
‘What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?’: A Transnational Approach to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

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Abstract

Early in Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*, the narrator asks: “What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?” (5-6). In the forty years since its publication, critics have taken up the narrator’s preoccupation, leading to a well-known debate over the “authenticity” of Kingston’s representations. Frank Chin, her most vocal critic, has attacked Kingston for inventing a “fake” Chinese American culture that perpetuates stereotypes and promotes a Western Orientalist perspective. Those on the other side of the debate have responded by highlighting Kingston’s concern with gender inequality. King-kok Cheung, for example, defends Kingston against what she perceives to be exclusionary definitions of Chinese American identity based on masculine traits. By calling attention to literary techniques that challenge patriarchal values, these approaches provide a necessary corrective, but they also introduce another hierarchy and binary between “modern” America and “traditional” China. A transnational approach challenges lines of inquiry that promote distinctions between “real” and “fake” versions of culture while also diminishing cultural hierarchies. By conveying the interplay of and between various cultures, the concept of “transnational” builds upon the term “multicultural,” which designates the existence of multiple cultures but not necessarily the relationship between them. This essay demonstrates how Kingston draws from her trans-Pacific roots to express a “transnational sensibility.” The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* does not physically experience transnationalism; she does not physically migrate to another country. Instead, her cultural negotiation requires reimagining the shape and scope of nations, the cultures associated with them, and the boundaries between them. Like the other sections of *The Woman Warrior*, “At the Western Palace,” imagines, negotiates, and undermines the boundaries between Chinese, American, and Chinese American by overlapping narrative forms associated with both the narrator’s Chinese mother and American culture. The narrator can only begin to understand her life in the US when she can see the lives of her female ancestors “branch[ing]” into hers.

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