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Hybridity in Maxine Hong Kingston  
Master's Thesis

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## **Annotation**

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## **Abstract**

This master's thesis focuses on the concept of hybridity and hybrid genres in literature, which are then illustrated on selected works of Maxine Hong Kingston, specifically *The Woman Warrior* and *To Be the Poet*. The thesis analyzes and describes how hybridity shapes the author's oeuvre on both a literary and cultural level.

## **Anotace**

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## **Abstrakt**

Tato magisterská práce se zabývá konceptem hybridity a hybridních žánrů v literatuře, jejichž prvky následně ilustruje na vybraných dílech Maxine Hong Kingstonové, konkrétně na *Válečnici* a *To Be the Poet*. Práce analyzuje a popisuje, jak hybridita dotváří dílo autorky na rovině nejen literární, ale také kulturní.

# Table of Contents

<b>1</b>	<b>Introduction</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>2</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	<b>9</b>
2.0	Theory of Hybridity .....	9
2.0.0	The Hybrid Genre.....	10
2.0.1	Interplay Between Cultural Hybridity and the Hybrid Form .....	13
2.1	Methods and Secondary Sources .....	16
2.1.0	Methods.....	17
2.1.1	Genre Ambiguity of Kingston’s Life Writing .....	19
2.1.2	Oral Tradition and Talk-story.....	22
2.1.3	Myths and Legends.....	23
2.1.4	Narrative Techniques .....	25
2.1.5	Sociocultural Background .....	25
2.1.6	Research Evaluation.....	26
<b>3</b>	<b>Maxine Hong Kingston: A Biography</b> .....	<b>27</b>
3.0	Life and Work.....	27
3.1	Kingston within the Chinese American Literary Tradition.....	30
<b>4</b>	<b>The Woman Warrior</b> .....	<b>32</b>
4.0	No Name Woman: A Dialogue of Three .....	32
4.1	White Tigers: Maxine and Fa Mu Lan as One .....	36
4.2	Shaman: Battling Chinese and American Ghosts .....	41
4.2.0	Weaving Brave Orchid’s Life in China.....	41
4.2.1	Among American Ghosts.....	44
4.3	At the Western Palace: A Tragedy of Not Belonging .....	46
4.4	A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe: An Outlaw Knot-maker .....	48
<b>5</b>	<b>To Be the Poet</b> .....	<b>50</b>
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion</b> .....	<b>57</b>

<b>Resumé .....</b>	<b>59</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>61</b>

# 1 Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston is considered a literary innovator, especially when it comes to experimentation and breaching the boundaries of genre. A mixture of dreams and facts, fabrication and family history, myth, and autobiography is why her work is hard to classify and often described as hybrid. Generally, hybrid work has been increasingly attracting the attention of scholars, teachers of literature and creative writing, as well as the general readership. The label is an attempt at categorization of a certain type of text that mixes, blends, or by any means combines elements of different genres and media. Although the term is widely used, there is no unified definition of hybridity.

This thesis aims to pinpoint which hybrid genres and techniques are present in two of Kingston's texts *The Woman Warrior* and *To Be the Poet*, but also to explore how they are created and what they accomplish. Since hybridity is very multifaceted, I will provide an informative theoretical framework focused on outlining the theory of hybridity in literary studies.

I chose *The Woman Warrior* and *To Be the Poet* for my analysis of hybridity because they are representative of each of the two major directions on Kingston's experimental writing journey: prose and poetry. *The Woman Warrior* is the author's best-known work and has been thoroughly studied through various lenses of literary criticism. This prosaic blend of autobiographical stories and mythical characters embedded in Kingston's Chinese American experience offers a rich tapestry of hybrid methods to explore. *To Be the Poet* is the first product of Kingston's shift towards poetry, which nonetheless still bears marks of her characteristic prosaic style.

## 2 Theoretical Framework

### 2.0 Theory of Hybridity

Hybridity is a popular term used in various fields of study, most prominently cultural studies and literary studies, including genre studies and post-colonialism. It can refer to cultures, identities, languages, or literary form. The theoretical usage varies from source to source; therefore, it is challenging to pinpoint the exact definition without having some variability. As Patterson notes in his essay “Gaston Miron: From Hybrid Genres to Hybrid Identities,” there is no distinct line between the different meanings of the term used in relation to form, culture, or identity.<sup>1</sup> To analyze the use and function of hybrid form in Maxine Hong Kingston’s work, it is necessary to first compare the various definitions of hybridity and differentiate them.

The word “hybrid” is originally a biological term referring to the offspring of two different species or varieties. Considering the figurative meaning of the word employed by the humanities, the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines it as “derived from heterogeneous or incongruous sources; having a mixed character; composed of two diverse elements.”<sup>2</sup> All ensuing meanings of hybridity are traceable to this primary definition. This thesis is concerned with two main interpretations in literary studies that interweave in the works of Maxine Hong Kingston: hybridity of the literary form, and cultural hybridity. The corresponding theorists of these concepts of hybridity in literary criticism are Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha, whose works have been the cause of hybridity becoming a buzzword in recent decades, as Kuortti states.<sup>3</sup> In the following sections, I will present the original

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<sup>1</sup> See Jeremy Patterson, “Gaston Miron: From Hybrid Genres to Hybrid Identities,” in *Hybrid Genres / L’Hybridité Des Genres*, ed. Jeanne Garane, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), [https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004361065\\_005](https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004361065_005).

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “hybrid, n. and adj.,” accessed May 16, 2023, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/89809?redirectedFrom=hybrid>.

<sup>3</sup> See Joel Kuortti, Jopi Nyman, and Mehdi Ghasemi, *Engagements with Hybridity in Literature: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2023), 9.

notions of hybridity proposed by Bakhtin and Bhabha to establish a theoretical foundation for my analysis, then further develop the ideas by integrating recent research on the topic.

### 2.0.0 The Hybrid Genre

One area of literary criticism that has adopted and utilized the idea of hybridity is genre theory. Mikhail Bakhtin, a notable formalist literary theorist, focused on the interplay of language within the novel, and developed ideas of dialogism and heteroglossia, both represented by the concept of hybridity. Dialogism is viewed as an inherent quality of a word and discourse, because even in case of a monologic rhetorical form, one always expects an active understanding of the listener.<sup>4</sup> Heteroglossia is a central term for Bakhtin's theory, designating the presence of more voices within a given narrative that interact with each other, and contributing to a hybrid.<sup>5</sup>

The process of creating a hybrid known as hybridization is defined by Mikhail Bakhtin as "a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor."<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin considers the product of such mixture—a hybrid—a system of artistic devices, which is used intentionally. Unintentional hybridization is also possible and characteristic of the evolution of all languages, as Bakhtin says.<sup>7</sup> Hybridity can even occur within one genre, according to Bakhtin. The focus of Bakhtin's work, the novel, is viewed as an intentional hybrid of two individualized language consciousnesses: the author's and the character's.<sup>8</sup> Bakhtin's theory of hybridity is one of the earliest, having emerged between the 1920s and 1940s, and focuses closely on language and

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<sup>4</sup> See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 280, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>5</sup> See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 60.

<sup>6</sup> Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 358.

<sup>7</sup> See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 358.

<sup>8</sup> See Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 358–61.

utterance within the novel. Later studies have significantly built upon Bakhtin's ideas and broadened the application of hybridity.

Towards the end of the 20th century, the term hybrid genre started to appear more frequently in genre studies. Alastair Fowler wrote directly about hybrid genres and defined them as generic mixtures "where two or more complete repertoires are present in such proportions that no one of them dominates."<sup>9</sup> This is a crucial characteristic that distinguishes genres with features borrowed from other genres, but otherwise faithful to the dominant genre, and true hybrids that cannot be categorized as either genre. Other sources, which do not focus on genres but on literary theory in general, provide looser but informative definitions of hybridity. For example, Jeremy Hawthorn defines the hybrid text as "a text in which two separate and often opposed elements can be detected, on a thematic or an ideological level."<sup>10</sup> "Genres" are replaced by "elements," which makes this definition much more flexible. Hawthorn's interpretation is closer to the current studies of hybrid texts, which account for hybridity's multidisciplinary quality and do not strictly stay within the boundaries of literary genre.

Hybrid genres, like the works labeled as such, seem to possess an inherent paradoxical quality of being unclassifiable. In a special issue of the *Journal of American Folklore* "Theorizing the Hybrid" Kapchan and Strong write that the term "hybrid genre" is an oxymoron, it is an anti-genre and defies categorical definition.<sup>11</sup> As she wrote in her earlier monograph, Kapchan considers a bounded definition of a hybrid genre unnecessary for this exact reason.<sup>12</sup> What is more productive, in her words, "is shifting the focus to the instrumentality of hybrid genres — what do these inherently ambiguous and self-reflexive forms

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<sup>9</sup> Alastair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), 183.

<sup>10</sup> Jeremy Hawthorn, *A Concise Glossary of Contemporary Literary Theory*, 2nd ed. (London: E. Arnold, 1994), 12.

<sup>11</sup> See Deborah Kapchan, and Pauline Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (Summer 1999): 243, <https://doi.org/10.2307/541360>.

<sup>12</sup> See Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 6.

accomplish? And how are they generated?”<sup>13</sup> Mary Klages notices another paradox in hybrids. According to her, “[h]ybridity often causes deconstruction, as a hybrid necessarily belongs to at least two categories at once; within a system of binary oppositions, a hybrid belongs to both sides and thus destabilizes the idea of ‘opposition’ itself.”<sup>14</sup> As these authors suggest, hybrid genres appear not only hard to categorize, but it seems in fact impossible to do so.

Although the term “hybrid genres” is paradoxical, it is widely used to label experimental writing that cannot be classified as one specific genre. Furthermore, the label is limitless since it does not cover only existing combinations of genres, but also newly forming ones. Any comprehensive overview of all hybrid genres is therefore unattainable. However, this does not mean hybrid genres are not worth exploring; on the contrary, they are an infinite source of innovation and creativity in literature, offering rich material for literary analyses.

Marcela Sulak and Jacqueline Kolosov are aware of the potential of hybridity for creative writing in particular. Despite the endless array of hybrid genres, they created an anthology of eight most recognized ones: *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres*. In the introduction, Sulak explores the origin of hybrid genres and explains what hybrid literature and hybrid genres mean:

When we speak of hybrid literature, we are speaking of individual works that do not replicate any previously existing pattern of literary affiliation. Rather, they take features from multiple parents—multiple genres—and mix them to create a new entity. Writers experiment and innovate, combining elements of traditional genres until they find a form that fits their subject or story.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Deborah Kapchan, *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 6.

<sup>14</sup> Mary Klages, *Literary Theory: The Complete Guide*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, an imprint of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, 2017), 237.

<sup>15</sup> Marcela Sulak, and Jacqueline Kolosov, eds. *Family Resemblance: An Anthology and Exploration of 8 Hybrid Literary Genres* (Brookline: Rose Metal Press, 2015), “Local, Organic, and Living: A Preface” section, Kindle.

This definition emphasizes the inherent nature of hybridity to create new forms and its potential for literary innovation. It is especially fitting for the most recent uses of the term “hybrid” in articles dealing with experimental literature.

In addition, Sulak describes an essential quality of hybrid work, which is crucial for analyzing these texts. She considers a true hybrid work to be such a thorough blend of genres that labeling it with a particular category would result in radically changing how one reads the work.<sup>16</sup> This view assumes that genre categorization shapes the reader’s interpretation of a text, which emphasizes its importance.

To summarize, the theory of hybridity as used in genre studies involves blending of separate genres. Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the novelistic hybrid is the foundational idea, emphasizing the process of hybridization that involves mixing of two or more consciousnesses and artistic devices. All genres or repertoires that make up a true hybrid work are in equal distribution, which makes it impossible to classify such work. Hybridity creates new forms and allows writers to explore them freely, without being bound by the restraints of genres. Some hybrid genres have been identified, but there is an infinite number of constantly evolving hybrid forms that can be explored through further research.

### 2.0.1 Interplay Between Cultural Hybridity and the Hybrid Form

“Hybridity” is an established term in post-colonial studies on account of Homi Bhabha’s acclaimed critical work *The Location of Culture* (1994), and often appears in literary studies focusing on works of ethnic writers, including Maxine Hong Kingston. In post-colonial contexts, hybridity refers to people’s cultures and identities affected by colonialism. Bhabha refers to the post-colonial concept of hybridity as “cultural hybridity.”<sup>17</sup> He argues that what occurs in colonized cultures when faced with colonial power is not “the silent repression of native traditions” but a process of hybridization.<sup>18</sup> Bhabha explains hybridity as “a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of the colonialist

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<sup>16</sup> See Sulak, *Family Resemblance*, “Local, Organic, and Living: A Preface” section, Kindle.

<sup>17</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 2nd ed. (1994; London: Routledge, 2004), 9.

<sup>18</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 160.

disavowal, so that other 'denied' knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition."<sup>19</sup> In other words, the subjects of colonization do not simply adopt the culture forced upon them by their colonizers, but instead develop a hybrid culture in which the colonizers and the colonized share the same space, creating an equal authority over each other.

In "Theorizing the Hybrid," Kapchan and Strong review and compare the theoretical value of hybridity with related terms, most importantly creolization. Creolization is discussed as being the closest interlocutor of hybridity especially in the domain of cultural diversity and is argued to be a better tool for analyzing mixed cultures.<sup>20</sup> Creolization is viewed not only as a mixture of languages, but as a creative process of converging languages, cultures, and identities. This offers the trope of creolization a much wider application and allows it to be used as a tool in examining cultural creativity, which could mostly eliminate the need for the theory of cultural hybridity. Be that as it may, Kapchan and Strong also state the reason why hybridity predominates over the creolization trope: its cross-disciplinarity. Due to citation practices in academic disciplines, creolization stays within works examining language and folkloric forms, but hybridity transcends disciplines and appears in studies of various forms of cultural expression.<sup>21</sup>

Hybridity often brings cultural and literary studies together. Several scholarly articles have analyzed the link between a writer's cultural identity and the hybrid form of their text. For example, Jeremy Patterson analyzed the interaction between hybrid form and identity in Gaston Miron's poetry. In his essay "Gaston Miron: From Hybrid Genres to Hybrid Identities," Patterson argues in favor of using hybridity as an analytical tool in literary studies and considers the interaction of hybrid culture and form worth exploring. In his words, "[m]etaphorical notions of hybridity, whatever critics may say against them, have the salutary effect of bringing into dialogue various academic disciplines."<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 162.

<sup>20</sup> See Deborah Kapchan, and Pauline Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," *Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (Summer 1999): 239–53, <https://doi.org/10.2307/541360>.

<sup>21</sup> See Kapchan, and Strong, "Theorizing the Hybrid," 240–42.

<sup>22</sup> Patterson, "Gaston Miron: From Hybrid Genres to Hybrid Identities," in *Hybrid Genres*, 41.

Sulak sees the connection as well and says: “Indeed, the malleable, up-and-coming genres of improvisation, self-invention, and the disjunction of texts that are ‘neither this nor that,’ or rather, ‘both this and that,’ have long been used by writers whose identity is hyphenate.”<sup>23</sup> In American literature, there are countless writers of mixed origins and different diasporas, who are using writing techniques that not only tell their stories but also reflect their identities. Among these writers are Maxine Hong Kingston, Toni Morrison and Kingston’s friend Leslie Marmon Silko, who combines Native American storytelling tradition and American influences.

In Martin’s study *Writing Between Cultures* (2011), she considers various hybrid narrative devices, and each relates to multicultural background of different writers. For example, the method of magic realism can express a blend of opposites, the magical and the real, a writer identifies with.<sup>24</sup> Also, by imprinting their American identity onto mythical characters, writers assert their position as part of both cultures.<sup>25</sup> Multilingualism can comment on the equality of English and an author’s native or heritage language.<sup>26</sup> In these cases, the experimental form of hybridity reflects the complexity of ethnic identities.

In *Challenges of Diversity* (2017), Sollors states that ethnic writers bring literary development innovation, and are part of modern movements. He also notes that “[e]thnic writers may feel the need for ‘new’ forms more intensely than mainstream authors.”<sup>27</sup> Hybridity is one of the ways to achieve new forms, but the specific techniques are unique to each writer. While many ethnic writers lean towards experimentation, looking for forms that express their individuality and hybrid cultural identity more accurately, others satisfy the demand for a realistic portrayal of ethnic struggles. Sollors notices that traditional forms conveying

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<sup>23</sup> Sulak, *Family Resemblance*, “Local, Organic, and Living: A Preface” section, Kindle.

<sup>24</sup> See Holly E. Martin, *Writing Between Cultures: A Study of Hybrid Narratives in Ethnic Literature of the United States* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2011), 21.

<sup>25</sup> See *Writing Between Cultures*, 92.

<sup>26</sup> See *Writing Between Cultures*, 147.

<sup>27</sup> Sollors, *Challenges of Diversity*, 54.

authentic hardships of ethnicity, such as Richard Wright's *Black Boy* (1946), are preferred by publishers and readers.<sup>28</sup>

It is important to note that the use of hybrid genres or narratives is not exclusively intended for ethnic writers. Authors of diverse backgrounds, not only those shaped by diasporic experiences, employ these forms in their narratives. Hybrid genres simply offer freedom to experiment with form, especially when the constraints of established genres prove too limiting.

Some scholars mention the limits of hybridity as an analytical tool for experimentation specifically in post-colonial literature. For example, Priyamvada Gopal claims that experimentation in post-colonial works is too differentiated a process to be covered by this single label.<sup>29</sup> She is rightfully concerned that hybridity offers little critical value when talking about various forms of experimentation in post-colonial works. Still, it may be argued that hybridity is a helpful concept allowing authors on the margin to publish their work without adhering to set categories.

To summarize, writers of complex identities seem to resist traditional ethnic realism by exploring new forms of writing. For these authors, inventive writing and new hybrid forms can serve as an expression of their multicultural identity, and not only be the result of general experimentation. This is where hybrid cultures and forms meet.

## **2.1 Methods and Secondary Sources**

This section introduces and defines major genres, techniques, and themes considered part of Maxine Hong Kingston's unique writing style which is often described as hybrid. Drawing on secondary sources, this section also provides insights and arguments from scholars who paid close attention to Kingston's hybrid form in her oeuvre and identified its specifics. These varying perspectives

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<sup>28</sup> See Werner Sollors, *Challenges of Diversity: Essays on America* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017), 54.

<sup>29</sup> Priyamvada Gopal, "Limits of Hybridity" in *The Routledge Companion to Experimental Literature*, eds. Joe Bray, Alison Gibbons, and Brian McHale (London: Routledge, 2012), 184.

provide a complex understanding of Kingston's writing and lay the foundations for an exploration of hybrid forms in her work.

### 2.1.0 Methods

Kingston's writing is characterized by its refusal to conform to any established genre. In the case of her life writing, she is weaving a tapestry of written and oral storytelling traditions, fact and myth, and American and Chinese culture, which reflects the complexity of real life, rather than pruning her experience to fit within the borders of an autobiography. In an interview by Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, Kingston discusses her frustration with her work being the subject of reviews repeatedly categorizing it either as fiction or non-fiction while overlooking the content. As she explains, there is a need for crossing genre boundaries when writing about real people, because people's stories are part of their lives and personality.<sup>30</sup>

The theoretical base Sulak and Kolosov provided in their anthology offers a solid, although incomplete, framework for tracing and studying concrete hybrid genres in Maxine Hong Kingston's work. They introduce eight hybrid genres that allow for non-conformity and genre-crossing. These are lyric essay, epistolary, poetic memoir, prose poetry, performative, short-form nonfiction, flash fiction, and a genre they call pictures made of words. As a basis for my analysis of *The Woman Warrior* and *To Be the Poet*, I will briefly introduce three of these genres: the lyric essay, the poetic memoir, and prose poetry.

The lyric essay is defined as "an attempt at understanding a particular subject, in which the form of the essay performs the content," and "a means of integrating a lived experience by combining multiple generic perspectives where one genre or mode of inquiry alone has proven insufficient."<sup>31</sup> Concerning its form, the lyric essay is characterized by interruption and fragmentation. Its techniques

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<sup>30</sup> See Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, "A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 33–48.

<sup>31</sup> Sulak, and Kolosov, eds., *Family Resemblance*, section Lyric Essay, An Introduction. Kindle.

include blending and weaving narrative elements from different genres, for example myth, history, science, personal essay, or lyric poetry.<sup>32</sup>

The hybrid poetic memoir is an amalgam of two distinct but related genres that is aware of its fragmentation with respect to the whole or larger narrative; the whole being “the society or culture of which the individual is a member.”<sup>33</sup>

Prose poetry is undoubtedly a true hybrid, combining two main genres with traditionally distinct features. Prose, as distinguished from poetry, is a form of written or spoken expression that does not have a regular rhythmic pattern measured by metrical schemes or using reiteration as free verse.<sup>34</sup> The offspring of these genres, the prose poem, does not use the line breaks expected in poetry but keeps the techniques of poetry, including fragmentation, compression, repetition, rhyme, and heightened language.<sup>35</sup>

In addition to Sulak and Kolosov’s framework, Holly E. Martin published a similarly useful monograph *Writing Between Cultures* (2011) devoted to hybrid narratives of ethnic American writers, where she explores the form of narratives within their multicultural contexts, as well as the method of magic realism. Martin claims the term is an intentional oxymoron, presenting a worldview where the magical and the ordinary meet.<sup>36</sup> “Commonplace binary configurations — magic and reality, life and death, body and spirit, fact and fiction, self and other, center and margin” are equally present in the genre.<sup>37</sup> In addition to Klages, Martin also claims the equal distribution of opposing elements destabilizes the binary relation between them.<sup>38</sup> Another notable method she explores and applies to Kingston’s works is multiple subjectivity. When applied to characters, multiple subjectivity

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<sup>32</sup> See Sulak, and Kolosov, eds., *Family Resemblance*, “Lyric Essay, An Introduction” section, Kindle.

<sup>33</sup> Sulak, and Kolosov, eds., *Family Resemblance*, “Poetic Memoir, An Introduction” section, Kindle.

<sup>34</sup> William Harmon, and Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 11th ed. (New Jersey: Pearson, 2009), 441–2.

<sup>35</sup> See Sulak, and Kolosov, eds., *Family Resemblance*, “Prose Poetry, An Introduction” section, Kindle.

<sup>36</sup> See Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 21.

<sup>37</sup> Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 21.

<sup>38</sup> See Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 21.

reflects their diverse subjective perceptions of self, which become increasingly evident with the growing contrast between them.<sup>39</sup>

### 2.1.1 Genre Ambiguity of Kingston's Life Writing

The full title of Kingston's first book is *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood among Ghosts*, suggesting it consists of fragments and does not tell one complete story. In the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "memoir" has several different meanings. The primary meaning of the plural "memoirs," which resonates with the content and form of *The Woman Warrior* the most, is: "Records of events or history written from the personal knowledge or experience of the writer, or based on special sources of information."<sup>40</sup> The phrase "personal knowledge or experience" is central to Kingston's approach to recollecting history as she puts greater emphasis on how she remembers things than strictly factual information. Kingston herself says "the book is 'personal' and 'subjective' and 'singular.'"<sup>41</sup>

Autobiography is a distinct literary genre defined by the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* as "a narrative account of an extended period of some person's life, written by, or presented as having been written by, that person."<sup>42</sup> Together with memoirs, and other genres like biography, or diaries, they fall under the encompassing category of "life writing."<sup>43</sup> But there is a significant difference between an autobiography and a memoir. Sulak and Kolosov say that "a memoir, as distinguished from an autobiography, tells *a* story *from* a life, rather than *the* story *of* a life."<sup>44</sup> Marcus agrees by saying that the distinction between the two genres

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<sup>39</sup> See Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 85.

<sup>40</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "'memoirs' in memoir (n.), sense 2.a," accessed April 25, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9920800986>.

<sup>41</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers" in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 101.

<sup>42</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), s.v. "Autobiography," 29.

<sup>43</sup> See Laura Marcus, *Autobiography: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Sulak and Kolosov, *Family Resemblance*, section Poetic Memoir, An Introduction. Kindle.

typically mentions autobiography being an evocation of a life in its entirety, while memoirs cover an anecdotal portrayal of people and events.<sup>45</sup>

Despite bearing the marks of memoirs, *The Woman Warrior* is often classified as an autobiography and even analyzed as such. The most debated feature of *The Woman Warrior*, and *China Men* respectively, is the use of fiction in autobiography. Jeffery Paul Chan, a co-editor of *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* (1974) and subsequently *The Big Aiiieeeee!* (1991), issued a critical reply to Johnson doubting her authority on the matter of Chinese American literature. In addition, he disapproved of “a white publishing house distributing an obvious fiction for fact,”<sup>46</sup> and accused Kingston of misleading white Americans by inaccurately representing Chinese American culture. To that, Kingston issued a detailed response in the form of an essay “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers” published in *Asian and Western Writers in Dialogue: New Cultural Identities* in 1982. She directs the following question to critics calling her work not representative of the typical Chinese American experience: “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself?”<sup>47</sup> Kingston’s harshest critic was Chan’s co-editor Frank Chin, who attacked her writing on several occasions, and called her writing “fake” and her imaginative rewriting of Fa Mulan’s story a “device for destroying history and literature.”<sup>48</sup> Their dispute even reached a point where Frank Chin threatened Kingston with violence.<sup>49</sup> The controversy caused by these supposed misreadings and genre ambiguity was also addressed by Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong. According to her, it is important to keep in mind that Kingston had nearly no say in its

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<sup>45</sup> See Laura Marcus, *Auto/biographical Discourses: Criticism, Theory, Practice* (Manchester; New York: Manchester University Press, 1994), 3.

<sup>46</sup> Jeffery Paul Chan, “The Mysterious West,” in *Critical Essays*, 85–6.

<sup>47</sup> Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers” in *Critical Essays*, 101.

<sup>48</sup> Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *The Big Aiiieeeee!: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Penguin, 1991), 2–3.

<sup>49</sup> See Neila C. Seshachari, “Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 202.

categorization and only took heed of her publisher's suggestion to label it as non-fiction because it encompasses a variety of writings.<sup>50</sup>

One of the first critics, who praised Kingston's divergence from the traditional form of autobiography and recognized it as a memoir, was Diane Johnson in her review "Ghosts" published in the *New York Review of Books* in 1977. She praised *The Woman Warrior* for including memories and images of ancestral ghosts to paint the whole picture of a woman growing up in a tradition. Her take on the book did not escape Kingston's attention. Although Kingston focused mainly on misreadings in the earlier mentioned essay "Cultural Mis-readings", she praised Johnson for "being clever enough to see"<sup>51</sup> that she's writing a memoir. And she confirmed it, saying: "I am, as Diane Johnson says, 'slyly writing a memoir, a form which ... can neither {be} dismiss{ed} as fiction nor quarrel{ed} with as fact.'"<sup>52</sup> What Chan calls stereotypical and "obvious fiction"<sup>53</sup> is, in fact, a conscious choice of the author to convey her individual experience as truthfully and authentically as possible without worrying about the division line between fiction and fact.

Being the first and most popular book Kingston published, *The Woman Warrior* was given most attention, both positive and negative, for blending family history and fiction, but her other works are no different in that regard. As mentioned, her subsequent work titled *China Men* is characterized by similar genre ambiguity. As Kingston says, she "wrote *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as one creation, envisioning short stories that interlinked, to be published serially or as one long book."<sup>54</sup> Kingston further explains that "the stories fell naturally into two volumes. A feminist passion bound the women's stories together. The years from the Gold Rush to the end of the Chinese Exclusion acts defined the men's lives and

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<sup>50</sup> See Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy," in *Critical Essays*, 147.

<sup>51</sup> Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings" in *Critical Essays*, 102.

<sup>52</sup> Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings" in *Critical Essays*, 102.

<sup>53</sup> Jeffery Paul Chan, and Diane Johnson "The Mysterious West {and Diane Johnson's Reply}" in *Critical Essays*, 86.

<sup>54</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, afterword to *The Woman Warrior* (1976; London: Pan Macmillan, 2015), 251.

their stories.”<sup>55</sup> Compared to *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston uses a more mature approach to the immigrant history of her male family members in *China Men*.

In *Retold Stories, Untold Histories*, Ziarkowska writes that Kingston is not interested in getting history right, because the true history often excluded people she writes about.<sup>56</sup> This is particularly reflected in the narrator’s biased point of view. However, this does not mean Kingston considers history unimportant. On the contrary, Kingston refers to *China Men* as “a history book.”<sup>57</sup> While brief mythical stories are adjunct to most chapters of *China Men*, a chapter titled “The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,” describing the experience of Chinese men building the Transcontinental Railroad, is followed by “The Laws,” an encyclopedic account of the history of the Chinese in America. The chapter is intentionally placed in the middle of the book to “compensate for people’s ignorance and encourage them to do research.”<sup>58</sup> Fiction and fact are both important to Kingston and both have their place in her life writing.

### 2.1.2 Oral Tradition and Talk-story

Oral tradition is among the most prominent themes and techniques of Kingston’s hybrid work, but it is also a part of her Chinese American heritage. Kingston’s parents and relatives passed down recollections in the form of talk-stories. Lee notices that “Kingston describes ‘talk-story’ as an oral tradition, one that blurs the lines between the historical and the imaginary, the national and the domestic, reality and fantasy.”<sup>59</sup> In an interview with Islas and Yalom, Kingston says she considers oral tradition to be “very alive.”<sup>60</sup> What fascinates her is how stories change every time someone tells them depending on the circumstances and the

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<sup>55</sup> Kingston, afterword to *The Woman Warrior*, 251.

<sup>56</sup> See Joanna Ziarkowska, *Retold Stories, Untold Histories: Maxine Hong Kingston and Leslie Marmon Silko on the Politics of Imagining the Past* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 169.

<sup>57</sup> Skenazy, “Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations*, 108.

<sup>58</sup> Skenazy, “Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations*, 108.

<sup>59</sup> Lee, *Understanding*, 30.

<sup>60</sup> Arturo Islas and Marilyn Yalom, “Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations*, 31.

audience.<sup>61</sup> Compared to talk-story, the written form feels too static, unchanging, and limiting to her. As Kingston explains in a 1980 interview with Islas and Yalom, “the way I tried to solve this problem was to keep ambiguity in the writing all the time.”<sup>62</sup> This ambiguity and changeability of talk-stories is directly connected with the hybrid form, therefore oral tradition is a great contributor to hybridity in Kingston’s work.

There are a few scholars who analyzed the use of oral tradition. Among them is Mary Slowik and her insightful analysis “When the Ghosts Speak: Oral and Written Narrative Forms in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*,” which examines the role of the audience in shaping talk-stories and the role of readers in the interpretation and re-telling of the stories in written form. Debra Shostak, author of “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Fake Books,” focuses on a factor that majorly influences how stories are passed down: memory. She rightfully <sup>63</sup> Shostak explores memory as a communal phenomenon, its tendency to change within the oral tradition of storytelling, and its creative use in *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, and *Tripmaster Monkey*. In addition, her study contributes to an understanding of Kingston’s writing as a deeply personal perspective on events, which, however, does not diminish the value of historical facts.

### 2.1.3 Myths and Legends

This dynamism of oral tradition discussed in the previous section is directly related to myths and Kingston’s take on them. In most literary contexts, as stated by *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, myths “are regarded as fictional stories containing deeper truths, expressing collective attitudes to fundamental matters of life, death, divinity, and existence (sometimes deemed to be ‘universal’).”<sup>64</sup> Barthes defines myth as a type of speech, specifically a system of communication, a

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<sup>61</sup> See Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, “A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (New York: G. K. Hall, 1998), 33–48.

<sup>62</sup> Islas and Yalom, 31. Italics in the original.

<sup>63</sup> See Debra Shostak, “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Fake Books,” in *Critical Essays*, 51.

<sup>64</sup> *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, ed. Chris Baldick, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), s.v. “Myth,” 217–18.

message.<sup>65</sup> “Myth is not defined by the object of its message, but by the way in which it utters this message: there are formal limits to myth, but there are no ‘substantial’ ones.” “Everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse.”<sup>66</sup> Staying true to the oral tradition she came from, Kingston often changed the myths she wrote down in her books from the ones she heard. Again, her intention is not to record Chinese myths but to keep them alive by playing with them<sup>67</sup>, and “retelling them in a new American way.”<sup>68</sup> By doing this, Kingston is following what, according to her, illiterate Chinese peasants would do in the past: tell myths to each other and change them with each telling to derive strength from them.<sup>69</sup> For example, the reinvention of the Chinese American past in *China Men*, according to Cheung, lies in interrogating authority by recasting Chinese and American myths using the oral tradition of talk-story, and giving voice to those silenced by history.<sup>70</sup>

Kingston does not only draw from myths but also from legends. These terms are sometimes used interchangeably in monographs on Kingston, and thus need to be distinguished. In the *Oxford English Dictionary* legend is defined as a “traditional story sometimes popularly regarded as historical but not authenticated,”<sup>71</sup> and in academic discourse, it is distinguished from myth, because it usually portrays real historical figures in an earthly environment despite including some supernatural elements.<sup>72</sup> An expanded definition can be found in *A Handbook to Literature* (2009): “Legends often indicate the lore of a people and thus serve as at least partial expressions of a national spirit.”<sup>73</sup> Because Kingston

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<sup>65</sup> See Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Annette Lavers (London: Vintage, 1993), 109.

<sup>66</sup> Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, 109.

<sup>67</sup> See Kay Bonetti, 40

<sup>68</sup> Pfaff, 18.

<sup>69</sup> See Islas and Yalom, 28.

<sup>70</sup> See King-Kok Cheung, “Talk Story: Counter-Memory in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *China Men*,” *Tamkang Review* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1993): 21–37.

<sup>71</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “legend (n.), sense 1.5.a,” accessed April 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3105254236>.

<sup>72</sup> See *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “legend (n.), sense 1.5.a,” accessed April 24, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3105254236>.

<sup>73</sup> William Harmon, William Flint Thrall, Addison Hibbard, and C. Hugh Holman, *A Handbook to Literature*, 11th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall, 2009), 311.

connects to the Chinese lore through heritage, this aspect of her work has not been left out of discussions either. For example, in *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (2010) Lan Dong explores the role of *The Woman Warrior* in the transformation of the legend of Mulan, a traditional Chinese folk heroine, and notices Kingston's autobiographical portrayal of the warrior. This hybrid product of communal lore and personal experience is worth exploring further.

#### 2.1.4 Narrative Techniques

Earlier mentioned Holly Martin looked at hybrid narratives in works of ethnic writers, including Kingston. In "Maxine Hong Kingston and the Dialogic Dilemma of Asian American Writers," Amy Ling turns her attention to analyzing rich narrative techniques in *The Woman Warrior* that stem from Bakhtin's theory of hybridity, such as multiple perspectives, dialogism, heteroglossia. She also noticed the tendency to make radical shifts from fiction to real events within a book, or even a single chapter. Frederic Wakeman Jr. explores the movement from mythical history toward the tangible present within *China Men* in his essay "Chinese Ghost Story." King-Kok Cheung, on the other hand, approaches the fictionalized past as a way of filling silences and envisioning a better future.

#### 2.1.5 Sociocultural Background

In *Class Definitions* (2008) Tokarczyk examines how Kingston's working-class background shapes her writing while recognizing other equally significant layers of the author's identity, such as race and ancestry. By closely looking at the writer's life and work, she notices characteristics in writing style, form, and themes bearing the mark of a working-class woman writer, but she also acknowledges the influence of personal ambition, immigrant status, and family. Notably, the author points out the hybrid form of *The Woman Warrior* and says it is a form ideal for the story of a working-class ethnic woman writer who does not fall into a single category, finding herself on the margin. Tokarczyk's study pays special attention to Kingston's use of fiction in life writing, such as retellings of dreams and myths. She

concludes they are especially powerful in contrast to everyday struggles of gender, race, and class oppression.<sup>74</sup>

Many scholars analyze *The Woman Warrior* from a feminist perspective, highlighting the misery of Chinese women, often caused by the men, but overlook the other side of Kingston's experience represented in *China Men*. Maureen Sabine pays attention to both books in an intertextual study *Broken Book of Life* (2004). She is interested in dialogues between men and women in the two books, as well as the power of cross-referencing myths, stories, and fantasies as part of an autobiography. Sabine adopts a psychoanalytical and a feminist approach in her study, which acknowledges the aspect of Kingston's writing focused on including hopes, illusions, ghosts, and dreams in the family history.

#### 2.1.6 Research Evaluation

Although multiple scholars have identified hybridity as a characteristic property of Kingston's texts, almost none applied it in their analyses. The only one who analyzes hybridity in Kingston's work directly is Holly Martin in *Writing Between Cultures* (2011). Despite being informative and sparking discussion, this source does not provide (or is its intention to provide) a comprehensive analysis of Kingston's works. Following on from findings of theorists of the hybrid genre, the study of hybridity in experimental or ethnic literature can reveal hidden layers of writers' and characters' identities, cultural perspectives, traditions, and inspire innovation. By looking at the intersection of hybrid form and cultural hybridity in Kingston's two texts most often described as hybrid, this thesis will try to specify what makes her writing hybrid, and identify hybrid genres outlined by Sulak, Kolosov, and Martin within her work.

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<sup>74</sup> See Michelle M. Tokarczyk, *Class Definitions: On the Lives and Writings of Maxine Hong Kingston, Sandra Cisneros, and Dorothy Allison* (Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 2008), 15.

## 3 Maxine Hong Kingston: A Biography

### 3.0 Life and Work

Maxine Hong Kingston is a prominent figure in Asian American literature, who has greatly influenced the later development of life writing and the hybrid genre. Central to the imaginative quality of her work is the interplay between cultural identity, womanhood, social struggle, and literary forms. This section delves into the influence of Kingston's life experience and heritage on the hybrid nature of her writing. By outlining the pivotal events of the author's life, this section aims to gain insight into how the family storytelling tradition, the author's immigrant status, and personal experience contribute to her unique narrative style.

Maxine Ting Ting Hong was born in Stockton, California in 1940. She is the first American-born child of Ying Lan and Tom Hong, who immigrated to the United States from China; her father in 1924, and her mother in 1939. Readers of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are familiar with the stories of their journey that were passed on to the next generation of Hong family through imaginative storytelling rather than an accurate record of events. In *China Men*, Kingston recounts her father's life as a Chinese teacher and scholar going to America to pursue prosperity. Like many before them, the Hong men dreamed of a life in America and the riches it promised. However, the reality of Chinese immigrant life in America offered very little. After years of switching menial jobs, Tom Hong invested in a laundry, sent for his wife, and after living in New York City for a while, they settled in California. While her father was working on their new life in America, Kingston's mother dealt with the loss of their two children and later decided to study medicine and midwifery. Her stories with her as Brave Orchid are documented in *The Woman Warrior*.

As Diane Simmons writes in her biography of Kingston, it was in their Stockton laundry that Kingston's literary influences started to take shape. Serving as a meeting place for the Chinese community in the area, the place was full of talk-stories from China ranging from history to myth, and Kingston listened.<sup>75</sup> Although

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<sup>75</sup> See Diane Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1999), 6.

her parents were not writers, they were great storytellers. They would share secret family stories, Chinese myths and legends, and talk about dreams and superstitions, often to reprimand or warn their children. To find a haven in a house full of children with no place for herself, Kingston began to write and create a world of her own.<sup>76</sup> As a part of her heritage and cultural struggle, language is among the biggest sources of inspiration for Kingston. Madsen writes that Kingston's mother tongue is a dialect of Cantonese known as "Sup Yup" with no written form. Therefore, Kingston attended a Chinese school for Chinese American children in the evenings, where she learned to speak and write Chinese.<sup>77</sup> As Kingston said in an interview with Seshachari, mastering English brought her the freedom to write and notate anything, even Chinese.<sup>78</sup> When she was fifteen years old, she published her first essay "I Am an American" in the *Girl Scout Magazine*.

In pursuit of higher education, Kingston listened to her parents at first and took a chance at engineering, but later settled on English. At Berkeley, she continued to assert her cultural identity and voice her opinions. Simmons writes that the author joined the Free Speech movement, attended Vietnam War protests, and criticized racism towards Asians amplified by the war.<sup>79</sup> Shortly after college, Maxine Hong married Earll Kingston, and their son Joseph was born. They relocated from California to Hawaii in 1967 because, as Kingston says in an interview with Gary Kubota, they felt their protests at Berkeley had no effect, almost all their friends became addicts, and getting away from the tension of war seemed like a good idea.<sup>80</sup> Simmons notes that Hawaii was even closer to the war than California, and the Kingstons felt obliged to continue their pacifist efforts by not taking any jobs.<sup>81</sup> Kingston writes: "It was the duty of the pacifist in a war

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<sup>76</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 7.

<sup>77</sup> See Deborah L. Madsen, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, vol. 9 of *Literary Masters* (Farmington Hills: Gale Group, 2000), 9.

<sup>78</sup> See Neila C. Seshachari, "Reinventing Peace: Conversations with Tripmaster Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), 207.

<sup>79</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 11.

<sup>80</sup> See Gary Kubota, "Maxine Hong Kingston: Something Comes from Outside Onto the Paper," in *Conversations*, 3.

<sup>81</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 13.

economy not to work.”<sup>82</sup> Pacifism certainly informed Kingston’s writing and appears as a strong theme throughout her work. Eventually, Kingston returned to teaching and during that time, she began writing her first book *The Woman Warrior*, which was published in 1976. Lee states that the success of the book secured a full-time writing career for Kingston and the publication of *China Men* in 1980 established her as a prominent literary figure.<sup>83</sup>

In both books, Kingston wrote about the stories of her parent’s home country, even though she had never been in China herself. As she described in an interview with Skenazy, that changed in 1984, when she and other renowned writers, such as Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Gary Snyder, and Allen Ginsberg, traveled to China for a few weeks. Kingston desired to find her roots, her village, and her family, places she knew only from stories.<sup>84</sup> In another interview with Donna Perry, she mentions that when she arrived, people lined up to see her and, despite it being her first visit, welcomed her back to China.<sup>85</sup> The trip was an opportunity for Kingston to see the country for herself, untainted by fabrications, but also to appreciate her ancestry and see what her life would be like if her parents had not emigrated. This has been the first of Kingston’s many following trips to China.

After leaving Hawaii, she published *Hawai’i One Summer, 1978* (1987), a series of recollections of her family’s stay. *Tripmaster Monkey* was published in 1989 and remains Kingston’s only novel. After years of focusing on her own experience and writing from her point of view, Kingston assumed the role of an omniscient narrator and created a separate story for a fictional character. The next work would be “The Fourth Book of Peace,” but the manuscript was destroyed in a house fire in 1991, while Kingston was attending her father’s funeral. For the next version, Kingston adopted a different approach to writing. *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003) is a communal effort of people who offered their stories of peace and myth.

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<sup>82</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *Hawai’i One Summer* (San Francisco: Meadow Press, 1987; Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1998), 15.

<sup>83</sup> See Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 7.

<sup>84</sup> See Paul Skenazy, “Kingston at the University,” in *Conversations*, 148.

<sup>85</sup> See Donna Perry, “Maxine Hong Kingston,” in *Conversations*, 186.

Before the book was finished, Kingston shifted towards poetry in *To Be the Poet* (2002), a book of verse based on her Harvard lectures. However, peace remained a lasting hope for the author. Since the 1980s, she organized writing workshops for U.S. Vietnam War veterans needing to manage and overcome their trauma and difficulties with adapting to a new life. Their stories were published as *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* in 2006 with Kingston as the editor. The last book in Kingston's oeuvre, which appeared in 2011, is a poetic memoir *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* that offers a meditation on her life and work.

### 3.1 Kingston within the Chinese American Literary Tradition

Maxine Hong Kingston has made a great impact on Chinese American autobiography and writing in general. According to Traise Yamamoto, until the 1940s the self-representation of Asian Americans was largely seized by well-educated upper-class Asian-born authors, whose texts affirmed the perception of Asians as foreign and exotic in contrast to American culture. Their experience was vastly different from the majority of working-class non-English-speaking Asians immigrating to America. The situation changed as the first generation of U.S.-born Asian Americans matured and began to record their own and their parent's experiences in English. Still, the narratives were often mediated, translated, and highly edited to satisfy the requirements of American publishing and general readership. A pioneer of female Chinese American literary tradition, and Kingston's predecessor, is Jade Snow Wong and her book *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1950). As Yamamoto notes, her work is both a deeply personal narrative and a representation of the Chinese American community.<sup>86</sup> Julia H. Lee claims this book was a turning point for Kingston, who had only known literature that mocked Chinese people. Wong showed her that Chinese American representation mattered and steered her toward asserting her American identity.<sup>87</sup> Although Kingston

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<sup>86</sup> See Traise Yamamoto, "Asian American Autobiography/Memoir," in *The Routledge Companion to Asian American and Pacific Islander Literature*, ed. Rachel C. Lee (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016). <https://www.proquest.com/encyclopedias-reference-works/31-asian-american-autobiography-memoir-part-iii/docview/2137944213/se-2?accountid=12797>.

<sup>87</sup> See Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2018), 12–13.

continues the tradition set by Wong, the merit and originality of her work lies, as Yamamoto argues, in its defiance of categorization, exploration of truth and authenticity, and approach to storytelling.<sup>88</sup>

Over the years, Kingston won numerous awards and honors, received an honorary doctorate, and was even declared a “Living Treasure of Hawaii.” In 2013, she was awarded the National Medal of Arts by the then President Barack Obama. Most recently, she received the Academy’s Emerson-Thoreau Medal for distinguished achievement in literature from Berkeley in 2023. Still, her greatest contribution, according to Skenazy and Martin, is the cultural impact she made as a Chinese American.<sup>89</sup> For many Chinese American authors, she was an inspiration, who contributed to their freedom to write. But, as Kingston mentions in an interview from 1989, many others were turned down by publishers, who expected their work to match the norm she set.<sup>90</sup> Again, the author’s delight in literary innovation emerged when she encouraged students and young writers to find their voice and change the market rather than mimicking what was done before.<sup>91</sup> Even now, she still inspires the Asian American community of writers, interviews emerging authors, and supports the aspiring ones.

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<sup>88</sup> See Yamamoto, “Asian American Autobiography/Memoir”

<sup>89</sup> See Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin, introduction to *Conversations*, vii.

<sup>90</sup> See William Satake Blauvelt, “Talking with the Woman Warrior,” in *Conversations*, 84.

<sup>91</sup> See Blauvelt, “Talking with the Woman Warrior,” in *Conversations*, 84.

## 4 The Woman Warrior

The publication of *The Woman Warrior* was a turning point not only in autobiographical writing but in American literature in general. While some critics praised the hybrid nature of the text, others found it confusing and misleading. Instead of exploring how the mixture of various narrative techniques enhances the complexity of life as a Chinese American woman writer, they read the work as an autobiography and challenged its authenticity. *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey* also faced harsh criticism on account of the accuracy of the portrayed Chinese American experience, but Kingston's first book remains the most debated. In this chapter, I will analyze individual chapters of *The Woman Warrior* and the hybrid narratives within them.

As the title says, the book is a memoir. It consists of memories of real events, but also memories of stories. Kingston approaches memory by listening to stories and documenting what has been said. She is not concerned with looking for the truth, because for her, the way people remember things is much more valuable to how myths are made. To distinguish between the two personas of Kingston, this thesis will refer to the book's narrator as Maxine.

### 4.0 No Name Woman: A Dialogue of Three

"'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you.'"<sup>92</sup> The story of No Name Woman begins with a secret; one which is immediately shared. The narrator—Maxine—listens to her mother's talk-story of an aunt who drowned herself and her infant in a well in China a long time ago. There are several dialogues at play within this story, signaling the first method of hybridity defined by Bakhtin: dialogism. The story can be seen as an interaction between three characters—Maxine, her mother, and the no name woman—but also as a dialogue between Kingston and the reader. Additionally, Kingston considers the entire book to be "an extended exploration of the internal dialogism of three words: *Chinese*,

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<sup>92</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 3.

*American, and female.*"<sup>93</sup> Here, each character is part of their own world. The forgotten aunt belongs to the old abandoned mythical world, China. She represents the Chinese ancestors, who survive through talk-stories, and the women of China oppressed by social standards. Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid, epitomizes the first generation of Chinese American immigrants and plays the role of a cultural mediator to her daughter. Maxine is the first generation of Chinese Americans born in the US, belonging to both and neither of those cultures. Her calling is to discover and appreciate her unique identity. At the heart of their exchange is a single chain of events, which changes with retellings, offering multiple perspectives according to their individual views. As the subject of Brave Orchid and Maxine's stories, the no name aunt occupies a central role, and despite not being able to tell her first-hand version of the story, she is not a passive character. She majorly participates in the lives of both Maxine and her mother and interacts with them through the legacy of her actions.

The story is first presented by Brave Orchid to Maxine with the intention to warn her before meeting a similar end as her aunt. Maxine's mother is a storyteller and this story comes with a moral lesson and a warning: Don't do as your aunt did. Don't make this family forget you, too. She makes clear that all memory of the aunt was erased from the family history as punishment for what she did. The lesson does not concern the aunt's suicide, as one would guess, but getting pregnant while her husband was away. "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us!"<sup>94</sup> The point Maxine's mother is trying to make is that to be a girl is shameful enough but to consciously bring dishonor onto one's family is a reason to become a no name woman. The urge to caution her daughter is so strong that she breaks the family's silent agreement to never speak of the aunt. Unlike a historical report, the talk-story is free to alterations to suit one's intended purpose, such as passing on cultural lessons. Therefore, one cannot be sure of the authenticity of the mother's recollection. As a storyteller, she has the freedom to change the story based on circumstances,

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<sup>93</sup> Amy Ling, "Maxine Hong Kingston and the Dialogic Dilemma of Asian American Writers," in *Critical Essays on Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Laura E. Skandera-Trombley (New York: G. K. Hall & Co., 1998), 172.

<sup>94</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 5.

according to Kingston.<sup>95</sup> Furthermore, her view of the event is one of many and there is no way of knowing the factual side of the story. Without the aunt's personal account, the original story is untraceable, and it remains uncertain whether the factual version would be honest. Shostak maintains that the absence of an original story in the storytelling tradition indicates that anyone from that culture can reinvent stories in line with their personal and cultural values without sacrificing their power and truthfulness.<sup>96</sup> It follows that Brave Orchid's heritage and personal agenda shape the narrative dedicated to Maxine while maintaining the historical value of the story.

In contrast to the mother's sparing version of the story focused on purely necessary information, Maxine retells the story to the reader with all the imaginative details her mother refrained from. Here, Maxine consciously creates a blend of her fantasy with family history, creating a hybrid narrative. According to Skenazy and Martin, Kingston discovers new forms of narrative as she transforms myths of oppression into myths of liberation. They draw attention to Kingston's reconstructive use of her inherited tradition of talk-story and mention the self-questioning power of her unique tale-telling frame.<sup>97</sup> What her mother simply passed on, Maxine builds upon.

Growing up as a girl in her community and often being referred to as a "maggot,"<sup>98</sup> Maxine feels sympathy for the ordeal of women and girls in Chinese culture. This is especially noticeable in the retelling of her aunt's story. She empathizes with her aunt and ponders what could have happened based on second-hand information about China, which she received from her parents, as well as employing her own feminist angle. The retelling reads as an act of rebellion against her mother and a love letter to her aunt and suffering women in general. The dialogue between the characters is necessary for Maxine's understanding of what it means to be Chinese and how that fits within her own Chinese American

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<sup>95</sup> See Laura E. Skandera-Trombley, "A Conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston," in *Critical Essays*, 36.

<sup>96</sup> See Shostak, "Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Books," in *Critical Essays*, 54.

<sup>97</sup> See Skenazy and Martin, "Introduction" in *Conversations with Maxine Hong Kingston*, ed. Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998), ix.

<sup>98</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 227.

identity, marked by hybridization. Addressing the reader directly, she poses a significant question: “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?”<sup>99</sup> This suggests that Kingston’s hybrid cultural identity is undividable, which is in agreement with Bhabh’s point that hybrid cultures are “neither ‘one’ nor ‘other.’”<sup>100</sup> Although countless critics have tried to pinpoint Kingston’s influences, the author herself cannot solve this puzzle.

What hybrid narratives allow Maxine to do is to visualize the hidden details of her mother’s tale and find possible explanations for the aunt’s actions. On this quest, she explores the Chinese world through the no name woman’s eyes. Maxine recognizes part of herself in her aunt and refuses any versions of the story that are not relatable to her personal experience. For example, the image of her aunt as a wild sexual woman does not sit easily with her: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help.”<sup>101</sup> On the other hand, she is willing to perceive her as an obedient Chinese girl imprisoned by fear and expectations, as a family outcast, and also as a woman in charge, who spared her illegitimate child, likely a girl, a horrible life. Kingston shows deep empathy for the actions of the no name aunt when she writes: “Mothers who love their children take them along.”<sup>102</sup> The narrator understands the extremity of her aunt’s choice and at the same time feels the immense social pressure that determined her actions.

Being ostracized as an American in the Chinese community and as a Chinese woman in America, Kingston has a unique perspective on the cruelty of the family’s treatment of her aunt. She views their silence as the aunt’s punishment that is passed down for generations. Although Kingston admits to having participated in her punishment by keeping silent, she resolutely opposes this practice by retelling her story, publishing it, and securing a lasting remembrance. According to

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<sup>99</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 6.

<sup>100</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 181.

<sup>101</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 10.

<sup>102</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 18.

Tokarczyk, Kingston's defiance of her mother's command to remain silent results in renaming the no name woman and granting her an identity that was denied for decades.<sup>103</sup> The hybrid form of the story allows Kingston to oppose not only the character Brave Orchid but also her mother and family outside the confines of a literary work.

#### **4.1 White Tigers: Maxine and Fa Mu Lan as One**

In the second chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston incorporates the narrative of two personas—Maxine and the warrior Fa Mu Lan. In the hybrid narrative, their lives connect and create a fantastic life of a young Chinese American girl turned Chinese legendary warrior on the path of self-discovery and vengeance. The tale of Fa Mu Lan holds a prominent place in *The Woman Warrior* as it determines the name and tone of the book, focusing on all stories of women fighting for themselves and their futures. Dong contends that this particular story majorly contributed to the widespread of the Mulan legend in the U.S. despite its divergence from the traditional Mulan tales appearing throughout Chinese history.<sup>104</sup>

“White Tigers” is not simply a retelling of the legend of Mulan. It is a hybrid reflection of Kingston's identity, family storytelling tradition, and cultural heritage. The autobiographical narrator identifies with a historical figure from a legend. In her study of hybrid narratives, Martin discusses the hybrid form of multiple subjectivities in literature, which includes characters embodying multiple cultural influences within different aspects of their subjectivity.<sup>105</sup> In Kingston's case, the author uses a legendary figure as part of the character's subjectivity. Martin says: “Maxine in *The Woman Warrior* integrates her self-identity so thoroughly with the legendary female warrior Fa Mu Lan, that she speaks of the legend of Fa Mu Lan as

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<sup>103</sup> See Tokarczyk, *Class Definitions*, 61.

<sup>104</sup> Lan Dong, “The White Tiger Mythology: A Woman Warrior's Autobiography” in *Mulan's Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), accessed November 2, 2023, ProQuest Ebook Central, 93–4.

<sup>105</sup> Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 85.

part of her own personal history.”<sup>106</sup> Maxine is no longer just a storyteller but becomes an active part of the myth she creates.

In his analysis of the narrator’s identification with the character Fa Mu Lan, Dong notes that their dual first-person narratives transform the Chinese legend and reflect Maxine’s wish for an alternative to the harsh reality of her Chinese American experience.<sup>107</sup> While it is true that Kingston longed for a more active role for Chinese American girls than what had been assigned to them, Dong’s interpretation considers only Maxine’s point of view. If the two personas are truly unified in a hybrid, Fa Mu Lan’s identification with Maxine matters just as much. The storyteller and the legendary warrior merge to explore each other’s worlds. In her portrayal of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston’s childhood self becomes the embodiment of a fierce warrior, reconnecting with her ancestry, and experiencing the legends and atmosphere of ancient China. Fa Mu Lan, on the other hand, takes on the role of a real-world woman warrior, confronting the challenges of womanhood, including a period, pregnancy, and patronizing attitudes of men.

Similarly to other tales in this volume, Kingston draws a connection between her own narrative and the stories she heard from her mother. In this instance, she juxtaposes two contrasting implications of her mother’s stories: girls ought to become wives and slaves, but also fearless warriors. Grice notices Maxine faces a choice between becoming a woman warrior, or a no-name woman, the two visions of her ancestral culture.<sup>108</sup> Enthralled by the song of Fa Mu Lan and burdened with patriarchal demands, Maxine’s only choice is to “grow up a warrior woman.”<sup>109</sup>

In the storyline, after Maxine decides to become a warrior, the narrative structure mimics the sensation of drifting into a dream. Dreams blend with reality and fiction blends with non-fiction, which is exactly the experience Maxine describes when talking about listening to her mother talk story while falling

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<sup>106</sup> Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 92.

<sup>107</sup> See Lan Dong, *Mulan’s Legend and Legacy in China and the United States* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2010), 96, ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>108</sup> See Helena Grice, *Maxine Hong Kingston* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2006), 22.

<sup>109</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 24.

asleep: "I couldn't tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep."<sup>110</sup> First, the narrator fantasizes about accepting a bird's call to become a warrior in the future perfect tense, evoking the fantasies of a conscious state. When the narrator finds herself outside the door of an elderly couple, she switches to the past simple and narrates the rest of the story in first person as if telling about a dream she had.

Kingston considers dreams to be essential to the imaginative lives of the people she writes about and thus inseparable from a truthful memoir.<sup>111</sup> Dreams, whether subconscious or deliberate, individual or communal, are part of Kingston's narrative strategy, and contribute to the hybrid form that resists categorization. Kingston's new form of life writing allowed her to tell "where the lineage of the stories themselves come from,"<sup>112</sup> and thus focus on real people but also their dreams and their significance. Sharing dreams and visions is part of Kingston's family custom of talk-story. The experience of sharing dreams and visions through talk-story according to the family tradition<sup>113</sup> in effect greatly influenced the hybrid form she employs.

In the second part of the chapter, the narrator finds herself in the mountains, at the doorstep of an old couple that would take her in and train her for fifteen years to become a warrior, a champion of China. The mountain section marks Kingston's ascent to magical realism, a hybrid form combining the ordinary and the supernatural. The hut, the mountains, and even the people themselves are surrounded by mystical forces, which test and guide the young girl on her journey. Although the narrator expects natural laws and forces to work, she is not surprised when the supernatural takes hold. She observes her parents on the surface of the water, pine needles arranging themselves, or a rabbit jumping into a fire to sacrifice itself for her. She endured endless painful exercises, such as kneeling until her legs

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<sup>110</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 24.

<sup>111</sup> See Phyllis Hoge Thompson, "This is the Story I Heard: A Conversation With Maxine Hong Kingston and Earll Kingston," *Biography* 6, no. 1 (Winter 1983), 9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23539174>.

<sup>112</sup> William Satake Blauvelt, "Talking with the Woman Warrior," in *Conversations*, 83.

<sup>113</sup> See William Satake Blauvelt, "Talking with the Woman Warrior," in *Conversations*, 82.

would cramp, moving her body in circles, and surviving in the mountains of white tigers on her own, which no ordinary man would live through.

In her analysis of hybrid ethnic literature, Martin refers to Wendy Faris's article "Scheherazade's Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction," which provides five essential characteristics of magical realism. One of them alludes to the power of magical realism to question received ideas about time, space, and identity,<sup>114</sup> which correspond to Kingston's aspiration for a work transcending those brackets, and appears throughout "White Tigers." Towards the end of the warrior's survival test, she sees whole cultures and nationalities dancing, and native and religious bells of every corner of the Earth ring and transform into lion's fur. The realization of being part of humanity and all traditions at the same time signifies the narrator's cultural awakening and transcendence. Time becomes relative to the warrior as well when she looks into the future: "Then the dancers danced the future – a machine-future – in clothes I had never seen before."<sup>115</sup> Perhaps the most significant moment with respect to crossing boundaries of time, space, identity, literature, and the world outside a written work is the following switch to present tense:

I am watching the centuries pass in moments because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star. And I understand how working and hoeing are dancing; how peasant clothes are golden, as kings' clothes are golden; how one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman.<sup>116</sup>

In the present continuous, Kingston abandons her role as a storyteller and enters the narrative. All three women thus share the experience of transcending the boundaries of time and societal roles. In this quote, Kingston connects her identity with the broader human experience as well as her characters. This account

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<sup>114</sup> See Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 34.

<sup>115</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 32.

<sup>116</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 32–3.

manifests Kingston's accomplishment to entwine the lives of people, Maxine, Fa Mu Lan, and herself using the hybrid technique of magical realism.

When the warrior reaches the end of her training, she returns to her parents' home and assumes her father's place in the war against Huns. At that point, magical realism recedes and is replaced by a mosaic of legends and folk stories. For example, she combines the legend of Fa Mu Lan with the story of a man Yüch Fei, who had words carved into his back. In Kingston's changed version of the myth, Fa Mu Lan's parents carve their oaths and names into her back. The author says that she gives men's stories to the women to fortify their position in the feminist war happening in *The Woman Warrior*.<sup>117</sup> Similarly to appropriating the story of Yüch Fei, the woman warrior claims the respect of men no woman would normally gain. Fa Mu Lan's pregnancy, another feminist addition, is placed among the heroine's war achievements and stands in contrast to their mythical nature. While she defeats mythical enemies, such as a snake concealed as a giant, her pregnancy is part of ordinary life, just as menstruation she wished to control with her supernatural ability. Kingston conveys this message through the warrior's old mentor: "You don't stop shitting and pissing," she said. "It's the same with the blood. Let it run. ('Let it walk' in Chinese.)"<sup>118</sup> Comparably, the warrior does not let pregnancy hinder her combat, lets it progress, and uses it to her advantage to appear as "a powerful, big man."<sup>119</sup>

When the war is won, Fa Mu Lan returns home and avenges her brothers and other villagers by killing the baron and his accomplices, who drafted men for war and stole from the poor. Although this brutality goes against Kingston's pacifist convictions, the narrator releases suppressed anger stemming from the hate towards girls the author heard in childhood. In the heroine's confrontation with the baron, she introduces herself as the female avenger. Mised, the baron assumes the soldier has come to avenge the women he assaulted and defends his actions by quoting popular sayings on account of girls being "maggots in the rice" and less

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<sup>117</sup> See Bonetti, "An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston" in *Conversations*, 40.

<sup>118</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 37.

<sup>119</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 48.

profitable than geese.<sup>120</sup> The baron's lack of respect for women provokes the warrior to cut off his head.

While the imaginative quality and hybrid form of the text are acknowledged by many, scholars still make comparisons to a traditional version of the legend, such as Helena Grice in *Maxine Hong Kingston* (2006). Frank Chin accused the narrative of being "a device for destroying history and literature."<sup>121</sup> Kingston, on the other hand, believes that "mythology and stories and rituals change to give you strength under present circumstances" or else they die.<sup>122</sup> This view enlightens the motifs behind using myth as part of an autobiographical work, as *The Woman Warrior* is publicized. Just as hybrid genres cannot be reduced to only one of their components, "White Tigers" cannot be read as the most authentic version of the legend of Fa Mu Lan, but as a retold myth that gives Kingston strength under her circumstances.

## **4.2 Shaman: Battling Chinese and American Ghosts**

"Shaman" is a story centering on Brave Orchid's life in China and later in America. The mother's journey falls into two parts divided by both form and place. Kingston shifts from a highly imaginative retelling of her mother's life in China to a more realistic and personal memoir of Brave Orchid's life in America. As in the rest of Kingston's texts, the more distant she is from the life of her ancestors, the more she draws on myths and her imagination in crafting their stories.

### **4.2.0 Weaving Brave Orchid's Life in China**

The period before Kingston was born, when her father was already in the U.S. and her mother was still in China, is veiled in mystery for the author. She heard confusing information and was left to make sense of their contradicting stories. Her mother (Brave Orchid) specifically likes to keep some things about herself secret, while being very forthcoming about others. For example, she would show

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<sup>120</sup> See Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 48.

<sup>121</sup> Jeffery Paul Chan, Frank Chin, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, eds., *The Big Aiiieeee!/: An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* (New York: Penguin Group, 1991), 3.

<sup>122</sup> Kay Bonetti, "An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston" in *Conversations*, 42.

her medical diploma—directly proving what she achieved—but never declare her age to anybody.<sup>123</sup> Even when inquiring about a strange stain on her mother’s photograph, Maxine gets ambiguous answers that change every time she asks about it. “‘Mother, did bangs come into fashion after you had the picture taken?’ One time she said yes. Another time when I asked, ‘Why do you have fingerprints on your forehead?’ she said, ‘Your First Uncle did that.’ I disliked the unsureness in her voice.”<sup>124</sup> Just as Maxine cannot be sure which answer to believe, the reader cannot tell history and fiction apart in “Shaman.” Kingston uses all the strands and snippets of Brave Orchid’s life, her customs, the Chinese myths, and the bottomless talk-stories her mother used to tell and weaves them into a powerful hybrid narrative.

The chapter title “Shaman” suggests that the story goes beyond factual accounts to explore deeper dimensions of her mother’s life and profession, including themes of cultural heritage, Chinese mythology, oral tradition, and gender roles. Most importantly, it is the imaginative property and hybrid form of the text that allows Kingston to explore all these themes within a seemingly autobiographical narrative. Similarly to “White Tigers,” where a legendary warrior is part of Maxine’s subjectivity, Brave Orchid surpasses her actual medical profession and becomes a shaman with knowledge of the spiritual world. According to the *OED*, a shaman is “a person regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits, and who practices magic or sorcery for the purpose of healing, divination, etc., typically by entering a trance state.”<sup>125</sup> Brave Orchid might be a midwife in real life, but in Maxine’s fantasy, she is a healer with power and knowledge out of this world.

Kingston incorporates not only the factual details but also the myriad of talk-stories, myths, and old wife’s tales she heard from her mother growing up to capture her mother's essence fully. In this case, Maxine is the storyteller and her mother is the folk heroine. At first, Maxine rationally recounts the challenging

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<sup>123</sup> See Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 68.

<sup>124</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 71.

<sup>125</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “shaman (n.), sense 1,” accessed May 1, 2024, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6714805389>.

beginnings of Brave Orchid's life and studies at the School of Midwifery. She mentions her everyday struggles with studying and expectations that she was afraid she would not live up to. "Older people were expected to be smarter... She did not want to overhear students or teachers say, 'She must be exceedingly stupid, doing no better than anyone else when she is a generation older.'"<sup>126</sup> These real-life personal struggles make the beginning of the story believable and authentic, characteristic of a memoir. The genre changes from memoir to magical realism when a haunted dormitory room and ghosts are introduced. The motif of ghosts is recurrent throughout the book, but in this story specifically, they signify a character's transformation.

Brave Orchid, the name carrying a symbolic meaning in this case, willingly decides to spend a night in the haunted room to prove to her roommates there are no ghosts. Before this, she is described as "a practical woman, [who] could not invent stories and told only true ones," and also a "dragoness ... [that] fanned out her dragon claws and riffled her red sequin scales and unfolded her coiling green stripes" during danger.<sup>127</sup> She seems very pragmatic, tenacious, and wise, but the fear of Chinese ghosts is burrowed deep within her. "Listen,' she said, 'if I am very afraid when you find me, don't forget to tweak my ears. Call my name and tell me how to go home.'"<sup>128</sup> The text juxtaposes the mother's formal education and her inherited knowledge of Chinese folklore. During the night in a haunted room, Brave Orchid is at first surprised by, but later confronts a Sitting Ghost—a creature sitting so heavy on her chest she cannot move. When she wakes up, her roommates call her name as she asked, and celebrate her bravery. She is changed, as if getting possessed. Her mind suddenly opens to a spiritual understanding and she abandons her pragmatic attitude. "I died for a while ... [f]or ten years I lost my way ... I walked from the Gobi Desert to this room in the To Keung School ... I did not die ... Good people do not lose to ghosts."<sup>129</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 76.

<sup>127</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 78–9.

<sup>128</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 80.

<sup>129</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 86.

Simmons notices a connection between the death of Brave Orchid's two children and her transformation into a village shaman. According to her, Brave Orchid is urged by the loss of her children to take care of others like a traditional shaman by studying to become a doctor.<sup>130</sup> The role of a medical doctor and shaman form a hybrid, which is rather paradoxical, as Simmons notices.<sup>131</sup> Brave Orchid finds herself fighting the spiritual dangers as well as the scientific ones. "The danger is not over. The ghost is listening to us right now, and tonight it will walk again but stronger ... You have to help me rid the world of this disease, as invisible and deadly as bacteria."<sup>132</sup> Later, as a practicing midwife, she continues to face ghosts while assisting births. "My mother saw them come out of cervixes. Medical science does not seal the earth, whose nether creatures seep out, hair by hair, disguised like the smoke that dispels them."<sup>133</sup> It is apparent that the profession haunts Brave Orchid, perhaps because she lost her first two children, but she is among the strong ones who can resist and fight the countless ghosts that frighten her.

#### 4.2.1 Among American Ghosts

Magic realism recedes when Brave Orchid comes to America to live with her husband. Mythical Chinese ghosts are replaced by real-life American ghosts: Taxi Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Newsboy Ghosts, White Ghosts, Black Ghosts, or Gypsy Ghosts. As Tokarczyk explains, in this case, ghosts are non-Chinese people, but when a Chinese American person is acting strangely, the word refers to them as well.<sup>134</sup> Although the two worlds—China and America—could not be more different, Brave Orchid finds a way to be strong and adapt to life in the "terrible ghost country."<sup>135</sup> Being part of the first generation of Chinese immigrants in America with no knowledge of English, she cannot continue working as a midwife

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<sup>130</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 75.

<sup>131</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 76.

<sup>132</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 87.

<sup>133</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 99.

<sup>134</sup> See Tokarczyk, *Class Definitions*, 65.

<sup>135</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 124.

in America. She makes do laboring in a laundry to feed her children, happy not to be starving, but longing for the life she left behind.

As an old shaman, Brave Orchid has a candid conversation with a much older, silver-haired Maxine, who happens to be sick when visiting her mother. In this interaction, a motif of disharmony emerges between Brave Orchid and Maxine, illustrating the complexity of their mother-daughter relationship. Despite Brave Orchid's role as the family shaman and her care for Maxine's well-being, Maxine resists her mother's healing powers and often falls ill during her visits, suggesting a certain incompatibility between them. Furthermore, Brave Orchid confesses her overwhelming nostalgia for days in China, most likely caused by the revelation that their property in China has been finally taken over. Afraid of losing all ties to her homeland and having no family around, Brave Orchid reaches out to Maxine, seeking to bind her to the house, which is hard for Maxine to deny her mother. "How can I bear to leave her again?"<sup>136</sup>

This expression of vulnerability and fear paired with her inability to keep her daughter healthy contrasts with Brave Orchid's young Chinese self that battled ghosts, climbed mountains to attend births, and crossed oceans to be with her husband. In America, she reminisces about life in China and complains about the hard American life. "Time was different in China. One year lasted as long as my total time here; one evening so long, you could visit your women friends, drink tea, and play cards at each house, and it would still be twilight."<sup>137</sup> She feels China slipping away but is too changed to go back. "I've gotten used to eating. And the Communists are much too mischievous."<sup>138</sup> In this intimate confession, Brave Orchid leaves myths and becomes real. The radical shift from myth to reality as the story moves across borders allows readers to compare Maxine's idea of her mother from the stories she used to tell with the real emotionally dependent mother who needs taking care of.

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<sup>136</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 120.

<sup>137</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 126.

<sup>138</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 127.

### 4.3 At the Western Palace: A Tragedy of Not Belonging

The only chapter of *The Woman Warrior* that is not a first-person narrative is “At the Western Palace,” an account of Brave Orchid’s sister—Moon Orchid—visit to America. In the context of the other imaginative stories in this book, the form of this story is strikingly conventional. A third-person narrator focuses on Brave Orchid’s point of view, and therefore Moon Orchid’s experience is mediated through her account of events. Furthermore, Maxine is a background character and does not interfere with the story as she normally would. Maxine and her siblings in general are referred to as Brave Orchid’s children. The central characters are the two elderly sisters with clashing personalities: Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid.

The absence of the experimental hybrid form leaves more room for the tragic story of the sister, who was renounced by her husband and could not survive in America. Nevertheless, hybridity is still part of this story. One of the major themes is cultural hybridity. Coming from a different cultural and social background, Moon Orchid experiences a major shock when she joins her family in America. The culture she belongs to is not hybrid, but purely Chinese. Brave Orchid, on the other hand, has somewhat adopted American culture and at the same time still celebrates her Chinese heritage, characteristic of a hybrid culture. The sister is not willing or capable of following Brave Orchid’s example. Simmons notes that Moon Orchid is not capable of becoming the fighter that establishes order in the chaotic American world, like her sister, and compares her to a tourist instead.<sup>139</sup> It is apparent that America is an alien world for Moon Orchid. She does not understand how Brave Orchid’s children can speak English better than Chinese or why they do not behave modestly like Chinese children.<sup>140</sup>

The necessity of working endless hours is also lost on Moon Orchid. In Hong Kong, her husband’s money bought her servants and anything she could think of.<sup>141</sup> In America, the Hong family has to work hard to put food on the table. Although Moon Orchid enthusiastically offers to help with the work at the family laundry, she

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<sup>139</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 88.

<sup>140</sup> See Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 157–8.

<sup>141</sup> See Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 181.

does not realize how hard and effectively one has to work to stay alive in this country and regards the work as entertainment. Her naivety extends to her perception of everything outside of what she was accustomed to in China. “So this is the United States,’ Moon Orchid said. ‘It certainly looks different from China. I’m glad to see the Americans talk like us.’ Brave Orchid was again startled at her sister’s denseness. ‘These aren’t the Americans. These are the overseas Chinese.’”<sup>142</sup> Moon Orchid’s not recognizing Chinese immigrants proves how foreign the lives of Chinese Americans feel to her.

The theme of female strength, appearing throughout the book, is connected with cultural hybridity in this story. Brave Orchid embodies the resilience of a shaman needed to survive as a Chinese woman in both a patriarchal society and America. In contrast, Moon Orchid lacks such assertiveness. While Brave Orchid is scheming how to confront Moon Orchid’s husband for cheating and planning a new life for her sister in America, Moon Orchid is paralyzed by fear, clinging to the familiar and longing to return to Hong Kong. Moon Orchid’s husband went to America for work but, unlike her sister’s husband, never sent for her. According to Simmons, most Chinese wives were not permitted into the U.S. until 1952.<sup>143</sup> To compensate for that, Moon Orchid’s husband sent money to China and supported their daughter’s college education, considering himself “a good husband.”<sup>144</sup> Moon Orchid grew accustomed to the solitary life there and does not see the point in changing her ways. During their confrontation, her husband’s dismissive words confirm her conviction: “It’s a mistake for you to be here. You can’t belong. You don’t have the hardness for this country.”<sup>145</sup> He has been able to start a new life, but clearly states there is no place for her in his life or America.

Moon Orchid tragically loses her mind and passes away despite her sister’s best efforts to “anchor her sister to this earth.”<sup>146</sup> Brave Orchid uses the same strategy she bid her roommates to choose had she lost her mind in the haunted

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<sup>142</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 160.

<sup>143</sup> See Simmons, *Maxine Hong Kingston*, 86.

<sup>144</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 181.

<sup>145</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 180.

<sup>146</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 186.

room in “Shaman.” “Brave Orchid tweaked her sister’s ears for hours, chanting the new address to her.”<sup>147</sup> In a mental asylum, she finds other like-minded people who cannot adapt to modern American life. “We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, I understand them.”<sup>148</sup> Similarly, Martin claims Moon Orchid’s condition and demise are “a result of her inability to adapt to the cultural differences she encounters in the United States, particularly the language.”<sup>149</sup> While Brave Orchid fought off her ghosts by accepting the change in “Shaman” and came back home, Moon Orchid never adapted. She lost her metaphorical battle and her sanity never returned.

#### **4.4 A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe: An Outlaw Knot-maker**

“If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker. ... Maybe that’s why my mother cut my tongue.”<sup>150</sup> The last chapter in *The Woman Warrior* is Maxine’s self-reflexive story that explores her journey to finding a voice and showcasing her storytelling abilities. Just like hybrid genres, Maxine is full of paradoxes. The ability to weave complex stories of myth and family histories contrasts with Maxine’s childhood silence that, in some form, pervades to adulthood. “When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two.”<sup>151</sup> For a girl who has so much to say, silence becomes maddening. At school, she picks a timid soft-spoken girl and bullies her for the same flaws she finds in herself, forcing her to speak. Maxine is overly critical of herself in this chapter. For one, she cannot stand being silent and passive, but when she becomes loud and aggressive, she falls sick with a mysterious illness and stays at home for a year and a half, almost as repentance.

At the heart of Maxine’s memoirs is a theme of deep understanding. Maxine is constantly trying to explain herself and let herself be known but she is met with

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<sup>147</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 185.

<sup>148</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 189.

<sup>149</sup> Martin, *Writing Between Cultures*, 138.

<sup>150</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 194.

<sup>151</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 195.

dismissive attitudes and confusion. When thinking about her daydreams, Maxine confides in her sister: “‘Uh,’ ... ‘do you talk to people that aren’t real inside your mind?’ ‘Do I *what?*’ she said. ... My sister, my almost-twin, the person most like me in all the world, had said, ‘*What?*’”<sup>152</sup> Misunderstood, Maxine lets her frustration build up until it hurts her throat, tightening her vocal cords to a snapping point.<sup>153</sup> Kingston allows Maxine to relax her throat and battle with her mother, the “champion talker,” in a stream of uncensored thoughts and reproach. Similarly to the situation where Maxine bullied her classmate, she uses this confrontation to assert her worth and fight her insecurities. This time, however, she aims her anger at a person who is responsible for many of her feelings of low worth. Maxine final stand is supplied by the mother’s last talk-story “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” where a woman called Ts’ai Yen is finally understood by her family after writing about her past life and family in China. Parallel to the last chapter, and the whole book, the final mythical story concludes Kingston’s self-reflexive hybrid writing.

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<sup>152</sup> Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 225.

<sup>153</sup> See Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 238.

## 5 To Be the Poet

While laboring over finishing *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston begins *To Be the Poet* with a lecture delivered at Harvard in 2000 titled “I Choose the Poet’s Life,” which focuses on the change in her writing career. She declares to set prose aside and turn to poetry: “I have almost finished my longbook. Let my life as a Poet begin.”<sup>154</sup> Lee notes that advertising this shift so publicly only reflects her prominence as a prose writer.<sup>155</sup> To Kingston, this change is a step to the unknown, however, Lee argues her prose has always borne the mark of poetry.<sup>156</sup> According to Kingston, the form of poetry offers the freedom to spend time as one likes and not be crushed by the exhausting process of writing a book of prose.<sup>157</sup> She yearns to be an artist—a poet, not a workhorse—a prosaist. She confesses her own poetry is still the result of will rather than the spontaneity she imagines true poets are blessed with. What intrigues her about poetry is the easiness and anything-goes attitude, which again contrasts with the tediousness of revising prose. Switching genres is a reward for Kingston, a chance at an easier and more beautiful life. In the lecture, she sets out to become a poet and invites her students to join her.

Having taught creative writing at Berkeley for thirteen years, Kingston’s pedagogical background likely contributes to the use of specific instructions for crafting poetry. Ted Sexauer, a veteran from her writing workshop, suggested a guideline for finding one’s way to poetry. Kingston uses his seven-step exercise in the beginning of her new journey to transition into poetry. The first step is focused on putting one’s current feelings in writing. The second step is repeating the same, only with eyes closed. The third step switches the poet’s focus to their surroundings and instructs them to note what they see. The fourth step circles back to closing one’s eyes, acknowledging and writing down one’s feelings. The fifth step is again opening one’s eyes, noticing the environment, and writing what one sees. The sixth step instructs the poet to repeat the process as many times as

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<sup>154</sup> Maxine Hong Kingston, *To Be the Poet* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>155</sup> See Julia H. Lee, *Understanding Maxine Hong Kingston*, 96.

<sup>156</sup> See *Understanding*, 95.

<sup>157</sup> See *To Be the Poet*, 6.

necessary. And finally, the seventh step allows the poet to find their own way to put the words together.<sup>158</sup> These steps serve as a guide for Kingston, her students, and by extension the reader to access poetry and their feelings.

The second part of the book called “I Call on the Muses of Poetry, and Here’s What I Get” consists of journal entries and documents Kingston’s journey of understanding poetry and becoming a poet. Among the entries, there are poems created by following the seven-step writing exercise, Kingston’s reflections on what memories and thoughts came to her, and even drawings of things she sees around her. It is as much an exploration of form as it is a documentation of the process behind becoming a poet. The commentary accompanying the lines of poetry signifies some reluctance to fully commit to a new form, but it can be also viewed as a thorough observation of the change Kingston embarks on, which is valuable on its own. The work is a thorough examination and record of the unknown: poetry in general, and Kingston—the poet.

The act of comprehension is central to this part. What she shares with readers and students is not only the product of her creative process but the methods themselves. Sulak defines work which is aware of being an act of perception as a hybrid genre called lyric essay.<sup>159</sup> The part “I Call on the Muses of Poetry, and Here’s What I Get” can be classified as such. The lyric essay is defined as “an attempt at understanding a particular subject, in which the form of the essay performs the content.”<sup>160</sup> As mentioned, Kingston is using essayistic elements to grasp poetry writing. This form is unique to her circumstances of slowly transitioning from prose to poetry. More importantly, the hybrid form allows her to fully immerse in the poet’s life—to live in the moment. Sometimes that is expressed by poems, sometimes by narration, and sometimes by a commentary, together creating a collage of perspectives.

As the section title “I Call on the Muses of Poetry, and Here’s What I Get” suggests, the author is open and honest about her process of finding her way to poetry and using various forms to do so. With respect to form, the lyric essay

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<sup>158</sup> See *To Be the Poet*, 25–6.

<sup>159</sup> See *Family Resemblance*, section Lyric Essay, An Introduction. Kindle.

<sup>160</sup> *Family Resemblance*, section Lyric Essay, An Introduction. Kindle.

utilizes fragmentation and interruption by mixing narrative features from different genres, such as personal essay or lyric poetry.<sup>161</sup> Often, Kingston scatters lines of poetry across the entries mimicking random but pressing thoughts. Other times, she comments in prose on poetry she produced. However, the commentary following the poems is often self-critical. She writes: “I am not satisfied with this jotting as a poem. I have the prosewriter’s desire for more story. For more.”<sup>162</sup> These prose ruminations indicate that Kingston chooses this form as the main mode of expression and is not comfortable with the limits of poetry yet. Hence, prose can be viewed as her preferred style for getting familiar with the new genre. The following intermission between steps in her first attempt at the writing exercise is an example of that: “I am writing in lines! I get an instinct where to break, and jump—space. Could you hear that there are lines? Somehow different from sentences in a paragraph?”<sup>163</sup> All these fragmented thoughts contribute to a deep understanding of the process. Instead of simply reading poetry, the reader becomes aware of how poetry is created.

As Kingston improves her skills, she gravitates towards combining the forms and the entries assume the hybrid form of prose poetry. This particular form does not use line breaks but preserves other characteristics of poetry, such as fragmentation, compression, repetition, rhyme, and rhythm.<sup>164</sup> The following entry from Kingston’s journal is written wholly in prose poetry:

March 27      I am 59 years and 5 months old, on an airplane. I can write prose on plane rides, and in the car as Earll drives. Engines—inertia takes over the body—do not allow me tides. (Feelings come and feelings go, leave and return like the tide. And the words are like tide lines.) The flow and

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<sup>161</sup> See *Family Resemblance*, section Lyric Essay, An Introduction. Kindle.

<sup>162</sup> *To Be the Poet*, 29.

<sup>163</sup> *To Be the Poet*, 33.

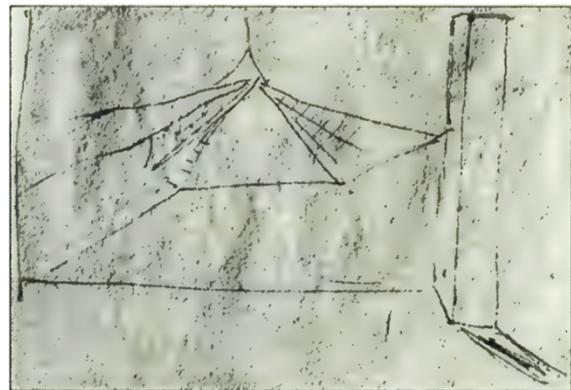
<sup>164</sup> See *Family Resemblance*, section Prose Poetry, An Introduction. Kindle.

wash have stopped. I need to arrive and settle in. Gary Snyder's advice: Stay put. Yes, the happy life is one in which I get to stay home.<sup>165</sup>

In contrast to Kingston's usual prose, this example features short, compressed sentences that accentuate the rhythm. Rhyming words like "rides," "drives," and "tides" add to the poetic pattern as well. There are instances of repetition, such as "feelings come and feelings go," which mimic the way tides move, as Kingston, in fact, puts it. In addition, "tide" is an example of poetic language, which Kingston likes to use even in more prosaic writing. Despite the writer's worry that lyric poems come to the young, this prose poem expresses lyricism rather well. It focuses on how traveling only allows for writing prose and prevents her ability to write poetry, thus contradicting itself. "Engines [...] do not allow me tides," meaning during car rides or flights she is not capable of being in touch with her feelings, which are necessary for her to create poetry. The lyric quality lies in her emotional reflection on this problem and in the mindful contradiction of her poetic capability, which permeates the whole volume.

Moreover, Kingston extends her exploration of poetry into diverse media. The hybrid form she employs to navigate poetry writing makes it possible to include visual elements, specifically drawings. The first time a drawing occurs is during a step of the writing exercise

that requires looking around. Kingston writes: "Peeking outside: Spider web. Impatient for words, I'll draw the spider web."<sup>166</sup> Just as words and verses, the illustrations are fragments of the poet's development. First used to quickly access a more fitting depiction of her surroundings, the drawings become



**Figure 1** Spider Web (*To Be the Poet*, 34)

more frequent as Kingston ventures deeper into poetry. This might signal the need for more background information, a concern that Kingston voiced regarding

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<sup>165</sup> *To Be the Poet*, 49.

<sup>166</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 34.

poetry's limited capacity as opposed to prose. In this sense, pictures can be viewed as a substitution for Kingston's usual form of expression. Later in the section "Spring Harvest," Kingston expands on what words and pictures can and cannot portray. Lee states that Kingston as a poet does not feel a word or a picture can express the complexity of experience.<sup>167</sup>

The third and final part of the book titled "Spring Harvest" continues as a notebook, but features finished poems. Similar to the titles of previous sections, this name also marks the stage of Kingston's poetic endeavor. "Spring" is the period she dedicates to poetry writing and "harvest" is a metaphor for completing her notebook and selecting poems fit for reading to the public—just as picking fruit for consumption. The self-reflexive and skeptical tone noticeable in the prose of previous sections permeates this part as well and often leads to contradictions. For example, the poem "Another waking up," which speaks of a desire to commit suicide, is followed by this visceral reaction: "Oh no, such unhappiness cannot be poetry. I refuse that one."<sup>168</sup> There are themes Kingston wants to avoid in poetry but includes nonetheless. Previously, she also wrote that "worries, ignoble thoughts, and petty feelings do not poetry make."<sup>169</sup> The notion that there are "non-poetic" worries or thoughts is not accurate and Kingston proves that by publishing them as poetry. As it happens, doubts and self-evaluation are just as important for Kingston to share as the finalized poems. This honesty is characteristic of all of Kingston's writing. What makes Kingston think some themes are not poetic is perhaps her own vision of poetry as encouraging rather than anxiety-ridden. This concept of poetry does not delve deep into painful feelings, but uplifts the author and provides an escape from her extensive prose work, referred to as the "longbook."

Some fragments of the process of making poetry introduced in the second section are present in the last section too, and even include Kingston's sense of humor, which Lee notices in her study as well. Kingston, for example, discovers the function of stanza breaks after writing poetry for months. She writes: "I've

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<sup>167</sup> See Lee, *Understanding*, 99.

<sup>168</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 71.

<sup>169</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 35.

discovered what stanza breaks are for. In the space, breathe. Before and after the poem, breathe. I can pause, raise my hand, and conduct your breathing.”<sup>170</sup>

Although amusing within the framework of a book of poetry, this breakthrough signals that one acquires knowledge through experimentation. The volume is thus a learning process, aiming to uncover new insights, not a perfected work of an expert with years of premeditation. Lee, on the other hand, views this particular excerpt as indicative of Kingston’s dedication to the mastery of form and technique.<sup>171</sup>

Besides this discovery, Kingston remembers and puts into practice a Chinese tradition of four-word poems. Like the writer says, this shortened form of poetry offers a simple form, which anyone can experiment with. “Easier, faster than haiku. / To carve on rocks. / To write on doorjambs. / To write on thresholds. / To tattoo on arms.”<sup>172</sup> Here, Kingston explains through examples and introduces the reader to an old tradition that she holds dear. It is close to the performative hybrid genre. Similarly to performing myths by retelling and shaping, the tradition is performed through creating poetry, not described or told of. Aside from the hybrid form, Kingston’s experimentation involves cultural hybridity. Her inclination toward combining the individuality of both countries—China and America—appears in the following example:

The oldest prayer is a four-word poem:

“May all beings be happy.”

Well, that’s sayable in four words in Chinese.

“All beings be happy.”

“All beings be peaceful.”

All beings be kind.

“All beings be free.”

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<sup>170</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 80.

<sup>171</sup>

<sup>172</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 92.

That line about being kind, I made up. A very American four-word poem.  
Kindness takes going into action.<sup>173</sup>

The original Chinese prayer is translated by Kingston into English using five words instead of four. Translation from Chinese into English is part of the writer's hybrid identity that allows her to effortlessly move between two cultures and benefit from their knowledge and traditions. The oldest prayer is followed by another three—presumably also Chinese—prayers she knows and one of her own making that represents both Kingston's pacifism and her American identity. Kindness is one of Kingston's hopes for mankind and she dedicates it a large part of her oeuvre.

*To Be the Poet* is no different from Kingston's other manuscripts in that regard. The last poem of the collection features an alternate ending of the story of Fa Mulan, which does not portray her as an eternal warrior but as a peacemaker.

The poem of Fa Mulan becomes the ending for the "longbook" *The Fifth Book of Peace* as well. Kingston owes this to her pursuit of poetry: "If I hadn't put myself into a poetic state, I wouldn't have thought to end this way. I went through a poetry door and came out of the war story."<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>173</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 93.

<sup>174</sup> Kingston, *To Be the Poet*, 111.

## 6 Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to describe the concept of hybridity and hybrid genres, then illustrate them and their techniques on selected works of Maxine Hong Kingston. Hybrid elements present in *The Woman Warrior* and *To Be the Poet* were discussed in terms of their form and genre, as well as their contribution in conveying the works' complex cultural themes.

*The Woman Warrior* analysis argued that the described hybrid elements were particularly effective at expressing Kingston's unique cultural background and the perception of her experiences as a Chinese American woman.

In "No Name Woman," hybrid techniques establish a connection between three characters from three different worlds, allowing a dialogue between what is essentially the old China, the first generation of Chinese American immigrants and their children, already born in the United States.

In "White Tigers," the narrative itself is hybrid as it merges two personas—the narrator and the legendary warrior Fa Mu Lan—into a dual first-person narrative with elements of magical realism. This allows to effectively convey the narrator identifying with Fa Mu Lan, as well as to comment on the roles Chinese women face due to their unfavorable positions within society.

"Shaman" describes the life of the narrator's mother, shrouded in mystery even to Kingston herself. By using a hybrid of facts and fiction, cultural heritage and folklore, the author was able to capture her particular fascination with her mother's unknowable history.

"At the Western Palace" is an exception by being strikingly conventional in its form but still retaining a hybrid element. Contrasting two characters—one who successfully integrates herself into American culture and one who is tragically consumed by it—provides a commentary on cultural hybridity and its devastating effects on immigrants that are unable to adapt.

In the last chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," Kingston continues the themes and hybrid techniques from all of the previous stories. The character of the narrator is shown to be as hybrid and paradoxical as the hybrid narratives in the book's stories, struggling to exist within the two cultures. Eventually, the

narrator discovers that in order to find her voice and place in the world, she must develop her new, hybrid identity by breaking away from her mother.

The thesis then continues with a chapter dedicated to *To Be the Poet*, a significant shift in Kingston's work towards poetry. The book contains hybrid elements by utilizing the genre of lyric essay as the author attempts to make the transition from prosaist to poet. This genre allows Kingston to retain some prosaic forms, such as narration and commentary on the creative process, but also to express herself through poetry and with poetic devices.

To summarize, this thesis showcased the significance of hybrid techniques and genres by providing analyses of Kingston's works. This author famously, or perhaps infamously, utilized hybridity to better communicate the life of a Chinese American woman in the way she lived it. As paradoxical as it may seem, the blending of genres, facts and fiction, myths and folklore, were the tools chosen to create a more personal portrayal of Kingston's real-life experiences. Arguably, this way Kingston's work sparked more attention and became more impactful than a simple, factual autobiography would have.

## Resumé

Tato práce popisuje různé formy hybridity ve vybraných dílech Maxine Hong Kingstonové. Konkrétně práce analyzuje hybridní postupy v autorčině první knize *The Woman Warrior* a v básnické sbírce *To Be the Poet*. Na jednotlivých dílech jsou ilustrovány konkrétní prvky hybridity jak z pohledu žánrového, tak z pohledu vypravěčských postupů. Práce popisuje, jak tyto hybridní postupy umožňují autorce zachytit v díle zároveň více různých kulturních, generačních a genderových perspektiv.

V úvodu práce je nejprve šířeji vysvětlen koncept hybridity v literární tvorbě. Teoretický rámec vychází z definic hybridity tak, jak je popsali literární kritici Michail Bakhtin a Homi Bhabha. Následně práce přibližuje pojem hybridního žánru v literatuře a to včetně potenciálních limitů, které s aplikací tohoto pojmu pro konkrétní dílo souvisejí.

V další části je pojem literární hybridity spojen s pojmem kulturní hybridity. Jak upozorňuje Bhabha, tyto koncepty jsou u etnických autorů v postkoloniální americké literatuře, mezi které Kingstonová patří, často neodmyslitelně spojeny. Práce v této pasáži také cituje argumenty kritiků, podle kterých právě hybridní žánry a postupy pomáhají výše zmíněným etnickým autorům vytvářet inovativní a experimentální díla.

Následující metodologická část představuje a definuje zásadní techniky, které jsou součástí děl Kingstonové a které jsou označovány za hybridní. Podobně je tomu u práce se žánry a tématy. Tyto jsou zásadní pro následnou analýzu vybraných děl *The Woman Warrior* a *To Be the Poet*. V úvodu metodologické části je řešena problematika nepřesného posuzování díla Kingstonové jakožto memoárů. Následně je popsán vliv lidové slovesnosti či ústní tradice na dílo Kingstonové a také zapojení legend a mýtů do její tvorby. Jsou popsány vyprávěcí metody a také sociokulturní pozadí díla Maxine Kingstonové právě ve vztahu ke kulturní hybriditě obsažené v jejím díle.

Ještě před samotnou analýzou děl je shrnuta biografie Kingstonové s důrazem na její etnický, sociální a kulturní původ. To vše s ohledem na vliv těchto aspektů na autorčinu tvorbu a využití hybridních prvků v ní. Samostatná část je věnována pozici Kingstonové v rámci čínsko-amerických autorů.

Analytická část práce je nejprve věnována sbírce povídek *The Woman Warrior*. První část se věnuje povídce *No Name Woman*, ve které práce upozorňuje na hybridní postupy ve vyprávění. Samotná povídka je zároveň ukázkou hybridního žánru, ve kterém se mísí vzpomínky na skutečné události s interpretací jednotlivých akterů. Podobně jsou hybridní postupy popsány i ve zbytku povídek tvořících *The Woman Warrior*.

Podobně jsou hybridní postupy popsány i v dalších povídkách *White Tigers*, *Shaman*, *At the Western Palace* a *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe: An Outlaw Knot*. Každá povídka obsahuje různé druhy hybridních postupů. Například ve *White Tigers* tak práce analyzuje kombinaci osobních vzpomínek a pocitů Kingstonové se známým mýtem o čínské bojovnici *Fa Mu Lan*. V povídce *Shaman* práce zkoumá kombinaci vzpomínek matky *Maxine Kingstonové* na obecně empirické studium medicíny a světa mystiky a lidových báhorek.

Závěrečná část práce analyzuje hybridní prvky v básnické sbírce *To Be the Poet*. V případě Kingstonové se jedná o ojedinělé vybočení z prózy k poezii, ke kterému se autorka sama otevřeně vyjadřuje. Hybridní přístup zde autorce zprostředkovává přechod mezi prózou a poetickým dílem, kdy protkává básnické prostředky prozaickým komentářem, jakožto pro ni stále pohodlnější metodou literárního vyjádření.

Výsledkem této magisterské práce je ukáзка mimořádného významu hybridních prvků a žánrů v komplexním díle Kingstonové. Její tvorba efektivně využila tyto postupy, aby vylíčila život čínsko-americké ženy tak, jak jej sama prožila. Jakkoliv se to může zdát paradoxní, prolínání žánrů, faktů a fikce, mýtů a tradic, se ukázaly jako vhodně zvolené nástroje k osobitějšímu zachycení skutečných životních zkušeností autorky.

Práce ukazuje několik druhů hybridních přístupů k poetickému dílu. Podobně jako u prózy i v případě poezie pracuje Kingstonová s kombinací žánrů. Nad to se ale v její poezii objevují také další druhy hybridity a to jak ve způsobu využití více druhů básnických forem, tak použití různých médií.

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