Stories To Grow Up On Communication and Culture in Kingston and Tan

by

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Abstract

This thesis studies two novels by Chinese American women, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club*. It explains the ways in which both authors use mother-daughter storytelling to tell their own stories. It also explores the gaps in communication present in both novels, and the political implications of the stories and of storytelling itself. It argues that the story is above all a personal medium, that changes with each teller and each retelling. This is true wherever people recount events to each other. Therefore, subjecting stories and storytellers to scrutiny about their historical truth or cultural accuracy is a destructive process which arrests a story in time and limits its potential to grow and change as the culture itself changes. In a way, the stories in Kingston and Tan are attempts to bridge the disconnect between the old ways of the mothers and the new ways of the daughters. The retelling makes the stories personal and relevant. In this way the stories remain vibrant and immediate for yet another generation.

In Chapter 1, "The Idea of a 'No-Truth' Outlook," I examine the idea of truth in storytelling—historical, cultural, and personal truth and the different meanings of each. I address the criticism leveled at Kingston and Tan that their stories are fake, and look more closely at the word *fake* itself. The main conclusion is that stories must evolve or die, and retelling them makes them stronger, no matter what the teller adds or subtracts.

Chapter 2, "The Language Barrier," talks about the different ways in which communication breaks down between the mothers and daughters in both novels. Age, native language, personality, and cultural identity combine to make conversation difficult and true understanding elusive.

Chapter 3, "Hybridity," deals with the concept of hybridity, the idea of belonging to two cultures and switching between them. I explain how this concept has direct relevance to the two novels. Finally I discuss the political controversy surrounding the subject of hybridity and what it means in terms of the survival of a minority culture.

I conclude that stories are ultimately very complicated pieces of personal and cultural capital. The debate over whose property stories are, and what is a real story and what is fake, is far from over. I recommend embracing the concept of hybridity as a way to allow people who have grown up in two cultures to use all of themselves and all of their experiences without being shunned for disloyalty to one culture.

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I. Introduction

From the very beginning of our consciousness we hear stories: our parents tell us family stories, read us fairy tales and children's stories; our friends tell us gossip stories about others, ghost stories to frighten us, bragging stories about their own accomplishments; and this is all before kindergarten! We learn not to put too much stock in stories, since we know how they change from teller to teller into something quite different from the original. "I heard..." is a signal to take what follows with a grain of salt. We may roll our eyes when our parents say, "When I was your age..." because we know some sort of lesson is coming. We enjoy stories for entertainment value, but we know they're not real, they're "just stories." So why should we pay any attention to stories and storytelling?

Rather than being an uncomplicated recitation, a story comes to life through several steps. First the original storyteller has to see or imagine the main event of the story. Then she has to interpret this event. Next she must choose the words and cadences she will use to describe the event to others. She decides who her audience will be. Finally she tells the story. Each audience member filters the story through his own personality and set of experiences. If one of the audience members repeats the story to another audience, the steps are the same, except that instead of seeing the event, the secondary storyteller *hears about* the event mediated through the language, personality, and experience of the original storyteller. Thus, a story is an extremely personal event,

¹ The act of seeing itself consists of several stages, according to eyewitness account expert Elizabeth Loftus. "During the first stage—acquisition—an event is perceived and information about it is initially stored in memory. In the second stage—retention—information is resident in memory. In the final stage—retrieval—memory is searched and pertinent information is retrieved and communicated." Elizabeth Loftus. Eyewitness Testimony. (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press. 1979) xii.

both for the teller and for the listener. No two people can tell a story the same way, and no two people will hear the same story told.

A story is not only an intricate form of communication, it is one of the oldest art forms we know of. In his book *Homo Narrans*, John Niles provides a concise history of storytelling:

To judge from the cuneiform records of ancient Sumeria, the papyri of early Egypt, the earliest bamboo and bronze inscriptions of ancient China, and other records that have come down to us from the dawn of European and Asian civilization, oral narrative and the myths, legends, and heroic histories that it incorporates have been part of human experience for as long as verbal records exist.²

As long as people have been able to communicate verbally, they have been telling stories.

There are casual forms of storytelling—the everyday recounting of events, telling jokes,
family anecdotes—and there are formal, even professional types of storytelling that have
widely recognized rules and conventions.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan both explore and expand upon the traditional medium of the story in their novels. Kingston's novel is basically made up of four stories, and Tan's contains sixteen. The stories in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* are not formal, although they are being told by characters created by authors who can be said to be professionals. But this is not what is usually meant by formal storytelling. The storytellers in these two books are ordinary people (usually mothers) trying to impart wisdom, knowledge, or history to others, or perhaps to entertain them (the listeners are usually daughters). When the mothers tell their

² John D. Niles. *Homo Narrans*. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1999) 1.

daughters stories about growing up in China, they allow themselves and their daughters "to inhabit mental worlds that pertain to times that are not present and places that are the stuff of dreams" (Niles 3). The mothers cannot go back to the China they knew, because it has changed so radically, and they are now different people, and the daughters have never been there. The stories allow the mothers to remember and relive, and the daughters to imagine and connect.

Through the "imaginative literature" of storytelling, the mothers attempt to create for their children "a parallel version of reality that helps make the world intelligible and navigable" (Niles 77). In practice, the mothers' versions of the world confuse their children, who experience things differently (and experience different things) so that the world mediated through their mothers' stories makes only partial sense, or is frightening. In The Woman Warrior, when Maxine gets her first period, her mother tells her a story about an adulterous aunt who is attacked by the villagers and kills herself and her baby, and who is now considered by the family never to have been born. Maxine says that when her mother "had to warn us about life, [she] told stories like this one, a story to grow up on. She tested our strength to establish realities." Is Brave Orchid testing Maxine to see if she will refrain from temptation and avoid "humiliating" her family? Or is she simply testing Maxine's ability to stomach such a horrible story and the lesson to be learned comes from milder feelings in the mother than the story's violence would indicate? Brave Orchid is not a person who talks about love, or gives praise. Any approval she gives her children is indirect, not explicit. Every story we hear in these two novels is invested with double meaning—the story and the reason for telling it.

³ Maxine Hong Kingston. *The Woman Warrior*. (New York: Vintage International. 1975) 5.

In both *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior*, communication is not transparent. Differences in generation, personality, language, and culture combine to make a simple conversation between a mother and a daughter into a minefield of misunderstandings and nuanced meanings. Finally, the reporting of these conversations becomes treacherous; as different groups vie for legitimacy, control of cultural output becomes important and intensely political. Even the most successful writers are not safe from having their works appropriated for one purpose or another and their motives scrutinized. Stories are not simple; they are enduring and powerful, and ultimately political.

II. The Idea of a "No-Truth" Outlook

From The Joy Luck Club:

The old woman remembered a swan she had bought many years ago in Shanghai for a foolish sum. This bird, boasted the market vendor, was once a duck that stretched its neck in hopes of becoming a goose, and now look!—it is too beautiful to eat.

Then the woman and the swan sailed across an ocean many thousands of li wide, stretching their necks toward America. On her journey she cooed to the swan: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English. And over there she will always be too full to swallow any sorrow! She will know my meaning, because I will give her this swan—a creature that became more than what was hoped for."

But when she arrived in the new country, the immigration officials pulled the swan away from her, leaving the woman fluttering her arms and with only one swan feather for a memory. And then she had to fill out so many forms she forgot why she had come and what she had left behind.

Now the woman was old. And she had a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow. For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, "This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions." And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English.⁴

⁴ Amy Tan. The Joy Luck Club. (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons. 1989) 17.

The writer, critic, and anthologist of Asian American literature Frank Chin detests Maxine Hong Kingston, according to his 1990 essay, "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." He also cannot stand Amy Tan, whom he characterizes as Kingston's "literary spawn," David Henry Hwang, author of the successful gender-bending play *M. Butterfly*, and Jade Snow Wong, whose memoir *Fifth Chinese Daughter* inspired Kingston. These writers are all fake, according to Chin. They do not appear in Chin's anthology, *The Big Aiiieeeee!*, which claims to represent "the essential works of the universal Chinese and Japanese childhood." ⁵ But what does Chin mean when he calls these writers' stories "fake"?

We can agree that the opposite of something fake is something real, or true. The actual idea of *truth* is much harder to define; it is a set of facts that most people can agree upon as having really happened, or at least that they sincerely believe to have happened. We think of truth as objective, but since we must observe the truth to know it, and none of us is an objective witness, it is difficult to identify any objective truth. In this paper I use truth to mean historical truth—do the "facts" bear out what the storyteller says?—and cultural truth—do Chinese Americans really act like that, talk like that, live that way? Fake is another word that needs definition. It is Chin's word, but Maxine Hong Kingston appropriates it for the subtitle of her third novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book.* Fake means untrue, not genuine, but there is a sense of something tacky about it.

⁵Jeffrey 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) xv. ⁶ A fake book is a collection of "dumbed down" arrangements of well-known songs, usually for piano or guitar. The chords are there, often in a simpler key, so that the person playing can coast along at parties accompanying singers, without actually putting any time into learning the songs.

Artificial flowers can be elegant; fake flowers are bad imitations of the real thing. To be fake is to be so far removed from real as to not even form an acceptable substitute.

Chin counts himself and a few others among the writers of the real, and insists,

The Christian social Darwinist bias of twentieth-century white American culture

combine[s] with the Christian mission, the racist acts of Congress, and the

statutes and city ordinances to emphasize the fake Chinese American dream over

the Chinese American reality, the belief over the fact, and the fake over the real,

until the stereotype has completely displaced history in the white sensibility

(xiii).

He sees the above writers as participators in a "white racist" agenda to vilify a "Chinese culture so foul, so cruel to women, so perverse, that good Chinese are driven by the moral imperative to kill it" (*Chin* 11). The obvious contradictions in Chin's statements are addressed in the final section of this paper, but for now let us concentrate on Chin's standards of "fakeness."

Chin makes specific mention of the first story in *The Joy Luck Club*, "a fake Chinese fairy tale about a duck that wants to be a swan and a mother who dreams of her daughter being born in America, where she'll grow up speaking perfect English and no one will laugh at her and where a 'woman's worth is [not] measured by the loudness of her husband's belch." He says this "fairy tale is not Chinese but white racist. It is not informed by any Chinese intelligence" (*Chin* 2).

The story of the swan is told by the man who wants to sell it—he tries to give the swan a romantic history because it is not really worth anything as food. The woman finds America not to be a paradise where she can escape what Chin calls "the brutish sadomasochistic culture of cruelty and victimization" (*Chin xii*), i.e., China, but a place

where officials take away her swan and confuse her so that she does not remember "why she had come and what she had left behind." Similarly, the woman's daughter does become "more than what was hoped for" (Tan 17): she becomes a stranger, a person with whom the woman can't communicate and who would not understand the story of the swan. The woman desires to leave China at the beginning of the story, presumably because her life has been difficult, but she doesn't love America, and is disappointed in her daughter who "swallow[s] more Coca-Cola than sorrow." China may represent a past full of suffering, but America is a materialistic and disconnected present and future, not a "freedom from Chinese culture" (*Chin* 26). It is in fact the daughter's lack of any relationship to Chinese culture that so dismays the mother.

An important aspect of stories is that they are *not* literal. They are told to entertain, to instruct, to warn, but almost never simply to inform. To view these mother-daughter stories as representing themselves as unvarnished accounts of actual events misses the point of why they are told. In *Homo Narrans*, John Niles says, "Truth in storytelling is not something to be equated with historical accuracy or mimetic plausibility. It is not the opposite of falsehood, fantasy, or error" (Niles 78). So, by Chin's definition but not by Niles', the stories are, in fact, "fake" in some important ways. First of all, many of the stories start with, "My mother told me..." or "My grandmother told this story." Already they are second-hand, even third-hand, which, as we know from repeating stories and rumors ourselves, means that each teller and re-teller has added something of her own. Or, as King-Kok Cheung says, "It is impossible to retrieve an unadulterated past, one not already mediated by language." The teller inserts

⁷ King-Kok Cheung. Articulate Silences. Introduction and Chapter 3, "Provocative Silence: The Woman Warrior and China Men." (Ithaca: Cornell University Press. 1993) 12.

her own language into the story. She may add extra descriptions of scenery and circumstance which her mind has supplied, speculation as to motive of the characters involved or even the motives of the teller. She may also leave out parts of the story that she has forgotten or deemed extraneous. This personalization can be conscious or unconscious, but it always happens.

In *The Joy Luck Club* Jing-Mei Woo describes how stories change even when the teller remains the same, as her mother told her "over the years...the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine" (Tan 21). The endings change as Jing-Mei grows older, and her mother feels her daughter is ready for more and more of the truth as she remembers it.

Moreover, according to Niles and others, "it is chiefly through storytelling that people possess a past" (Niles 2). This certainly means that history was preserved through oral tradition long before it was written down for posterity, but it seems also to imply something a little different, that the past does not necessarily exist unless we talk about it. In this sense, we are the creators of our own history. If this is true, and I believe that in an important sense it is true, what is to stop us, and what *should* stop us from embellishing and even inventing historical and cultural truth, or consciously omitting that which is painful or casts us in an unflattering light?

Summarizing Paul Ricoeur, Niles says that "identity, whether it be of an individual person or of a historical community, is acquired though the mediation of narrative and thus is a function of fiction" (Niles 3). There are no Chinese, and no Chinese Americans, unless they claim themselves through storytelling. Claiming herself is exactly what Maxine Hong Kingston does when she retells the story of Fa Mu Lan.

She "create[s] the past through narratives that fuse documentary record and contemporary desire" (Niles 3). In the story of Fa Mu Lan, the documentary record is the original(?) text of the chant and the contemporary desire is wanting to belong to a tradition of powerful women, even if that tradition is only a skeleton to which the modern writer must add substance.

Similarly, the mothers in these two books are claiming their children through storytelling. Maxine, Rose, Lena, Jing-Mei, and Waverly are all part of the default American cultural history they have grown up with. They learn about the pilgrims, the wars, the inventions in school, and from their friends and classmates how everyone's grandparents (or parents) survived through the Great Depression, how all the men went off to war and came back and moved to the suburbs and had babies. It is not part of the assumed twentieth-century American experience to have survived a Japanese invasion, to have emigrated from China, to own a laundry, to live in Chinatown. The mothers are replacing, or at least supplementing the dominant American family history with their own past, which becomes the daughters' past as well. Without knowledge of this history, the daughters would simply be American, living with a borrowed past, and their identities would not be complicated or enriched by sometimes wonderful, sometimes uncomfortable fragments of a different record.

Chin says that myths are, "by nature, immutable and unchanging because they are deeply ingrained in the cultural memory, or they are not myths." In contrast, Niles emphasizes that "folklore"—the myths and stories of the people—is "ordinary and evolving. As soon as it is packaged and set off from the processes of ordinary life, it becomes something else more quaint, whimsical or primitive" (Niles 45). It becomes

something fake, like a dashboard hula girl souvenir that reminds you of Hawaii but almost painfully proclaims your willing ignorance of contemporary Hawaiian culture. If Kingston cannot reconfigure old myths to meet "contemporary desires", the myths are lifeless; they have been jettisoned from the messy, still-evolving culture of which they were once a part.

Additionally, the stories in The Joy Luck Club, and even in The Woman Warrior are personal, not culturally representative, so they do not exactly fit the definition of myths as Chin defines them. Even the re-telling of the legend of Fa Mu Lan in The Woman Warrior is a personal story, Kingston imagining what it would be like to be the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan. In fact, to be an engaging storyteller, one needs to "identify with whichever character occupies the 'hero position' at a given time and...see himself or herself in him" (Niles 80). Otherwise the story lacks life and immediacy. Kingston adds her own twists and details to a bare-bones legend which Chin thoughtfully provides in his essay so we can see just how "fake" Kingston's version is. Nothing in Kingston's reimagining of the legend contradicts the original chant; it just embellishes and individualizes an old, simple story.

As in the story of Fa Mu Lan, the stories often contain mythical or supernatural elements which are presumably not to be taken as literal truth, but rather as larger-than-life signposts of important lessons or devices to catch and hold the attention of the listener. Even if these elements represent aspects of an actual belief system, we must ask if the belief system referred to is one that the teller and/or listener embraces. If not, the beliefs referred to in the story are background or history, not spiritually central to the events in the story. By searching in the canon of Chinese literature and mythology for

evidence that Kingston's story is true or untrue, Chin stubbornly refuses to understand the true nature of the story: it is fiction, and if a myth was never true at all, how can it be more or less true, real or fake?

Walter Benjamin says, "The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale." By this logic, stories become the property of the listener, albeit without fully leaving the possession of the teller. This transfer of knowledge can either represent the natural progression of legend and history, a tremendous opportunity, or an unknown danger.

Benjamin also draws a sharp distinction between novelists and storytellers, but what of the novelist who is also a storyteller, whose novel simply consists of stories and pieces of stories? Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* is such a novel. Its sixteen different stories are told by four mothers and four daughters, but within each story are other stories, many told by other mothers and grandmothers. These layers of separate and inter-connected stories are the media through which Tan continues the pattern she describes in her novels by telling the stories again, but the difference now is that her stories reach a much wider audience. Suddenly the stories are not being kept within the family anymore, they are subject to scrutiny by readers who belong to other times, other cultures.

There are two other kinds of work the stories do in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*. The retelling of the story of Fa Mu Lan gives Kingston the opportunity to work through her own questions about and dissatisfactions with gender roles. Fa Mu Lan is a woman warrior, but no one realizes she is a woman. She cannot let anyone find this out, since "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no

⁸ Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books. 1969 (translation copywrite).

matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations" (Kingston 39). She wears bigger armor while she is pregnant, so she just looks like a fat man. Even the baron who controls her home village does not recognize her. When he asks who she is, she announces to him, "I am a female avenger." He assumes she is a man who avenges wrongs against women and tries to appeal to her, man to man, about what he considers minor dalliances ("I haven't done anything other men—even you—wouldn't have done in my place") (Kingston 43). She rips off her shirt to show the astonished baron her breasts and the list of wrongs against her family that her parents have carved into her back, then beheads him.

She reveals her gender publicly only when she finally returns to her home village from her successful military campaign to depose the emperor and install a new emperor sympathetic to the peasants. Her son is "delighted that the shiny general was his mother too" (Warrior 45). In a way, her almost supernatural military prowess is hollow, since she cannot tell anyone who she really is. Of course, she is remembered in legend as a woman, so in history's eyes, she eventually gets her name back.

By placing herself into the legend of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston sets up a paradox between her dream life as a woman warrior and her real life as a girl, and a disappointment. She recounts all the anti-female sayings she heard as a child from various neighbors and relatives. They are all very similar, implying that using up any time or resources on a girl is a waste, since she will eventually belong to someone else's family when she gets married. The food/love/pride/education should go to the sons, that way it stays in the family. Maxine doesn't indicate that her parents feel this way, but enough of a cadre of older-generation men hangs around her house to get the point

across. Far from being a warrior who saves her family and her country, she is a "bad girl" who rebels in small, insignificant ways like breaking dishes and can't muster up the courage to rebel in larger, more important ways. The effect of her weak (if brave) protests against racism at work is that she gets ignored or fired. There are no sweeping changes, not even any apologies. There is nothing like the satisfaction of cutting someone's head off! In the story of Fa Mu Lan, Maxine has cast herself in the role of a woman who has it all. She is a hero to all her village and her entire country, she is strong and brave and wise, her husband loves and respects her, and her son admires her. She says, "My American life has been such a disappointment" (Kingston 45).

The other function of the stories is to hold up as examples people whom the daughters will never meet. Niles says that "one of the primary functions of oral narrative is to keep alive the memory of people who have gone before" (Niles 82). The stories about China all involve people who have "gone before"—the adulterous aunt, the opiumeating mother, the father whose portrait hangs on the wall, possibly the abandoned babies, the first husbands. Even if the storytellers do not know for certain that the people they speak of are dead, they might as well be, since the storyteller will never see or hear from them again. The exception to this is the abandoned babies—even though the mother, the storyteller, never sees them again, they are "reborn" to their half sister after the mother's death. But if Suyuan had never told Jing-Mei about them, they could never have "come alive" for her. The mothers bring these people to life in their stories as warnings, not as role models. Do not commit adultery or you will bring shame on your family and end up dead with your dead baby in a well. "Do not trust men" is also a common theme. Remembering the dead has a different purpose than the usual tendency

to lionize those who have gone before, or at least gloss over their shortcomings. In these families, no one is worried about speaking ill of the dead.

The idea that strict historical truth is not necessary in storytelling is not a new one, although perhaps explicitly admitting it is. The fairy tale of Cinderella may have happened—a king marries a poor commoner who is ill-treated at home. Disney's version of the story, complete with fairy godmother and talking mice, is no less "real" than the original fairy tale—whoever heard of living happily ever after, for instance? The movie Cinderella is a contemporary retelling of an old story, updated to suit the Twentieth Century and catch the attention of children raised on Looney Tunes. Kingston's retelling of Fa Mu Lan does similar work for Maxine, albeit with a different motive: it makes an old story relevant and helpful in Maxine's life. The story of the swan is a similar attempt to make sense of contemporary events through a somewhat surreal narrative. Good stories do not stagnate, they do not become irrelevant, but stay active and polymorphous to suit their time and teller.

III. The Language Barrier: Problems of Vision, Problems of Language, Problems of Culture

The act of storytelling in The Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club must be performed through the acrobatics of translation. English is not the mothers' first language and the daughters speak only the Chinese they were taught as children and was reinforced at Chinese school. In The Joy Luck Club, Suyuan Woo starts the Joy Luck Club, a social group of four families, soon after leaving China for San Francisco. She and her husband meet the other families in church. Suyuan is drawn to them because she can "sense that the women of these families also had unspeakable tragedies they had left behind in China and hopes they couldn't begin to express in their fragile English" (Tan 20). Tan describes their language as though the women's command of English will only allow them to exchange pleasantries and conduct daily business; any venturing into more complicated situations or emotions will lead to the breakdown of vocabulary and conjugation. For the important discussions, the women need to speak Chinese. Language is one important reason why they meet regularly for over thirty years. But the need to express oneself in one's own language also means that in almost all the instances of storytelling between mothers and daughters in these two books, the comfort zone of language is different for the teller than it is for the listener. The advantage shifts depending on who is telling the story. Most often the mother tells the story in Chinese to the daughter, who understands, or thinks she does, but processes what she hears and answers in English.

Jing-Mei Woo recalls often being confused by the conversations between herself and her mother, Suyuan, who has recently died. She tries to get answers about the past

and her family from her mother, but the explanations "made me [Jing-Mei] feel my mother and I spoke two different languages, which we did. I talked to her in English, she answered back in Chinese" (Tan 34). Each conversation is not merely between two individuals, but between two worlds. In addition to the negotiations between personalities that occur in any relationship, Jing-Mei and Suyuan must frame their giveand-take between the different languages in which they think. The problem of translation is at the forefront of their relationship. Jing-Mei continues, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more (Joy 37)." For Suyuan, everything her daughter says is nuanced, heavy with double and triple meaning, whether Jing-Mei intends it or not. On the other side, Jing-Mei doesn't understand the deliberate and important background meanings in what her mother says, since strictly listening to the words may not lift the veil of connotation and allusion. To Suyuan, these misunderstandings are signs of her daughter's disrespect, stupidity and sheer foreign-ness from her mother.

Shijie Guan proposes some concrete differences between American and Chinese communication styles. Guan says that "the Chinese prefer imagery and relational thinking, the Americans prefer abstract conceptual and logical thinking" which means that the Chinese are more likely to make sense of an issue through the use of analogy rather than through "judging and reasoning with abstract concepts" (Guan 27). In addition, Chinese are more likely to use synthesis than analysis; Americans prefer the latter concept. Guan says,

⁹ Shijie Guan. "A Comparison of Sino-American Thinking Patterns and the Function of Chinese Characters in the Difference." In D. Ray Heisey, Ed. *Chinese Perspectives in Rhetoric and Communication*. (Stamford, Connecticut: Ablex Publishing Corporation. 2000) 27.

Synthesis means viewing an object in a way of combining in thought each part of the object as a whole with unification of its different natures, aspects, and relations. Analysis means viewing an object in a way of decomposing in thought the whole object into each individual component, or differentiating its natures, aspects, and relations from each other (Guan 34).

As students educated in English, in American schools, the daughters in *The Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club* think in terms of breaking things down into manageable pieces. Their mothers think in terms of connections—how everything is related. When Ying-Ying St.Clair goes to stay at her daughter Lena's house, she knows that Lena and her husband Harold's marriage is in trouble because the furniture is falling apart and the dishes break. "All around this house I see the signs. My daughter looks but she does not see. This is a house that will break into pieces. How do I know? I have always known a thing before it happens" (Tan 243). To Ying-Ying, the flimsy furniture and the broken glass are symptoms of the shaky marriage that inhabits the house. To Lena, they are unrelated and unimportant, signs of her mother's superstition rather than of her own failing marriage.

Sometimes it is not the language barrier that causes communication problems between the mothers and daughters, but fundamental differences in personality. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Waverly Jong becomes a chess prodigy, to the delight of her mother, Lindo. She says,

I had to accompany my mother on Saturday market days when I had no tournament to play. My mother would proudly walk with me, visiting many shops, buying very little. "This my daughter Wave-ly Jong," she said to whoever looked her way.

One day, after we left a shop I said under my breath, "I wish you wouldn't do that, telling everybody I'm your daughter." My mother stopped walking. Crowds of people with heavy bags pushed past us on the sidewalk, bumping into first one shoulder, then another.

"Aiii-ya. So shame be with mother?" She grasped my hand even tighter as she glared at me.

I looked down. "It's not that, it's just so obvious. It's just so embarrassing."

"Embarrass you be my daughter?" Her voice was cracking with anger.

"That's not what I meant. That's not what I said."

"What you say?"

I knew it was a mistake to say anything more, but I heard my voice speaking... (Joy 99)

What Waverly really means is, "Stop bragging about me being a chess prodigy!" but that is not what she says. She starts off her comment muttering, half in hopes that her mother will not hear. The ensuing fight, which results in Waverly running away through the crowded market, is caused by Waverly's vague statement that at the same time obscures the real problem and insults and hurts her mother. Waverly wishes to take her comment back or modify it somehow because she has been rude to her mother and knows she is about to get in trouble. Lindo, whose imperfect command of her daughter's native language is evident in the passage above, pounces on Waverly's words instead of getting at the sentiment or reasoning behind them: Waverly wants to be anonymous and her mother is the equivalent of a loudspeaker truck following her around blaring out her accomplishments to friends and strangers alike.

Disregarding the words, the volume of speaking voices alone can become a source of culture-related mortification. Maxine reports that "the emigrant villagers are shouters, hollering face to face" (Kingston 171). They seem inappropriately loud. In fact, contrary to the myth of the quiet Chinese girl, Maxine says the "American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine" (Kingston 172) at elementary school. To be feminine means to lower your voice, since if you don't "you can see the disgust on American faces looking at women like that" (Kingston 172). In Chinese school, however, "the girls were not mute. They screamed and yelled during recess, when there were no rules; they had fist-fights" (Kingston 167). The boisterousness of Chinese school does not carry over into elementary school. Maxine only talks "at home and to one or two of the Chinese kids in [public kindergarten] class" (Kingston 166). The problem seems to be American and not Chinese, since, according to Maxine, all the inhibitions disappear once the girls are only with other Chinese American kids. However, Maxine may not be a reliable narrator here. She says that she and her sister make their voices quieter on purpose in order to be "American-feminine" but the effect seems to be that no one can hear them. They must not be speaking at the same volume level as the other children in the class. When the second-grade class puts on a play, the Chinese girls are left behind because their voices are "too soft or nonexistent" (Kingston 167). Shyness must be taking hold of their vocal cords, because apparently they can yell and scream as loud as anyone when they are in Chinese school, a place where they feel more comfortable.

Although Maxine moderates her own speech (or at least tries) in order to be different from the way girls act at Chinese school, she cannot make her mother into an

"American-feminine" woman this way: "I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones" (Kingston 11). These are situations where, for Americans, shouting is particularly jarring, but Brave Orchid does not see the need to change her behavior, or perhaps she can't change it, after talking that way all her life. In any case, the American Chinese daughter is embarrassed and the Chinese American mother is bewildered by her daughter's embarrassment.

Recall that a story begins when someone sees and/or experiences events. The way people see determines what they see and how they interpret the input from their eyes. At the most basic level, says Elizabeth Loftus, the way people see is affected by "cultural expectations or stereotypes, expectations from past experience, personal prejudices, and momentary or temporary expectations" (Loftus 37). It seems that the process of actually seeing or experiencing events is just as subjective as hearing about them second hand. What you see depends on who you are.

One striking instance where perception is everything is the story of the Delivery Ghost in *The Woman Warrior*. Using a term taught to her by her mother, Maxine grows up referring to all the white people she interacts with every day as 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 walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars" (Kingston 97). These ghosts perform "useful chores" but are subhuman. The Chinese and their children are the only humans around, by this logic. One day the Delivery Ghost from the Rexall drugstore brings medicine meant for another family to Maxine's house by mistake. In Brave Orchid's eyes, the ordinary delivery boy making a harmless mistake has cursed the

family by bringing sickness to the house. Brave Orchid "muttered for an hour, and then her anger boiled over. 'That ghost! That dead ghost! How dare he come to the wrong house?...Revenge. We've got to avenge this wrong on our future, on our health, and on our lives. Nobody's going to sicken my children and get away with it'" (Kingston 171). She makes Maxine go to the drugstore and demand candy to "remove the curse with sweetness" (Kingston 172). Where Maxine and her siblings see a trivial event, Brave Orchid sees a dark conspiracy of foreigners and curses. Again, embarrassment results since Maxine must humor her mother's superstitious nature out in public. Different backgrounds, different generations produce the perception of wholly different events and meanings.

Now that we have established that our eyes are at worst unreliable and at best subjective, we learn that our language skills are just as suspect. Niles says,

According to a key metaphor that goes back to the work of Saussure, language is not a window that permits us to gaze on reality with little or no distortion. It is an eye, a highly complex psychoneural mechanism that mysteriously gives rise to ideas as a sentient person filters external stimuli in accord with preestablished mental capacities" (Niles 78).

Through the metaphor of language as an eye, we can apply what we know about the inconsistencies and biases of seeing with our eyes to how we think about language. Two people may say the same words with nearly opposite intentions. And what about sarcasm and irony, and when people say the opposite of what they really mean to protect themselves or others? It seems as though language is as much of a source of confusion as it is the basis of developed human communication.

There is no better example of the gaps in language and meaning than when mothers and daughters attempt to communicate across cultures and across generations, even though they are all Chinese American in some way or another. Instead of talking to each other, Maxine and her mother, Brave Orchid, talk past each other, each speaking from a different angle, each exasperated with the other for the apparent slowness, rudeness, strangeness of her speech and life. The adult Maxine wakes up during a visit to her parents' house to find her mother walking around the room, putting another quilt on her and finally sitting in a chair next to the bed to watch her daughter sleep. Finally, Maxine says, her mother sends "light at full brightness beaming through my eyelids, her eyes at my eyes, and I had to open them" (Kingston 100). The two women proceed to have a conversation that is so disjointed it is almost nonsensical. They switch from topic to topic, from pills (which Brave Orchid thinks are LSD, but are really Maxine's cold pills) to how Maxine does not come home enough, to how old Brave Orchid really is, to what it is like to work in the tomato fields. The conversation is at a strange moment: the mother wakes the daughter up to speak to her about everything and nothing, the daughter is confused and sleepy, and the culture/language gap is exacerbated. What does Brave Orchid really want? Does she say it and Maxine does not understand? Is she incapable of saying it from so many years of talking through metaphor, hiding her love and pride? In the book, Maxine does not know the answer, and neither do we. If Brave Orchid is waking up Maxine to claim her again, through simple talk, while she is home again for a short while, her attempt seems not to succeed. The opportunity for intimacy passes. The conversation is so disjointed as to be practically meaningless; Maxine is not in a listening mood.

The language and culture gaps between parents and children can also have profound effects on the very nature of the relationships in question. For example, in *The* Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club, there is sometimes a reversal of the roles of mother and child, but only from the child's perspective, not the mother's. In The Woman Warrior, Brave Orchid thinks of her children as "lazy", "greedy", and "impolite", with "noisy barbarous mouths" (Kingston 121). Against custom, she and her husband "put up their own pictures because later the children would not have the sense to do it" (Kingston 122). They will disregard their parents' memories and fail to show the proper respect by not displaying their parents' pictures. To Brave Orchid, her children will always literally be children, never full-fledged adults. "I don't see how any of them could support themselves," Brave Orchid says. "I don't see how anybody could want to marry them" (Kingston 133). The children are disappointments, half-formed. But to the children themselves, their mother is an embarrassment, a childlike person who needs to be told partial truths so as not to become upset, a superstitious woman who does inexplicable things, like open the back door and mumble words to protect her family (Kingston 121).

The children have to act as translators, which gives them power, however undesired, over their mothers. In *The Joy Luck Club*, Lena St. Clair remembers that she often lied when I had to translate for [my mother], the endless forms, instructions, notices from school, telephone calls. "Shemma yisz?"—What meaning?—she asked me when a man at a grocery store yelled at her for opening up jars to smell the insides. I was so embarrassed I told her that Chinese people were not allowed to shop there" (Joy 106).

Lena's mother, Ying-Ying, relies on her daughter to navigate situations where her only partial command of English inhibits her. Lena is "embarrassed" not only because Ying-

Ying does things that Americans don't do, but because she isn't in command of situations where an adult should be competent, situations in which she finds herself stranded by language. Other mothers do not need their daughters' help to go to the store, Lena thinks. Of course every mother embarrasses her daughter, in large and small ways, even if there is no discernable cultural difference between them. But to Lena, like every daughter embarrassed by her mother, Ying-Ying's transgressions seem much worse than the minor missteps committed by other mothers.

Age, cultural background, and language are factors that contribute to the opacity of interactions between the mothers and daughters in these two novels. The ensuing gaps in understanding lead to fights, confusion, embarrassment, and even sometimes a disconcerting reversal of roles. Going back to Chin's complaint of fakeness, "truth" is impossible to define if even meaning is obscure. In most human interactions, but especially when the transfer is complicated by added barriers, meaning is subjective; therefore, what was truly said is open to discussion.

IV. Hybridity

The "multicultural" novel or memoir is subject to a different set of scrutinies than its mainstream (white) counterpart—Amy Ling describes the multicultural novel as a "provocative act." Critics and readers alike examine it for allegiance to one culture or another, and for "clues" about the inner workings of the author's cultural background. Reading becomes an anthropological exercise instead of a literary one. In fact, as Ling laments, not entirely facetiously, "One would think they'd been asked to read stories written by baboons" (Ling 143). Dissecting a novel is not only the realm of the bumbling or malicious mainstream critic. Critics like Frank Chin also espouse this view when they examine works by other Asian American writers for signs of disloyalty to one culture or another. As Amy Ling notes, "All too often the most vociferous slings and arrows are flung from those within the minority community itself" (Ling 143).

The questions that are getting asked here have little to do with the literary merits of the novel. The critics are worried about the stories, and whom they really belong to.

Are they personal literary devices or are they cultural capital, held in trust for the next generation? I have already argued that, due to the personal nature of storytelling, the idea of an *impersonal* body of work that remains constant throughout time is not only improbable, but undesirable. If people cannot make the stories their own, they will have little or no investment in preserving them. Restrictions on storytelling ultimately hurt the entire culture.

In the cases of Kingston and Tan, there are additional questions and criticisms.

These mainly circle around the idea of cultural duality—what does it mean to be both

¹⁰ Amy Ling. "Maxine Hong Kingston and the Dialogic Dilemma." In Geoffrey Kain, Ed. *Ideas of Home*. (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press. 1997)

Chinese and American? Can one be both at the same time, or does one side always have to "win" in a given situation? Does portraying one culture in a positive light necessarily reflect negatively on the other? Who makes the rules about cultural duality and why?

In examining cultures and the spaces between them, it is useful to work with a specific definition of the word "culture." Helen Spencer-Oatey provides this definition:

Culture is a fuzzy set of attitudes, beliefs, behavioural conventions, and basic assumptions and values that are shared by a group of people, and that influence each member's behaviour and each member's interpretations of the 'meaning' of other people's behaviour.¹¹

In other words, as we have seen before, how you interpret what is happening around you depends on who you are and where you come from. Spencer-Oatey speaks from the standpoint of communication theory, but her definition is useful for multicultural literary critics as well. Spencer-Oatey points out that any notion of culture is "fuzzy"—there is bleeding around the edges between borders of countries (think of Alsace and Lorraine, which are for the moment in France but have been part of a centuries-old tug-of-war between France and Germany) and mixing of cultures brought about by immigration, trade, military conquest, and slavery.

We may, as Homi Bhabha does, call the concept of mixed cultures "hybridity," but it is a term that means different things to different people. The term comes from the world of botany, where it means combining different plants, or different strains of plants, into one viable plant. The plant formed by this process retains some of the characteristics of each parent plant, but is its own unique variety. In the analysis of Virpi Ylänne-McEwen and Nikolas Coupland, Bhabha says in his 1988 article, "The Commitment to

¹¹ Helen Spencer-Oatey, Ed. Culturally Speaking. (London: Continuum. 2000) 4.

Theory," that "cultural identity always shows indeterminacy and a struggle between alternatives—what he calls 'hybridity." For Babha, a hybrid culture is not a seamless blending of the antecedent cultures, but a constant negotiation between them. In this view a person of hybrid culture lives in a sense *between* cultures and is always choosing one way or another to look at life.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, when Lena St. Clair asks her mother how her great-grandfather died, Ying-Ying is horrified. "'Annh! Why do you Americans have only these morbid thoughts in your mind?' cried my mother in Chinese" (Tan 103). But on the very same page, Lena describes a terrifying fall down the basement stairs, "And after that I began to see terrible things. I saw these things with my Chinese eyes, the part of me I got from my mother...And when I got older, I could see things that Caucasian girls at school did not" (Tan 103). To Ying-Ying, Americans are "morbid," obsessed with death, talking about things better left unsaid. But for Lena, her "Chinese eyes" are what makes her see possible tragedy everywhere, accidents about to happen—the Chinese part of her is the morbid side.

In this story, Mother and daughter are each trying to sort out where Lena comes from, why her personality is the way it is. They both rely on cultural differences to explain why certain thoughts prevail, certain actions are taken. Like Babha, Lena and Ying-Ying believe that a trait must either be American or Chinese, not neither and not both. The stories in *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club* must either be told from an American (white?) perspective or a Chinese perspective.

¹² Virpi Ylanne-McEwen and Nikolas Coupland. "Accommodation Theory." In Helen Spencer-Oatey, Ed. *Culturally Speaking*. (London: Continuum. 2000) 207.

It seems, then, that these writers and critics all agree that Chinese Americans live in the gaps between their different cultures, not in some integrated composite. The resting state is cultural limbo; the person has to "channel" one culture or another to act or think or speak. This view seems limiting. It seems strange to tell an American of Chinese ancestry that she always has to pick a position, that she can never simply be herself without knowing which set of baggage she is accessing at one time. Must even subconscious thought and action stem from one cultural source or another? This supposition seems extreme, but it is the natural continuation of the "alternating cultural current" theory. The risk here is the alienation of groups of people who are Chinese American but who feel either not very Chinese or not very American.

King-Kok Cheung eloquently addresses Frank Chin's criticism of the Chinese tainted by a missionary experience in her book, *Articulate Silences*, saying, "I am especially uneasy about the hard-line distinction Frank Chin draws in *The Big Aiiieeeee!* between the "fake" and the "real" Asian American literature. He considers works emanating from an American missionary tradition as fake, and the ones faithful to 'Asian childhood literature and history' as real. In his concern for cultural purity, he ignores one of the most defining characteristics of Asian American literature...:hybridity" (Cheung 19). Discounting any Chinese Americans' experiences informed by Christianity is a good way to disenfranchise a whole group of people in one fell swoop. It does not make sense to say these experiences and traditions are not real, or that they are not Chinese American. The whole point of calling oneself Chinese American is that one belongs to both cultures. An American with a Chinese family history and a Chinese with an

intimate knowledge of American culture are both part of the group "Chinese American" and their beliefs and experiences must not be discounted or invalidated.

Asian immigrant collectivity is unstable and changeable, with its cohesion complicated by intergenerationality, by various degrees of identification and relation to a 'homeland' and by different extents of assimilation to and distinction from 'majority culture' in the United States." ¹³ Being Chinese American is something different than being either Chinese or American. And even the category of "Chinese American" collects a whole range of experiences, from people who are American citizens but who came to the U.S. as adults to people born in the U.S. who do not speak Chinese, or know anything about Chinese customs. All the primary characters in *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior* are Chinese Americans in some way. But they are completely different people, whose lives are informed by completely different cultural sensibilities.

By the logic of the alternating current model, a person in a given situation must constantly juggle cultures and decide whose viewpoints make more sense in that specific moment. Realistically, it does not happen like this. Things happen too fast; the mind must act too quickly to be able to consciously drag cultures along with it. Maxine has a way to deal with this that she learns in her training in the mountains. She says, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradox" (Kingston 29). But her mind is already embracing paradox—that elasticity is what enables her to react in a unique way when she first meets the old man and woman in the story of the white tigers:

"Have you eaten rice today, little girl?" they greeted me.

¹³ Wendy Ho. In Her Mother's House. (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press. 1999) 235.

"Yes, I have," I said out of politeness. "Thank you."

("No, I haven't," I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. "I'm starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies" (Kingston 21).

This is a humorous passage, but it shows that Maxine is a blunt American kid and also a person aware of a respectful Chinese past. Her mind is large enough to grasp all parts of herself at once. Wendy Ho says that Maxine "configures a complex, permeable self in response to the diverse communities (real and imaginary) she inhabits" (Ho 235). Rather than switching within a binary of Chinese and American, Maxine can be both at all times, and concentrate on one or the other at will.

When we ask a writer to pledge loyalty to one culture or another, what are we really asking? In many cases, the Frank Chins of the world are daring the writer to make a mistake, to betray the minority culture by saying it is weird or wrong or misogynist. Any criticism of the minority culture means becoming a collaborator, in the Vichy government sense, with the majority. The message to feminist writers is: It may be dirty laundry, but it's *our* dirty laundry, and nobody else's business. It is one thing for the women of a culture to pass their heritage on to their children, but it is entirely different if they want to write the stories down and show them to others and maybe make some money from them. If the writer wants to claim any of her heritage that lies outside mainstream culture, she is constantly walking on eggshells in order to remain true to herself and her own experiences but not set back the movement—by reinforcing orientalist myths, for example.

Unfortunately, the people who have the most to gain from playing cultural police are those who are either not interested in feminist perspectives or are actively trying to

limit them. Frank Chin actually asserted once that "Feminists are racists!" (Ling 144). That kind of rhetoric will win him no friends, but it also weakens the Asian American "movement" as a whole. Repressing women's voices makes their claims of a misogynist tradition seem all the more valid, which in turn can lead to less willingness on the part of a majority culture to accept and learn. Infighting cripples any common agenda that a group may have, and disinclines others to take them seriously. But rather than suppressing the catalyst for the infighting, the critics might do well to examine their own prejudices and come to grips with them before they attempt to censor others around them who are letting their voices out, regardless of the taboos they may be breaking.

V. Conclusion

Under the right circumstances, stories last forever—not necessarily the same stories, but people tell each other tales in every language in every country of the world, and they always will. They are fictional, fleeting, varying from teller to teller through generations. Still, this ephemeral medium safeguards important cultural history and ensures that current generations do not forget their predecessors. In fact, in some important ways stories actually define a culture and keep it alive—without the knowledge of the past (strictly factual and heavily embellished alike) a culture cannot really exist.

The debate over who stories belong to, who is allowed to tell them, and what determines stories' authenticity is unlikely to end soon, given the personal and political nature of the discourse, but even while it continues we can lay out a few fundamentals about stories themselves. They all originated somewhere and have been revised since the moment of inception. When we tell stories, we launch them into the world and have little control over what happens next. Each subsequent storyteller makes the material her own, consistent with her own experience and appropriate for the audience. A storyteller who repeats verbatim what he has been told by others is hardly compelling to listen to or read.

In *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Woman Warrior*, the authors use stories passed down from mother to daughter to tell their own stories. Embedded in these instances of storytelling are all the complexities of the relationships between the mothers and daughters: the difficult balance between contemporary life and traditional ways, the changing roles and worth of women, the disorienting experience for both mother and daughter of having a "foreigner" for a relative.

As Tan and Kingston tell their stories about stories, we experience with them the opacity of communication between the mothers and daughters. Differences in age, language, and cultural communication norms combine to make dialogue a constant struggle for understanding and a constant opportunity for misunderstanding. Slights, real and imagined, proliferate as the women talk past and through each other. The mothers communicate through metaphors that the daughters cannot (or are unwilling to) understand. The daughters, in turn, tire of digging though their mothers' words to find the deeper meaning when their lives are so much more modern and apparently straightforward. Love gets hung up in the disconnect between the women.

The distances and differences between the women are addressed by the term "hybridity," which deals with the negotiations a person must make between her multiple cultures. The term is especially meaningful for the Chinese American women in Kingston and Tan, whose identity with American and Chinese culture varies widely, but always includes both. According to Homi Bhabha and others, hybridity takes the form of an almost constant rapid-fire shift between cultural perspectives. Each person has his or her own balance between the cultures: which one is most often in the foreground, which stays in the back of the mind and how often there is a switch. Many critics object to the idea of a person belonging to more than one culture at once, construing any identification with the majority culture as being in league with one's oppressors. But in the interest of literature and culture, we should celebrate writers who "make their minds large" enough to hold the paradoxes of their worlds and lives and the complicated lives of their characters.

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