A Barbarian's Reed Pipe: Teaching Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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**Abstract:** This essay proposes a pedagogical model for teaching Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* in which the instructor emphasizes a different approach to each chapter. Students in turn consider the text in relation to genre, cultural authenticity, Chinese American history, concepts from postcolonial and race studies, and feminism. Each extends into the next, providing the instructor an opportunity to synthesize approaches at the conclusion of the unit. Along the way, students become involved in critical debates regarding the text. This method affords students a rich, theoretically-informed reading of a complex, multilayered classic of American literature.

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* is one of the most widely-taught texts in American literature courses. It has also been recognized as the most well-known work of Asian American literature and the single most anthologized text by a living author (Wong "Autobiography" 29; "Maxine" 3). The scholarship of critical and pedagogical approaches to Kingston's text is vast and includes MLA *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior*, Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong's *The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*, and countless critical articles. I've taught *The Woman Warrior* in introductory literature courses, surveys of American literature, American immigrant literature, and Asian American literature. I've experimented with different approaches in turn, but I've found it most useful pedagogically to take a different approach to each chapter and extend each approach throughout our treatment of the text. The five chapters align very well with five approaches: genre, cultural authenticity, history, concepts from postcolonialism and race, and feminism. This method is not only theoretically informed but also offers students a rich reading of this complex, multilayered work of American literature.

First, a few qualifications. The five approaches are by no means the only possible critical angles, nor need they be treated as discrete categories: they overlap, which allows instructors to build upon a critical foundation while connecting disparate threads into a coherent classroom narrative. For the purposes of practical application, I have generally avoided textual summary, elaboration of theoretical tenets, and jargon: my focus is on accessibility even to non-major introductory literature students. I do advise that instructors keep a running list of discussion questions and points from each approach. While time constraints prevent returning to every single point, I've found it useful for students to read
new material in the context of previous and new approaches; to this end, I ask students to journal and briefly discuss "what more they noticed" from each approach as they progress through the text. I also add that I address the author as Kingston and the narrator as Maxine, if only to highlight that the two are not necessarily identical.

**Genre and "No Name Woman"**

For the first chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, "No Name Woman," I recommend focusing on the genre categories of "autobiography" and "memoir." Readers, critics, and teachers alike have long puzzled over which literary genre *The Woman Warrior* best fits. The book was originally billed as "autobiography" (Lim "Reading" 3). Although the 1989 Vintage reissue calls the book "Nonfiction/Literature," the Library of Congress classification remains "biography." Amazon.com currently posts ranking of the book in Biographies & Memoirs, which is then subdivided into Ethnic & National > Chinese and Regional US > West. Confusion, however, remains. Vincente F. Gotera notes that the work's subtitle, "Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts," leads students to expect a "traditional" autobiography (71). Timothy Dow Adams, however, points out, "students have trouble initially in understanding who is talking in *The Woman Warrior* and whose story is being related. The traditional autobiographical beginning doesn't occur until halfway through the book with the words 'I was born in the middle of World War II'" (152).

A logical first step, then, is to elicit student assumptions regarding the genres of autobiography and memoir. Before I begin teaching the novel, I begin simply with the discussion prompts, "What is an autobiography? What is a memoir? Are they the same?" and ask students for characteristics and examples. Students, however, often give the traditional notion of the genre: "a one-plane, chronological account of the author's life history, commencing with birth and ending in middle or old age; the story line follows the evolution of the author-narrator-protagonist as the central character in search of him- or herself" (Yalom 110). Wong adds a number of common assumptions regarding traditional notion, including a presumed clear distinction between autobiography and fiction, as well as the belief that autobiography should be "a mechanical conveyance of facts from the autobiographer's mind to the readers, via a medium in the physical world, the process pleasant or not depending on the author's literary talents" ("Autobiography" 36-37). I cite
these comments toward the end of the discussion to check student agreement, but I hold off providing dictionary definitions until the end of the text when we reconsider this issue.

In relation to the first chapter, the teacher may invite students reflect on their genre assumptions by discussing questions in small groups and citing textual support. Questions might include, "Are autobiographies and memoirs ever really objective? Why or why not? How do autobiographies and memoirs differ from fiction? Given our initial discussion of the genre, does The Woman Warrior strike you as one or the other? Why or why not?"

To prepare them for the mixing of fact and fiction, I also follow Marlyn Peterson and Deirdre Lashgari's (1991) recommendation: "do freewrites (later expanded) on 'stories' in their own families in which literal truth was embellished or altered, or fantasy presented as truth, in ways that were confusing to them as children" (102). I've found that many undergraduate students are willing to share tall tales and legends that have circulated in their own families.

Cultural Authenticity and "White Tigers"

The second approach to teaching The Woman Warrior, which I emphasize beginning with the "White Tigers" chapter, focuses on the cultural authenticity of Kingston's work. This issue has been cited by many critics as the single most bitterly contested debate in Asian American studies (Lee 52). My purpose here is not to take sides, but rather to engage students in the larger critical debate about the text, in a manner akin to Gerald Graff's "teaching the conflicts." The problem is that many readers (and critics alike) read The Woman Warrior ethnographically, assuming Chinese cultural references are all authentic, when in reality, not all are. Students will certainly be left wondering. Wong, for example, notes, "teachers who assign The Woman Warrior must be prepared to tackle that inevitable question from students, Do the Chinese are really do that? - which translates to the broader and more theoretical question How 'Chinese' is The Woman Warrior?" (Wong, "Kingston's," 27). This may leave the teacher in a quandary: with too little cultural explanation, students feel confused; with too much, teachers risk overwhelming the narrative. More importantly, how is one to judge what is or isn't "authentic"? A few critics have addressed this point, such as Wong's "Kingston's Handling of Traditional Chinese Sources" in the MLA Approaches text. I have yet, however, to find a comprehensive approach. While I do not claim that my cultural understanding is flawless, I speak Chinese and spent a third of my life
in a Chinese-speaking environment. Even so, I still take a middle road: I teach some cultural material and answer questions, but I do not address every reference. Sometimes I ask students to research words and phrases and share their findings; a class Wiki might be an excellent option for disseminating information.

On the one hand, authentic references to Chinese culture abound in *The Woman Warrior*. In the first two chapters alone, there are references to footbinding (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 9); a Chinese "almanac" (10); men being informally referred to as "brother," 'younger brother,' 'older brother'" (12); "moon cakes" (13, 185); round doorways (13); offerings made of paper burnt for deceased relations (16); the cultural taboo regarding death (34); ancestral tablets and home exorcisms (45); filial piety (45); festive holiday "red letters" (50); and the Chinese characters for eight (23), human (20, 23), mountain (20), and to fly (35). In the text, the narrator Maxine mentions "Kuan Kung, the god of war and literature" (38), the legendary fighter "Chen Luan-Feng" (38), as well as the "eight sages," or Eight Immortals of Taoist legend (22). Maxine's mother is also fond of using the common Chinese exclamation "Aiaa" (13, 67, 100, 118, 136). As the text continues, the instructor can elucidate further examples. There are references to diplomas being encased in metal tubes inscribed with the character for "joy" (57); historical and legendary personages such as the "father of medicine" Chang Chun-ching (63), Dr. Sun Yat-sen (63, 168), the heroes Chou Yi-han, Chen Luan-feng, and Wei Pang (90), and Chiang Kai-shek (168); "Kwangtung," or Canton (71); Chinese "talismans" (67); the *I Ching* (78); pulse and traditional Chinese medicine (80); thick, homemade Chinese quilts (99); the idea of eating "too much yin" (100); the custom of not opening presents in front of the giver (121); the Chinese characters for *I* (167) and *here* (167); chanting and memorization in traditional Chinese education (167); and the "drums and cymbals and the gongs and brass horns" of Chinese opera (203). There are also references to two of the Eight Immortals, Chung-li Ch’uan (84) and Li Ti’eh-kuai (95).

On the other hand, several ostensibly "Chinese" cultural references in *The Woman Warrior* are distorted or completely fictionalized. This has lead Kingston's most vociferous critic, Frank Chin, to charge her with promoting a "fake China and Chinese America" (27-28). Critics focus in particular on the Fa Mu Lan (aka Hua Mulan) episode of "White Tigers." While there are many Chinese versions of the Fa Mu Lan legend, the narrator, Maxine,
adds pregnancy, the episode of the baron, and the peasant uprisings; moreover, the
tattooing scene is actually from the legend of Yue Fei (Wong, "Kingston's," 33). Many
undergraduate students may recognize Mulan from the Disney film of the same name, but
most Chinese will have known the story from a young age: in this regard, it is not unlike The
Butterfly Lovers and Journey to the West: stories well-known to virtually all Chinese.

After introducing these concepts in lecture, I assign Frank Chin's article, "The Most
Popular Book in China." Chin facetiously claims that the most popular book in China, The
Unmanly Warrior, is the autobiography of a white woman born and raised in a French hand
laundry in south China (23). In Chin's narrative, the autobiographer imagines her ancestor
Joan of Arc: grotesquely twisting the legend, however, Chin posits that Joan of Arc was a
man, that his supporters formed the Nazi party, that he fought at Hastings and Waterloo,
and, after being publicly castrated, his body was dressed "in underwear from Frederick's of
Hollywood, and high fashion from Oscar de la Renta, Gucci shoes and coochie-coos" (25-
26). Occasionally, I ask students to alter a fairy tale or historical legend with which they are
all familiar, and then discuss, "How would someone from another culture know this wasn't
the actual story? Does it matter? Can anyone change a well-known story?" Students are
quick to cite postmodern reboots of fairy tales and legends in films such as Shrek,
Maleficent, and Snow White and the Huntsman, as well as popular young adult novels that
provide a new twist Greek and Roman mythology. Wong suggests additional discussion
questions: "Does Kingston's confusion betray an irresponsible attitude toward Chinese
traditions? Should she not have done her 'homework' better? . . . Is she indeed free to
modify traditional material well known to the Chinese people? Why or why not?" (Wong,
"Kingston's," 31). Just as critics have long debated these questions, I ask students to
explore the ideas themselves. Fa Mu Lan is also but one instance of cultural distortion.
There are others. In the legend of Ts'ai Yen that concludes The Woman Warrior, Maxine
omits the crucial point that Ts'ai Yen left her children behind. While red eggs are used in a
newborn son's ceremony, they were certainly never dyed by "boiling them with a flag"
(Kingston, The Woman Warrior, 40). Moreover, Maxine's claim that Chinese do not smile for
photographs may be true for those she's known, but hardly so for everyone (58).

Another type of distortion has been largely ignored in the work's critical reception:
the text's inconsistent use translation. While Maxine sometimes refers to Chinese people
and places in their transliterated Chinese names, at other times, she substitutes English names, words, and phrases. For example, while her mother is "Brave Orchid" and her aunt "Moon Orchid," Mu Lan, whose name literally translates as "Wood Orchid," is simply transliterated. Maxine does much the same when she translates a common Chinese greeting as "Have you eaten rice today?" (21, 62). In this way, Maxine is doing something no Chinese person would: interpreting words and phrases with common meanings by their literal meanings of their individual word components, much like I might say when we hear "New York" we think of it not as a name but as the newer version of the city of York. Similarly, "People of One Hundred Surnames" (42) is a literal translation of a phrase that simply means the people, just as "Person of the Middle Nation" (136) means Chinese. While "Fragile" does translate word-for-word as "use a little heart" (62), the phrase means be careful. She is back translating, one word at a time, and perhaps in this way exoticizing the etymology of each phrase. Herein lies a clue to what's happening: perhaps inevitably, Maxine interprets Chinese words and phrases through an American lens. At times, Maxine bypasses conventional translations: she refers to a Confucian temple as a "Confucius Church" (19) and the Great Wall of China as "the Long Wall"; the latter is simply a literal translation of the Chinese term (42). Sometimes, Maxine is incorrect in her use of Chinese. She claims, for example, that "There is a Chinese word for the female I - which is 'slave'' (47). While there was such an archaic linguistic form in classical Chinese, it is no longer used. Maxine also mistranslates a number of Chinese words and phrases: she renders frogs as "heavenly chickens" (65), where the literal translation would be field chickens, and eclipse as "frog-swallowing-the-moon" (169), where she inexplicably substitutes frog for dog.

One of Maxine's translated words has received significant critical scrutiny: her ubiquitous use of the English word "ghost." There are early references to weeping ghosts and ghosts harming the living (16), but ghosts come to the fore in the third chapter, "Shaman," when Brave Orchid fights with the Sitting Ghost. In that chapter, Maxine relates,

But America has been full of machines and ghosts - Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There
were Black Ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts. (97)

Later, the reader will find references to Gypsy Ghosts, Newsboy Ghosts, Grocery Ghosts, Social Worker Ghosts, Public Health Nurse Ghosts, Jesus Ghosts, Burglar Ghosts, Hobo Ghosts, Wino Ghosts (97-8); Teacher Ghosts, Scientist Ghosts, Doctor Ghosts (102); Ghost Coaches (129); Panhandler Ghosts and Mugger Ghosts (139); and Delivery Ghosts (169). Students will likely be put off by the sheer number of "ghost" references in The Woman Warrior. Reed Way Dasenbrock notes, "the number of students who have asked me, 'What are all those ghosts doing in the book?' indicates that a significant percentage of the book's readers may be confused longer than a careful reader might think possible" (165).

Students will eventually realize that Maxine uses "ghost" primarily to mean Americans, and the book's subtitle, "Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts," will take on new meaning. Dasenbrock continues, "To understand ghost in The Woman Warrior, non-Chinese readers need to understand the Chinese use of the word, which means that we must, momentarily at least, learn to see ourselves as ghosts. As we experience the word, where else to experience a perception and a category of thought, and in so doing we learn a good deal about Chinese perceptions of us" (165). Kingston has even been accused of mistranslating the Cantonese word gwai (gui in Mandarin). Jeffery Chan objects to how the text uses the term "as Christian missionaries do, as 'devil' or 'ghost,' when it actually means 'asshole'" (qtd. in Kim 310-11). While the word is not nearly as severe as Chan would imply, it is pejorative: in Mandarin, yang guizi is a derogatory term for foreigners, and in Cantonese, foreigners are sometimes colloquially called gwailo. It is also worth pointing out that Maxine's claim that "The Japanese, though 'little,' were not ghosts, the only foreigners considered not ghosts by the Chinese" (Kingston, The Woman Warrior, 93) is patently false: especially during and after the Sino-Japanese War, many Chinese referred to Japanese as riben guizi.

The issue of cultural authenticity in The Woman Warrior is by far one of the most complex. Each time I've shared the above information with students, they respond negatively. Some even feel cheated. As before, I put to them a number of questions: "Why twist this content and these words and phrases? Was it deliberate or accidental? Who
would know the difference? Is cultural understanding the responsibility of the writer, the reader, both, or neither?" Perhaps most importantly, I ask, "Is Maxine Chinese or American or both?" The problem, of course, is the tendency to read the text ethnographically. At this point, I also begin to address the issue of reception and ask students to imagine how readers from different cultural background might interpret the text differently; I offer myself as an example, having noticed the many distortions and errors upon reading the text for the first time. We then build on the first approach by considering again whether the text is autobiography / memoir, fiction, or something in-between. Since I've heretofore deliberately use "Maxine" when referring to the narrator, this also provides an opportunity to discuss whether narrator and author are necessarily even the same person.

History and "Shaman"

Since students are usually somewhat disillusioned to find they can't read The Woman Warrior ethnographically as Chinese, in the next chapter, I ground them in Chinese American history. This has the net effect of helping transition students from reading the text as Chinese to reading it as American. I find that this approach works very well in conjunction with the third chapter, "Shaman." If teachers assign the first chapter of E.D. Huntley's Maxine Hong Kingston: A Critical Companion, they may emphasize two major points. First, Kingston, like her narrator, is American. Kingston observes that even in the critical reception of The Woman Warrior, this fact has oft been ignored:

Another bothersome characteristic of the reviews is the ignorance of the fact that I am an American. I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. The Woman Warrior is an American book … Don't you hear the American slang? Don't you see the American settings? Don't you see the way the Chinese myths have been transmuted by America? ("Cultural" 58).

Teachers could expand on this point by asking students to look for distinctly American / Western influences in the text. There are, for example, references to a witch in "a pointed hat and layers of capes" (Kingston, The Woman Warrior, 188), "vampire nightmares" (190), and "Frankenstein's monster, like the mummy dragging its foot" (195).
Biographical information will also help teachers draw out the Hawaiian connection to the text. Critics have made much of Maxine's use of "talk-story" in *The Woman Warrior*, with many assuming it is Chinese. Virtually every critic of the text refers to Kingston's "talk-stories:" Huntley, for example, comments that "Kingston's own narrative style is a Chinese folk genre called 'talk-story,'" and Korean American critic Elaine Kim states "Maxine Hong Kingston has attempted to express the Chinese American language by rendering in English the rhythms and images of the Chinese talk-story she was 'born talking'" (32; 217). A close reading of *The Woman Warrior* reveals that, unlike her critics, she never uses "talk-story" (like the critics do) as a noun. She writes, "we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story" (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 19), "Night after night my mother would talk-story" (19), "then they asked me to talk-story" (27), and "they talk-story" (159). "Talk story" is actually a commonly used colloquial verb phrase in Hawaii meaning "to chat." It should not at all be surprising to find Hawaiian cultural content, especially since Kingston lived in Hawaii for seventeen years, wrote a book entitled *Hawaii One Summer*, and has been recognized as a "Living Treasure of Hawaii." To date, Susan Brownmiller is the only critic I've found to recognize this, and she learned it from Kingston: "'Talk-story,' I learn in Maxine's kitchen, is actually a Hawaiian pidgin phrase, borrowed street language from her adopted city" (178). This provides an opportunity to discuss how critics can get things wrong and caution students that they should even approach criticism critically. Moreover, it feeds back into cultural authenticity by suggesting that Maxine, at least partially, is Kingston.

I've also found that students greatly benefit from a basic understanding of Chinese American history. Several scholars have noted that lack of historical context impedes teaching and reading *The Woman Warrior*. Shirley Goek-Lin Lim cites historical background as a major concern of every single contributor to the MLA volume *Approaches to Teaching Kingston's The Woman Warrior* (x). Kim, moreover, adds, "I have found the knowledge of the social context of Asian-American literature can mean the difference between understanding a work and completely misinterpreting it" (xviii). Although Kingston herself noted of *The Woman Warrior* that "Some readers will just have to do some background reading," she included a considerable amount of historical background in her second novel, *China Men*, and hoped that readers would read both texts together (23).
To avoid overwhelming students, I assign a brief timeline of Chinese American history. I often refer students to the companion website for the PBS Bill Moyers special, *Becoming American: The Chinese Experience*. The website's timeline concludes with the year 2000, but it contains crucial historical developments from the 19th and 20th centuries; the site also contains links to a vast number of resources. In class discussion or journals, I ask students what they found interesting or surprising and to see if they can draw connections to the text. For example, Maxine's use of "Gold Mountain" (*Kingston, The Woman Warrior* 3, 86, 137), while another back translation, is a historical reference to America first used by early Chinese Americans, many of whom immigrated after the 1849 California Gold Rush. Brief mention of the Chinese Communist Revolution will help students to make sense of references to the year "nineteen forty-nine" (106), and awareness of labor restrictions will help students understand references to laundry work. Students will additionally be able to appreciate the historical basis for details that emerge later in the text. Background on Ellis Island, the Chinese Exclusion Act, and how many immigration records were lost in the San Francisco earthquake and fire of 1906 will help students make sense of comments such as, "On Ellis Island the people were sent after forty days at sea and had no fancy luggage" (115), "There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get sent back to China" (183), and "Lie to Americans. Tell them you're born during the San Francisco earthquake. Tell them your birth certificate and your parents were burned up in the fire" (184).

**Postcolonialism, Race, and "At the Western Palace"**

I draw upon concepts from postcolonialism and race for the text's fourth chapter, "At the Western Palace." The terms I teach are *othering, the exotic other, the demonic other, double consciousness, and internalized racism*. Whether or not Kingston presents an Orientalist perspective has long been up for debate. I focus instead on how the work is received. On the one hand, many readers exoticize the text's ostensibly Chinese elements, which relates back (and possibly explains) cultural authenticity. As Wong observes, "Undeniably part of *The Woman Warrior*'s popularity has been fueled by a misplaced fascination with traditional Chinese culture, which may mean that the endeavor to produce a 'translatable' Chinese American literature is destined to be undermined by stereotyping and
On the other hand, some readers may hold stereotypical views of Chinese Americans. On its own merits, *The Woman Warrior* may simply "reinforce the white readers' stereotypes of Chinese Americans as eternally unassimilable aliens, 'silent, mysterious, and devious'" (Wong, "Autobiography," 34). To expand on this, I assign Kingston's own essay, "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," in which she offers dozens of examples of exoticism among the book's reviewers. At one point, she lashes out at critics, declaring "How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!" ("Cultural" 55). She adds, "How stubbornly Americans hang on to the oriental fantasy can be seen in their picking 'The White Tigers' chapter as their favourite" (57). This usually has the effect of encouraging students to reflect on the degree to which they might be prone to exoticism or demonizing: it also helps raise the important question of why Chinese Americans might be seen as the Other.

I also address Maxine's double consciousness and internalized racism. Kim notes, "The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* 'sees double' almost all the time: she has two vantage points, and the images are blurred. Continually confronted with dualities, contradictions, and paradoxes, she struggles to discern 'what is real' from what is illusory by asking questions, trying to name the unnamed, and speaking 'the unspeakable'" (199). I ask for students to look for evidence of Maxine being conflicted and looking down on Chinese and Chinese American culture. I've found four noteworthy examples. First, Kingston regularly refers to Chinese people as intolerably loud. She states: "The immigrants I know have loud voices, unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village where they called their friendships out across the fields. I have not been able to stop my mother screams in public libraries or over telephones ... Chinese communication was loud, public" (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*,11). She adds, "I've watched a Chinese audience laugh, visit, talk-story, and holler during a piano recital, as if the musician could not hear them" (172). She continues, "My father asks, 'Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it they talk loud?'" (171). Once again, Maxine is interpreting the Chinese language through an American lens, but this time negatively: "You can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that. It isn't just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, *chingchong* ugly, to American ears, not beautiful like Japanese sayonara
words with the consonants and vowels as regular as Italian. We make guttural peasant noise and have Ton Duc Thang names you can't remember" (171-72).

Maxine also accuses the Chinese of "lying." In a pivotal passage, she openly confronts her mother, stating, "I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories" (202). There are many other examples. She adds, "Soon I want to go to China and find out who's lying" (205), and "I'd like to go to China and see those people and find out what's a cheat story and what's not" (206). She even uses "lying" as a basis for questioning Chinese culture in general: "I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn't; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along" (185). I tell students many Chinese critics and readers have taken exception to this. Ya-Jie Zhang, for example, notes, "When I read the part in which Kingston says 'the Chinese are too loud' and 'tell lies,' I was personally offended. This is simply not true, I thought. To me, Americans are just as loud or louder. What Kingston calls 'lies' are nothing more than courteous ways of putting things." (18). Teachers interested in exploring this further might delve into the comparative cultural values of harmony and truth, but I've usually found this is too much for one unit.

A third area students will probably pick up on is Maxine's aversion to Chinese eating habits. She states, "My mother has cooked for us: raccoons, skunks, hawks, city pigeons, wild ducks, wild geese, black-skinned bantams, snakes, garden snails, turtles that crawled about the pantry floor and sometimes escaped under refrigerator or stove, catfish that swam in the bathtub" (Kingston, The Woman Warrior, 90). She also refers with disgust to "blood pudding" (92), "black seaweed gelatin" (138), and "spooning out the brains" at a "monkey feast" (92). She even comments, "I have seen revulsion on the faces of visitors who've caught us at meals" (92). In fairness, I point out that these are hardly common in Chinese cuisine and that there are American foods that other cultures think disgusting; my students are usually able to suggest a few.

A fourth example is the disturbing scene in which Maxine torments a young Chinese girl. Maxine notes that she hated the girl "for her China doll hair cut" (173), adding that she "wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft" (176). As she squeezes the girl's face and pulls her hair, Maxine tells the girl, "You're disgusting . . . You're such a nothing" (178), and asks "Do you want to be like this, dumb (do you know
what dumb means?), your whole life? Don't you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl?" (180). Students could be asked to what degree the narrator is confronting a mirror image of her "Chinese" self.

We then discuss the relationship between identity and labeling. I ask students to consider the meaning of the term "Chinese American." For example, "Does the term include newly naturalized American citizens as well as descendants of people who've been in America for several generations? What does 'Chinese' mean in the first place? Does it include people from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and those of Chinese ethnicity from Malaysia, Singapore, and elsewhere? Does it include people who have one Chinese ancestor?" Kingston, after all, contrasts herself with "those people who look like us in Hong Kong, the People's Republic and Taiwan" and prefers not to hyphenate Chinese American since it "gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns" ("Cultural" 60, 59).

**Feminism and "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"**

The final pedagogical approach to *The Woman Warrior* is theoretically informed by feminism. Many consider this to be the most significant approach to the work overall: I treat it throughout the text with added emphasis on the final chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." I concentrate primarily on silencing and female empowerment, particularly as related to the characters No Name Aunt, Brave Orchid, Kingston, and Fa Mu Lan.

Many critics have explored the crucial of silencing in *The Woman Warrior.* King-Kok Cheung contends, "The real battle that runs through the work is one against silence and invisibility" ("The Woman Warrior," 124). Students might be asked to cite examples of silencing in the text. The text, for example, opens with the ironic line: "You must not tell anyone ... what I am about to tell you. In China your father has a sister who killed herself" (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 3). Cheung adds that silence "entombs the no-name aunt in *The Woman Warrior,* who commits suicide after giving birth to an illegitimate child" ("Don't Tell" 166). Students might be asked to what degree the first chapter, "No Name Woman," serves as a cautionary tale, especially in light of Maxine's estimation of Brave Orchid: "Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one" (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, 5).
In addition to No Name Aunt, students should also carefully consider the character of Brave Orchid. On the one hand, Brave Orchid is vocal, strong, and independent. Cheung notes that Brave Orchid breaks with patriarchal silencing by telling Kingston the story of No Name Aunt ("Don't Tell," 173). Kim adds, "Brave Orchid, the mother, is a woman of such a fiery fortitude that she almost overpowers the narrator with her strength and vitality" (201). On the other hand, Brave Orchid also silences those around her. In the third chapter, "At the Western Palace," Brave Orchid insists that her sister Moon Orchid confront her American husband, oust his American wife, and claim possession of their children, demanding that her sister say, "I am the first wife, and she is our servant" (Kingston, The Woman Warrior, 126). When the scheme fails, however, Moon Orchid becomes increasingly paranoid, and eventually dies in a mental hospital. Students might be asked whether or not Brave Orchid victimized and silenced her own sister. Students could also discuss the degree to which Brave Orchid silences the narrator. Brave Orchid constantly derides girls to the young narrator with such lines as, "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls" (46). Brave Orchid justifies cutting Maxine's frenum "so you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything" (164). Given Brave Orchid's tendency to dominate and silence others, however, students would be right to question her motives. Students should also consider Maxine's own silence. She states, "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent" (165), adding "the other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). Clearly, the tormenting scene is also tied to silence. Cheung notes, "Her frustration with the mute girl reflects her own anxiety: she is afraid of losing her identity, of being erased or unhinged - as her two aunts have been respectively erased and unhinged - through silence" ("Don't Tell," 167).

A second feminist theme for students to focus on is female empowerment. Teachers here might wish to focus first on Fa Mu Lan. Teachers should question the assumption that Fa only achieved power through adopting the guise of a man. The tattooing scene, for example, is an act of empowerment. Cheung notes, "The warrior's back carries a text of scars, listing grievances that counter the baron's sexist language. The battle is as much a verbal match as a physical one […]. In Maxine's fantasy the blade used by the parents to
carve words on the warrior's back is both injurious and empowering" ("Don't Tell" 177). Interestingly, students have told me they feel empowered by their own tattoos, and this has led to fascinating discussions of embodiment and power. Discussion of empowerment helps set the stage for the Maxine's rebellion against her mother at the end of The Woman Warrior. Students might be asked to discuss the following questions in small groups: "How does Maxine finally overcome her silence? Is there a similarity between the grievances and actions of Fa Mu Lan and Maxine? Does Maxine in effect become Fa Mu Lan, and what is the role of language in this transformation?"

Teachers can extend this approach in a number of ways. First, they can help students forge meaningful connections with this approach. Peterson and Lashgari, noting that some male students feel uninvolved in a text focusing on women's experience, assign "freewriting on a personal experience of being 'silenced'" (105). Teachers can also broach the issue of "voice" in student writing. Kathleen A. Boardman argues that the text can be interpreted as the narrator's development into a writer: "The Woman Warrior describes the struggles between cultures, generations, and attitudes—conflicts with which students can identify. The book can be read as a chronicle of the process of becoming a writer: finding a voice and something to say and thus making a contribution to the community" (87). This gives students the opportunity to consider whether the act of using one's voice to open up about and share experiences is empowering. I also suggest that when Maxine finally opens up to her mother, she is ultimately declaring her Americanness.

Synthesizing Approaches

There are a number of strategies for teachers to tie all five pedagogical approaches into a cohesive classroom narrative once students have finished reading The Woman Warrior. First, teachers could return to the question of genre. At this point, I introduce the dictionary definitions and ask students if the text fits either. According to the OED, "autobiography" means "An account of a person's life given by himself or herself, esp. one published in book form. Also: the process of writing such an account; these considered as a literary genre" ("Autobiography"). Memoir, on the other hand, refers to "biography or autobiography; a biographical notice" ("Memoir"). If students believe it does not, they are in good company. Wong notes, "The most fundamental objection to The Woman Warrior
concerns its generic status: its being billed as autobiography rather than fiction, when so much of the book departs from the popular definition of autobiography" ("Autobiography" 30). Benjamin Tong argues the book is "fiction passing for autobiography" (Wong, "Autobiography," 30). Kingston's own comments are telling: "the only correspondence I had with the publisher concerning the classification of my books was that he said that Non-fiction would be the most accurate category; Non-fiction is such a catch-all that even 'poetry is considered non-fiction'" (qtd. in 30). Brownmiller once asked Kingston if The Woman Warrior is nonfiction, to which she responded, "'The bookstores are confused too,' she giggles. 'I've seen it placed in the anthropology section. Oh, I guess it's closer to fiction, but whatever sells...' She lets the sentence trail off. We agree that the title (not her first choice) is mildly deceiving" (175). This might lead students to wonder whether Jeffery Chan is justified in his accusation that "the autobiographical label is a marketing ploy in which the author, to her discredit, has acquiesced" (qtd. in Wong “Autobiography” 30). Although students are surprised to see the discussion turn to marketing, I find it worthwhile to propose that many writers do hope to sell books: I leave students to consider whether this necessarily involves a trade-off with integrity and artistry.

One reason students often object to the autobiographical label is the sheer multiplicity of voices in the text. Teachers could advance the notion that, in light of double consciousness, multiple voices might be inevitable, and that Maxine and Kingston, if not identical, may be two parts of the whole. Adams, for example, argues that autobiography is the appropriate form for Kingston's "complicated task of balancing the 'double bind' of her Chinese American identity" (151). This in turn allows teachers to deconstruct the autobiography fact/fiction binary. Adams continues, "Like Kingston's ethnic identity, which is impossible to divide cleanly into Chinese or American parts, autobiography is also, in what Amy Ling has called 'the hyphenated condition,' neither fiction nor history nor exactly a combination of the two but a genre of its own, a complex equation designed to tell the story of one's life with whatever degree of invention is needed to reconcile one's self to that life" (151). Huntley adds that Kingston "hopes that she can redefine larger categories - fiction and nonfiction - that she also finds confining and limiting. She imagines a very wide border between fiction and nonfiction, envisioning fiction as a narrow place on one side of that
border, while nonfiction is a narrow place on the other side" (24). In this way, if not purely autobiographical, *The Woman Warrior* is an instance of genre bending.

I return to the notion of cultural authenticity first by addressing reception. In a survey of seventy Chinese student responses to *The Woman Warrior* and other Asian American texts at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hardy C. Wilcoxon observes, "The fact remains, however, for most of the Asian readers whose responses we are concerned with, that the 'distortions' at issue cannot be forgiven, much less valorized, in terms of efforts to create a living myth or to explore, heuristically and provisionally, a sense of self" (321-22). At the same time, it resonates in transnational feminism. Zhang, for example, notes, "I am ashamed to admit that negative feelings for women have not yet been completely wiped out from Chinese minds in 'New China.' Disregard for women is deeply rooted in the thousands of years of feudal history," and adds that "'No Name Woman' reminds me of dozens of true stories I know about" (19). It should nevertheless be remembered that *The Woman Warrior* is an American story. Kingston comments, "Like the people who carry them across oceans, the myths become American. The myths I write are new, American. That's why they often appear as cartoons and kung fu movies. I take the power I need from whatever myth. Thus Fa Mu Lan has the words cut into her back; in the traditional story, it is the man, Ngak Fei the Patriot, whose parents cut vows on his back. I mean to take his power for women" ("Personal" 24). I suggest students read other Chinese American writers, such as Diana Chang, Frank Chin, Justin Chin, Marilyn Chin, Louis Chu, Sui Sin Far, Chang Hua, David Henry Hwang, Gish Jen, Jean Kwok, CY Lee, Gus Lee, Li-Young Lee, Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Lin Yutang, David Wong Louie, Pardee Lowe, Anchee Min, Celeste Ng, Lisa See, Amy Tan, Jade Snow Wang, Ping Wang, Shawn Wong, John Yau, and Wing Yung. Combined with secondary sources, there is plenty of material here for instructors to design a course section or an entire course on Chinese American literature.

We then discuss the meaning of "American." As Joan Chiung-huei Chang observes, "Just as there is no such thing as a unified Chinese American, there is no such thing as a unified American, either. [...] In fact, that a person consists of various personalities is a characteristic shared by all human beings, including Chinese, Americans, and so-called Chinese Americans" (180). I ask students if or how they label their own ethnicity: some students, for example, might refer to themselves "Italian Americans," but they probably do
not think of themselves as fully Italian. In this regard, Kingston makes a crucial point: "Critics do not ask whether Vonnegut is typical of German Americans; they do not ask whether J.P. Donleavy is typical of Irish Americans [...]. Books written by American of European ancestry are reviewed as American novels" ("Cultural" 63). At this point, I propose a statement for class debate: "*The Woman Warrior* is simply a work of American literature and Maxine Hong Kingston is an American author." By this time, few students disagree.

I extend the historical discussion by discussing the text's implications in light of sweeping changes in American demographics. According to the 2010 United States Census, whites account for 72% of the US population, Hispanic or Latino 16%, African American 13%, and Asian 5% (Humes, Jones, and Ramirez 4). The Pew Research Center predicts that by 2050, the US population will rise to 438 million, with 82% of the increase due to newly arrived immigrants and their descendants (one in five Americans will be an immigrant versus roughly one in eight in 2005); moreover, the non-Hispanic white population of the US will be a minority at 47%, the Latino population 29%, African Americans 13%, and Asians 9% (Passel and Cohn). I suggest, therefore, that while *The Woman Warrior* is an American story, it is also an invitation to multicultural awareness. James R. Aubrey notes, "Indeed, the book's greatest virtue as a reading assignment may be the culture shock it creates. As a white male of European ancestry, I certainly recognized that I was in a fundamentally different world the first time I read the book, and exploration of such a feeling among students can generate enlightening discussions" (84). The implications for American readers are far-reaching. As Amy Ling observes, "As a nation of immigrants, the United States has the opportunity to become acquainted with the peoples of the world with its own borders and its own language. In their books, the immigrants and their children are speaking, singing. Together they make up the great American chorus, and it is our special privilege, as teachers and students of literature, to listen" (157-58). As a follow-up, I often ask students what other examples of multicultural American literature they've read, how *The Woman Warrior* compares, and to what degree literature might afford a better sense of American diversity and interconnectedness.

Teachers might wish to extend the postcolonial approach by addressing what ought by now to be fairly obvious: immigrant identity can be transformative. Wong comments that
informed students see past the "assumption that traditional Chinese culture is 'brought over' by immigrants much like a steamer trunk is" ("Kingston's," 28). Wong adds that "the so-called distortions of traditional Chinese culture found in the text are simply indications of how far removed from it the protagonist has become" (Wong, "Autobiography," 44). This may also lead into discussion of whether grappling with identity might be a positive step toward hybridity. Clearly, it is an ongoing process for the narrator: "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (205).

As a final point, teachers might return to the feminist approach, asking students to consider the gendered title of the work, as well as its implications for the text's concluding lines regarding Ts'ai Yen: "She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us in is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well" (209). Students often read the latter ironically after our discussion of translation in the text, but they tend to agree with Kim's estimation that "Despite all attempts, Chinese and American, to silence her, the woman warrior's spirit surges within the Chinese American narrator" (205). I add that several Asian American writers, including Amy Tan, focus on mother-daughter relationships, and this might be in part attributable to Kingston's lasting influence, an influence which has doubtless spread far and wide across author, genre, and culture. As an aside, I mention that for all the questions about cultural authenticity, when I referred to the narrator as Maxine, I did so out of affection for author as well as child narrator: after all, I see in my own children as well as many students the struggle to balance two or more cultures.

There is certainly far more a teacher might do with The Woman Warrior. The feminist approach might be expanded to include the debate over the "emasculating" of Chinese American males, and the genre approach might incorporate the argument that autobiography is a Western, Christian form. Teachers might also draw from other critical approaches, such as postmodern aspects of fragmented identity. As a repertoire of pedagogical approaches, however, I've found the five approaches above to be more than sufficient for teaching the novel. Literature pedagogy can and should be theoretically informed, and an eclectic critical approach helps students to develop interpretive acumen and experience a rich reading of a complex text. In the end, The Woman Warrior is
empowering for students and teachers alike: the text deeply engages students in the negotiation of meaning and frees teachers to weave their own classroom narratives.

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