

# Re:Search

## **“The Reporting is the Vengeance”:**

**Fantasy, Feminism, and Narrative Resistance in *The Woman Warrior***

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### ABSTRACT

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Fantasy has been recognized by feminist scholars and activists for its supportive role in social justice movements, both as a tool of critique and as basic equipment for designing better futures. While the imaginative nature of fantasy allows us to access important opportunities by conceiving of possibilities beyond the present and empowering action, future-oriented readings of fantasy tend to overlook the ways that fantasy delivers social change in the present, at the time of its creation. This article considers the use of fantasy as a present-oriented form of resistance in Maxine Hong Kingston’s 1976 autobiography *The Woman Warrior*. Granting fantasy and reality equal agency in her controversial book, Kingston employs fantasy to speak out about her experiences with sexism in the Chinese American community while writing difference into standard narratives of history and life as a Chinese American. This article emphasizes the power of fantasy in *The Woman Warrior* to disrupt the dominant historical narrative voice by representing difference in the present.

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### KEYWORDS

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Fantasy, Feminism, Narrative Resistance, Chinese American, Representation, Memory

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Maxine Hong Kingston enriches the feminist project of writing women's agency into history in her 1976 autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Kingston's extensive incorporation of fantasy into her account of her childhood, caught between the misogynistic morals and extraordinary women of her Stockton, California home, talks back to patriarchal narratives of life as a Chinese American by disrupting history-as-usual with difference. Like the ghostly presence of patriarchy in Kingston's life that cannot be fully described but only acutely felt, the task of recovering her experience with sexism in the Chinese American community, from the silence that patriarchy preserves, cannot be fulfilled using the available tools of historical production. Realism cannot paint the myriad shapes and shades of oppression. Kingston requires a more unconventional device for writing difference into history and narrating her girlhood among ghosts.

I use the term "fantasy" in this paper to refer to the moments in *The Woman Warrior* in which Kingston creates events outside of her lived experience, speculates about the lives of other people, or otherwise writes in details that draw from spaces beyond reality to narrate her story. In order to analyze Kingston's feminist use of fantasy in her memoir, I will closely examine the places in her book where fantasy becomes necessary to articulate her lived experiences with patriarchy as a Chinese American woman. As I contrast Kingston's struggle to speak out about her experience with sexism along with patriarchal narratives of what it means to be Chinese American, I refer to the tendency of standard narratives about life as a Chinese American to erase, by way of silence, the reality of misogyny and heteropatriarchal regulation of women's gender and sexual formation. That is, patriarchy as a system of power becomes invisible in dominant narratives, including those centering around marginalized ethnic communities, and its violence escapes detection. I am speaking about the difficulty of marginalized identities to emerge in stories when not directly named.

Although *The Woman Warrior* has been in print for several decades, Kingston's decision to employ fantasy in her narration of personal history is by no means familiar or intuitive to many of her readers. King-Kok Cheung, a literary

critic, notes in her 1990 essay “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?” that Kingston’s blending of fiction and reality in her memoir has been the subject of controversy for Asian American critics since the book’s debut. While literary giants Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan—and even her publisher Knopf—have famously accused Kingston of “misrepresenting Chinese and Chinese American culture, and for passing fiction for autobiography,” Cheung views her memoir as continuing a feminist tradition of using the autobiography genre to “forge a viable and expansive identity by refashioning patriarchal myths and invoking imaginative possibilities” (238-39). Following Cheung’s reading of Kingston’s text, I will further analyze the memoir’s use of fantasy to perform feminist work.

Many critics point to fantasy as a useful tool in feminist writing and social justice issues. Juana María Rodríguez, a feminist cultural studies scholar, identifies fantasy as “a way to conjure and inhabit an alternative world in which other forms of identification and social relations become imaginable” in her 2014 book *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings* (26). Her observation about this function of fantasy as a means to conceive of more unrestricted futures confirms the power of fantasy both as a tool of critique of the present and as a medium for articulating the desire for a future that better supports freedom. But the tendency to emphasize fantasy as the abstract origin of social change to come makes it easy to overlook the way that fantasy produces change in the present, at the time of its creation.

To this end, Dipesh Chakrabarty, in his book *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000), addresses the unique position of fantasy, the supernatural, and other embodiments of difference to challenge historicist—homogenous, Eurocentric, secular—narratives of history by resisting translation into a normative narrative that would strip them of agency in order to include them in a so-called objective, universal form of history. He proposes a “radical untranslatability” that in Kingston’s example means refusing to translate fantasy into social fact and instead treating it as equal to “objective” fact (76). This insistence on transforming the nature of our dominant mode of

producing history to represent difference is what makes Kingston's autobiography a powerful feminist act of resistance in the present as well as for the future.

My framing of fantasy in Kingston's text does not seek to dismiss the opportunities that future-oriented readings of fantasy as the expression of feminist critique or desire afford us as readers invested in what futures may be possible for those who share Kingston's feminist longing for greater autonomy, mutual care, and resistance against patriarchal oppression in all its forms. Rather, this consideration of the work that Kingston's use of fantasy does in the present to write difference into patriarchal narratives of the Chinese American experience aims to draw attention to the important intervention her use of fantasy makes in the practice of producing history in American ethnic communities. Kingston's creative approach in *The Woman Warrior* is generative in the example it offers for the practice of writing back to power and the ongoing struggle to represent difference in both personal and collective histories. This ability to represent difference in the context of colonial, cis-hetero-patriarchal narratives of history supports any effort by historically disenfranchised groups to challenge their detention in the margins and work towards social change. The use of fantasy in *The Woman Warrior* is therefore productive now.

Turning now to Kingston's text will help make her application of fantasy more explicit. The book is divided into five chapters, each presented as a combination of reflective narration about Kingston's own life as well as the life of another woman whose story became a formative influence on her development; I will address the use of fantasy in what I believe are the two most foundational chapters to the memoir. I will then return to Chakrabarty's proposal of a "radical untranslatability" in greater depth to consider how her use of fantasy in the memoir interrupts normative, patriarchal narratives of history.

By intimately tying together fantasy and lived experience in the creation of her memoir, Kingston makes fantasy an essential part of memory and a key component in relating her experience with patriarchal oppression in the Chinese American community. The best representative example of this use of fantasy belongs to the chapter entitled "White Tigers," in which Kingston recalls growing

up in the tradition of hearing her mother “talk-story,” especially about the ballad of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior honored in the title of the book (19). As Kingston remembers listening to her mother’s tales of swordswomen gracing humanity with their heroic deeds and the invention of a new martial art, her description of Sunday afternoons with her mother seamlessly slips into the world of the stories themselves. “[S]he taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan,” Kingston begins, “I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (20). With each new development in the plot of the story, Kingston’s life and Fa Mu Lan’s life become increasingly intertwined, until Kingston occupies the position of protagonist in the ballad. Her first entry into the story introduces guesses about what the Fa Mu Lan experience must be like. She qualifies her narration with suppositions such as “I *would* be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mountains” and “We *would* go so high the plants would change, and the river that flows past the village would become a waterfall” (Kingston 20, emphasis mine). I draw attention to the frequency with which Kingston speculates here to suggest that Kingston clearly and confidently situates herself within fantasy in her recollection of her childhood. As she solidifies her participation in the story and relates the events of her life as a swordswoman with greater certainty, Kingston describes becoming strong enough to “jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, leaping like a monkey over the hut” and the gruesome carving of oaths of revenge for the injustices of war onto her back (23). Kingston invents a lengthy and heroic life for herself, concluding that “From the words on my back, and how they were fulfilled, the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality,” locating herself at the center of an exceptional journey (45). The result is a long, engrossing narrative that envelops readers in the fantastic world of Kingston’s imagination, which ultimately claims more space in the chapter than the realistic world of Stockton, California, and the events that take place there. The large space that Kingston’s fantasies occupy in her memoir indicates the centrality of fantasy to her construction of her memories as a young girl.

As the direction of Kingston's narrative abruptly transitions back to her childhood at home, the intense intimacy of fantasy and lived reality in building memory and relating her experiences with sexism in her community becomes clear. After removing herself from the world of fantasy, Kingston gives us this reflection, including an exchange with her mother: "My American life has been such a disappointment. 'I got straight A's, Mama.' 'Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.' I could not figure out what was my village" (45). The sudden shift from epic Chinese chronicle to Chinese American reality in this passage all but ensures that the readers' memories of Kingston's life filling in for Fa Mu Lan will linger in their minds. Moreover, this method of structurally placing fantasy in the center of the chapter and granting it the bulk of its space is what allows fantasy to become essential information for understanding Kingston's experience later in her reality at home. In other words, due to the sheer magnitude of the role of fantasy in this section and its continued presence in Kingston's narration after the ballad ends, readers cannot remove fantasy from the chapter and have a complete image of Kingston's life. In this conversation between Kingston and her mother, Kingston's comparison of her American life to her previous adventures and her reference to her village in her alternate fantastic life as the heroine of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan hold little meaning without knowledge of her fantastic past. The two necessarily mix in the construction of Kingston's memory. Thus fantasy becomes a necessary condition for articulating Kingston's experiences with sexism rather than a simple artistic choice.

I will now take more time to examine how reading fantasy as irreplaceable infrastructure in Kingston's memoir is useful for reading what she has to say about sexism in her life. Kingston's fantasy has a sustained presence in her reality when speaking to her lived experience with patriarchy as her story continues to structure her narration of sexism in the Chinese American community during her time at home. Thinking of her childhood, Kingston recalls often hearing misogynistic comments from her mother and neighbors, such as "better to raise geese than girls" and "feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (46). These memories bring deep resentment, bitterness, and pain into her adult life. In a return to her

earlier memory of achieving high grades in school, Kingston cites the popular assumption among her home community that she “was getting straight A’s for the good of [her] future husband’s family, not [her] own” as her motivation in college and to stop performing well in school was to “show [her] mother and father and the nosey emigrant villagers that girls have no outward tendency” (47). Here, where her anger and pain surrounding her experiences with misogyny intersect most strongly with her gestures towards Fa Mu Lan’s story, the use of fantasy becomes central to Kingston’s memory in general and to her memory of life shaped by sexism in particular.

If we recognize Kingston’s fantasy as fundamental to her memory, we are better able to appreciate the parallels she draws between what she feels in her life and what she feels in her fantasies. Referring again to her retelling of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan and voicing the pain of living in a patriarchal environment, Kingston states, “I’ve looked for the bird” (49). In the context of Kingston’s retelling of the story, this statement communicates not only desire for empowerment and escape from a sexist reality but a deep sense of loss for the life she had in her fantasy. Her confession helps her voice grief that might otherwise have been left silent for lack of material loss in her Californian life. Furthermore, she ends her chapter with this reflection defending her decision to speak about misogyny in her life:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are “report a crime” and “report to five families.” The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words...that they do not fit on my skin. (Kingston 53)

After sharing her experience with sexism throughout her childhood and adulthood, Kingston urges the Chinese American community to acknowledge the similarity between her and the celebrated woman warrior of its beloved story so that she can “return to them,” or have an equal place in the community (53). Kingston explains that they share the burden of injustices—“the words at our backs”—which remain inscribed on their bodies as women, and by clarifying that

“[t]he reporting is the vengeance” rather than the violence, advocates for a reading of her exposure of sexism in the Chinese American community not as a condemnation of her community but as an act of justice in the service of its well-being, just as Fa Mu Lan’s carvings function as a promise of justice to her village (53).

Cheung agrees that the struggle here is one of speaking out where patriarchy prefers silence and notes: “Aside from the fantasy connected with Fa Mu Lan the book has little to do with actual fighting. The real battle that runs through the work is one against silence and invisibility....[T]he protagonist eventually speaks with a vengeance through writing—through a heroic act of self-expression” (243). Far from representing a wish for slaughter, Kingston’s revision of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan and incorporation of her retelling into her own story can be read as part of an act of resistance against silence. Her fantasy is critical to her process of speaking out. By positioning fantasy as such a large part of her memory of her youth, especially concerning her experiences with patriarchal oppression, Kingston thus employs fantasy as a tactic to respond to patriarchal narratives of what it means to be Chinese American that do not account for the gender and sexual regulation common to her life. Fantasy and reality support each other in the effort to articulate Kingston’s trauma related to sexism in the Chinese American community.

The importance of fantasy to resisting imposed silence is also evident in the chapter titled “No Name Woman,” which opens Kingston’s text, setting the tone for the rest of the book. I include this first chapter in my analysis for both its emphasis on speaking out and for the way Kingston again uses it to parallel her story with that of another woman. Although chronologically this chapter comes before Kingston’s retelling of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan, I choose to read “No Name Woman” at this moment because knowledge of how Kingston uses fantasy later in “White Tigers” is useful to recognizing how she establishes it as a tool in the beginning of her memoir. The first scene Kingston gives us of this story is a memory of her mother warning her: “You must not tell anyone...what I am about to tell you” (3). Her mother proceeds to tell her the secret: “In China your father



had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well” (3). If Kingston fails to be obedient, “what happened to her could happen to you” (5). Kingston’s betrayal of her mother’s grisly secret launches her efforts to fill in the gaps of the cautionary tale. In her mother’s story, Kingston’s aunt drowns herself after suffering a raid organized by her village to punish her for an extramarital pregnancy. Kingston quickly sympathizes with the No Name Woman and presumes that she “...could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex” because “[w]omen in the old China did not choose” (6). Kingston’s conviction in the rigidity of repressive gender norms for Chinese women leads her to conclude that “some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil,” and furthermore that “[s]he obeyed him [as] she always did as she was told” (6). Receiving no information about her aunt from her mother “unless powered by necessity,” Kingston instead imagines a life characterized by abjection and endless labor against injustice (6).

Of course, her exposition of the imagined life of the No Name Woman becomes a critical context for reading her own life as a young woman hearing this story. Kingston’s detailed narration of her aunt’s struggle to cultivate a fulfilling existence under the violence of patriarchy joins her own memories of trying to control her relationship with men in adolescence. A young Kingston supposes that her aunt’s attacker “may have been somebody in her own household” but adds that “[a]ll the village were kinsmen” and “[a]ny man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover” by being referred to as “‘brother,’ ‘younger brother,’ ‘older brother’” (11-12). Pausing to reflect on a supposed shared experience, Kingston confesses: “As if it came from an atavism deeper than fear, I used to add ‘brother’ silently to boys’ names,” a habit that “hexed the boys...and made them less scary and as familiar and deserving of benevolence as the girls” (12). She goes on to describe her negotiation of her sexuality to either attract or repel boys in reality before finishing the tale, but her commentary placed in the middle of her aunt’s story, surrounded by fantasy, highlights the intimacy of fantasy and reality in her construction of memory.

This intimacy between fantasy and reality serves an instructive purpose for readers. erin Khuê Ninh, an Asian Americanist, calls attention to the relationship between Kingston's life and her aunt's life in her 2011 book *Ingratitude: The Debt-Bound Daughter in Asian American Literature*. Highlighting the links between Kingston and the No Name Woman that organize the chapter in this passage, Ninh argues:

However "imaginary" the genetics of atavism here, the trope of lineage has its uses, making Maxine very much heir to her aunt's legacy, if not via genetic coding so much as by way of its consistent deployment in her socialization—and via the narrator's own assertion of an extended comparison between them.... In thus linking the No Name Woman's story to her own, Maxine employs...an associative logic, which leaks the tone and atmosphere of traumatic events with her own mundane history. (69)

Through suggesting connections between her aunt's imagined story and her own life, Kingston continually produces herself as someone who shares her aunt's trauma, even as she describes ordinary events that might disarm her claim to grief. In her analysis, Ninh emphasizes the purpose that Kingston's imagination has in assisting her attempt to make visible the sexism that structures her own life. This productive connection tying Kingston's experiences at home with her fantasy fashioning the No Name Woman's life is represented even more strongly at the end of the chapter when Kingston identifies her mother's instruction not to speak about her aunt as a command to "participate in her punishment" (16). Kingston suggests solidarity based on shared experience with her aunt by drawing parallels between their lives. In this way, Kingston's ability to articulate her experiences living in a patriarchal context becomes contingent on the supportive role fantasy plays.

However, the relevancy of Kingston's use of fantasy to feminist work is not limited to its service as an aid in the act of speaking out or even to its capacity for making legible patriarchy's record of perfect attendance in the affairs of Kingston's life. In order to examine how Kingston's use of fantasy represents a means of challenging dominant narratives of history, it is necessary to return to

Chakrabarty's argument about the opportunities offered by a politics of "radical untranslatability" when engaging the discipline of history. In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty defines a structural problem with the way that the discipline of history "renews and maintains itself" by telling many stories while keeping certain basic assumptions the same, thus reproducing one dominant narrative of history with many chapters (99). More specifically, he observes that "there is a peculiar way in which all these other [non-Western] histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called 'the history of Europe'" (27). By preserving and operating on the assumption that historical time by its very nature must be secular (independent and real prior to human activity as the earth itself) and homogenous (fundamentally unchanged by any number of events added to its frame), historians and writers of history succeed in reproducing history as contemporary readers know it, as the only way of narrating history.

Chakrabarty's proposal of a "radical untranslatability" makes an intervention in this standard, dominant way of producing history by challenging the assumptions that secure its monopoly on the way we understand history. In the interests of social justice as a means to resist a homogenous, Eurocentric tradition of history and recognize the heterogeneity of human existence, Chakrabarty's proposal advocates for a refusal to translate historical difference into universal categories that fit neatly into standard narratives of history. He directs us to the example of granting the supernatural power in our narratives of history to illustrate this point: "A secular subject like history faces certain problems in handling practices in which gods, spirits, or the supernatural have agency in the world" (72). To "take gods and spirits to be existentially coeval with the human" would be to unravel the one immaculate stitch mediating thousands of years of difference on a master historical narrative but it would also mean recognizing difference and heterogeneity rather than managing it (16). And to the objections of Asian American male critics like Frank Chin and Jeffrey Paul Chan, this is precisely what Kingston does.

While my reading of *The Woman Warrior* makes a point of distinguishing between fantasy and reality in her writing in order to study their relationship to

her efforts to speak out about sexism in the Chinese American community, here I want to emphasize the impact of Kingston's work in mixing the two forces. When Kingston presents her fantasy and lived experience together and blends the two in her autobiography so that they become inseparable and mutually supportive of her voice, she answers Chakrabarty's call for "a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation...so that the world may once again be imagined as radically heterogeneous" (45-46). Chakrabarty's critique of history as a discipline asks for a way of producing and narrating history that accepts the differences that typically face translation into social or anthropological decoration—such as the supernatural, or, in Kingston's case, fantasy—and advocates for heterogeneity.

By including fantasy as an essential component of her autobiography, Kingston offers an example of a personal historical narrative that writes back to dominant means of producing history by declining the usual imperative to translate fantasy and thus making space for difference and plurality of experience. *The Woman Warrior* in this way delivers a powerful contribution to representing heterogeneity in the collective histories of the Chinese American community, especially gender difference. Kingston's autobiography writes women into the patriarchal imagination of Chinese American history in a way that rewrites their roles and revises the standard historical voice.

At this last point, I would like to prioritize bringing the conversation around Kingston's memoir and its feminist work back to contemporary social justice movements. Kingston's example of representing difference generates exciting questions about what the ability to write ourselves makes possible for collective efforts by marginalized groups, by the least of us, to work towards freedom in its multiple forms. As Kingston reminds her own Chinese American community, "the reporting is the vengeance," and recovering histories of oppression that are a part of our intersectional inheritances is one way of employing fantasy in the service of social justice in the present. What I hope to leave as a final thought is the suggestion that fantasy does important intersectional

feminist work, not only in the future by conceiving better worlds, but also in the present as we represent ourselves against dominant narratives of history. Then, our revision of the past as a place of possibility and fantasy and as a political tool for all times brings us closer to seeing the our importance and agency, as Kingston does in building the memory of the stories that filled her childhood, concluding that “at last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story” (19-20).

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