing boundaries as embodying her oppressed female relatives in China and The Gold Mountain alike; hence the continuity in the experiences that echo one another.

The No Name Woman's gender inequity is intensified when linked to the situation of racial inequity in China Men (Goellnicht 193). Indeed, Kingston offers a space for the female characters to express their views about gender discrimination, love, marriage...and another discursive space for male characters from different backgrounds, family, neighbours, mythical figures ...to reveal their histories and tell on racial and social issues. As a result the multiple voices account for transgressing conventional boundaries.

To conclude, Kingston—in the two books—produces yet subverts the values and deconstructs fixed oppositions as biography/autobiography, history/fiction and orality/writing. And fe/male boundaries. Moreover, she questions institutions and cultural codes since she was born, raised and educated in a multicultural America by parents who are culturally Chinese. Hence, Kingston is raised and educated at the intersection of two different cultures (west and east). She writes, then, from the same crossing of cultures, ( and margins) which accounts for the instances of differences observed in the two texts, such as the language, habits and behavior between the first and second generation of immigrants and Chinese and Americans. In both The Woman Warrior and China Men, the Chinese carry with them Chinese cultural elements. The China men and women carry their stories, songs, proverbs, and customs. However their cultural practices are elements of inferiority there, as the Chinese are a minority group who —continue to be alien, having taken no steps toward becoming citizens and incapable of becoming such (China Men 153).

When Kingston—the narrator—asks —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?(The Woman Warrior 13). She articulates the shifting personality of the self as subject-in-the-making (Goellnicht 1997, 340). Indeed, the Chinese American subject is constructed in accordance with their social and family background from their early childhood. The second generation of Chinese Americans is taught to be both Chinese and Americans. They are so shaped by their families, schools and the outside world, that their Chinese identity interpenetrates their American way of life and gives rise to a subject in process of becoming. Goellnicht extends the same idea, declaring that —there is, then, no —purell/ —essentialll/ —authentic Chinese American self, no —biological insidell against which she can be measured (ibid). "No pure, authentic identity echoes no single, pure culture. Consequently the subjects in both the Woman Warrior and China Men are —culturally produced (in relation to other positions) and socially learned a complex and continuous processll" (ibid).

The Chinese subject is culturally, historically produced in a multicultural space. Indeed space in Kingston's works is a terrain which shapes the border between two geographies China and America (Huntley 68). Kingston describes a China she ignores unless from her mother's talk story and relative letters. China is —a fictional construct, a collage of impressions and images (69). According to the mother's stories, China is home and America is a temporary place ( Huntley 69). Both China and America are present in The Woman Warrior and China Men. Thus America —already a multicultural space—coexists with China within the same text and respectively in the two texts. The Woman Warrior is categorised as Kingston's —China Book and China Men as her —Gold Mountain Book (72). Ultimately, space in the two texts is an intersection between cultures,

racess and gender. This space is inhabited by a subject who is not only Chinese American but a member of diasporic community. This space is —a border country(...location of cultural hybridity (...)) [it] enables the survival of diasporic communities, minority cultures, immigrants and liminal identities (72). Then as a member of border country, Kingston speaks two languages, has two cultural heritages.

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