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*Asian American (S)wordswomen*

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I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large,  
so that there is room for paradoxes.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*





Jade Snow Wong

Maxine Hong Kingston



Hisaye Yamamoto

Wakako Yamauchi



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## Foreword

This dissertation deals with four Asian American women writers, two of them of Chinese ancestry and the other two of Japanese origin. They are Jade Snow Wong (San Francisco, 1922-2006) and Maxine Hong Kingston (Stockton, 1940-), on the one hand, and Hisaye Yamamoto (Redondo Beach, 1921-2011) and Wakako Yamauchi (Westmorland, 1924-), on the other. All of them were born in California and they are all second-generation immigrants. Wong and Yamamoto died recently while Kingston and Yamauchi are still alive. Wong's two memoirs (*Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *No Chinese Stranger*) are considered as classics of Asian American literature but only Kingston's work has actually entered the American canon. Both Yamamoto and Yamauchi chronicled the Japanese American experience in their works: the former mainly wrote short stories while the latter is better known as a playwright. I will analyse and compare Wong's coming-of-age autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976), three short stories by Yamamoto ("Seventeen Syllables", 1949; "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara", 1950; "Yoneko's Earthquake", 1951) taken from *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1988) and a short story by Yamauchi ("Songs My Mother Taught Me") taken from *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir* (1994). All these works depict Asian American women's lives and their struggles to reach self-expression and self-achievement. Moreover, they are all autobiographical narratives.

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* is an autobiography and a coming-of-age novel clearly addressing the white audience: its aim is to show that Chinese people were able to assimilate in American society and, at the same time, to debunk negative images associated with Chinese Americans and so to raise interest in their culture and traditions. The author, playing the role of cultural guide, accompanies the white reader in a "guided Chinatown tour" (Wong 1992) giving

information about festivals and food making. The protagonist, Jade Snow, is the fifth daughter of a Chinese family living in San Francisco's Chinatown. Jade Snow strives for individual freedom against her parents' steadfast belief in Chinese traditions. Being in America, she is able to go to college, find a job, and obtain social recognition. In the end, her family will also acknowledge her abilities and achievements. This apparently simple shift from Asia to America, from tradition to progress, from patriarchy to individual freedom, has to be problematized and deeply questioned.

Similarly, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* tells the story of a girl growing up into an independent woman. The generic status of this work has been a point of disagreement among critics. Moreover, *The Woman Warrior* has been at the centre of a debate which has greatly influenced definitions of Asian American identity, literature, and criticism. In spite of or thanks to this, *The Woman Warrior* is perhaps the only Asian American work to have entered the American canon and Kingston is supposedly the most widely taught living American author. The main reason for choosing this work is not only that it is one of the most debated and read Asian American novels but also because it can be usefully compared to Wong's autobiography. Comparisons are made possible by the fact that both of them are Chinese American novels written by two women, daughters of Chinese immigrants, sharing the same concerns, notably, women's emancipation. Yet, a more accurate analysis will show that one of the two heroines has failed to grasp the hidden sides and complications of the Western concept of female freedom.

Yamamoto and Yamauchi have been paired for the same reasons Wong and Kingston appear in a sort of literary bond: they are both second-generation Japanese American writers concerned with Japanese American women's condition. Moreover, Yamamoto and Yamauchi became friends in the relocation camp of Poston, Arizona, where they both worked at the newspaper camp, *The Poston Chronicle*.

The short-stories by Yamamoto that I analyse are taken from a collection

where different themes are dealt with so only those which openly address the issue of women's repression and desire for self-expression have been selected. "Seventeen Syllables" narrates the parallel stories of a mother and a daughter who are incapable of understanding each other. Particularly, Rosie fails to grasp her mother's deep suffering when her father destroys the symbol of her artistic work. "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara" takes place in a Japanese relocation camp: Miss Sasagawara, the daughter of a Buddhist priest, is an artist and she is thought to be insane. At the end of the story, a truth of sorrow and repression emerges. "Yoneko's Earthquake" also follows two parallel plot lines: that of the mother and that of her daughter, both fond of the same man, a Filipino farm hand. What is interesting in Yamamoto's stories is that nothing is totally white or black: the final meaning of her stories is never straightforward and unambiguous. Her style and literary devices, such as the use of hidden narratives (i.e. secondary plots which usually remain hidden under the surface of the main plot) and of a limited point of view, are also very remarkable and worth being explored.

Despite the fact that Yamauchi is better known as a playwright, a short story will be here examined so that the link with Yamamoto's work will be stronger. At the centre of Yamauchi's short stories there is the tension between the aspirations of first-generation Japanese American women and the patriarchal norms of Japanese culture: they portray these women fighting to realise ambitions which challenge traditional gender roles. In "Songs My Mother Taught Me", the protagonist is a first-generation Japanese American woman who escapes from her life of worker, wife, and mother and seeks some kind of satisfaction in art.

The order in which these works will be studied does not imply any kind of increasing importance or literary merit. Moreover, other works could have been chosen to explore the way in which Asian American women find and sometimes eventually lose their freedom and individuality: for instance, works by Korean

or South-Asian American women writers.<sup>1</sup> Personal interest in China and Japan has guided the choice of only Chinese and Japanese American women writers. Surely, these writers have come to be considered as fundamental to the Asian American literary tradition. Besides, as it has already been stated, these authors turned out to be particularly suited to be compared and a comparative reading of texts is always very fruitful since it enables texts to enlighten each other. My analysis will be both thematic and formal in order to provide a deeper understanding and appreciation of each work.

My interest in the encounter between East and West started with my undergraduate dissertation which dealt with the influence of Buddhism on Jack Kerouac's life and work. When the time came to think about my master dissertation I strongly wanted to pursue my research on the interconnections between East and West. I chanced upon Asian American literature and realised that it was the perfect subject: not only because it clearly is a blending of Asia and America, East and West, but also because it is a relatively recent and not too extensive field of research. Asian American studies only emerged during the late 1960s and research in this field is not very popular, especially in Europe. Most critics and researchers are Asian Americans, some of whom believing that being Asian American is a requisite for studying this field. Yet, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, one of its most authoritative voices, acknowledges that "non-Asians can manage to do excellent criticism on Asian American literature" (cited in Grice 2002: x).

I hope that if my analysis does not make any significant contribution to Asian American studies, it will at least draw some attention to the phenomenon of Asian immigration to Europe and its possible consequences, such as the emergence of a new literary field. Although Asian America may seem a very far away reality, it is a certain fact that more and more Asians are migrating to Europe as well. In Italy, small Chinatowns are growing progressively in the cities and it will not be long until we need a term to define Asian immigrants'

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance Korean American writer Nora Okja Keller or South-Asian American writer Bharati Mukherjee.

children: Asian Italians, Chinese Italians, Indian Italians, and so on. In a few years, students may be studying texts written by Italians of Asian origin.<sup>2</sup>

What caught my attention was also the presence of a *fil rouge* in many texts by Asian American women, and particularly in those that I chose: their women protagonists find self-expression and self-achievement through art, especially through writing. This is why the title of my dissertation is *Asian American (S)wordswomen*: the figure of the swordswoman appears in *The Woman Warrior*, her name is Fa Mu Lan, and her real weapon is not the sword but the word. Likewise, the authors of these works and their women protagonists use words to fight against oppression and silence. I felt that such message needed to be explored and transmitted: these women show how literature can actually change one's life and that literature is not as useless as our hyper-materialistic and hyper-scientific society may suggest. Nowadays, the formative role of humanities has been shadowed by scientific subjects and even by media entertainment. Studying and researching in the literary field is perceived as being useless or, at best, as a pleasurable activity which will not improve in any way people's lives. Yet, in these Asian American women's texts, writing and reading or making clay sculptures is what enables them to express themselves, to find their identity and a measure of happiness and satisfaction.

To conclude, this dissertation deals with women writers and in doing so it attempts to add value to their work; it analyses works whose women protagonists are caught between "two worlds", notably, Asia and America but also community values and individual self-expression, public and private; it highlights these women's efforts to disentangle themselves from social, and especially masculine, oppression and to achieve self-expression through various

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<sup>2</sup> Italy is indeed the European country with the highest number of Asian immigrants (Demaio and Nanni 2013). It is not surprising then that Discovery Italia produced a reality show called "Italiani made in China" in 2015 and "Italiani made in India" in 2016. Their protagonists, six young second-generation immigrants of Chinese and Indian origin, went respectively to China and India to discover their roots.

artistic means; it shows how women can be as much as or even more creative than men in their struggle for self-determination.

# 1. INTRODUCTION





## 1.1 East Goes West<sup>3</sup>

East'll meet West anyway. Think what a great world revolution will take place when East meets West finally, and it'll be guys like us that can start the thing ...

Jack Kerouac, *The Dharma Bums*

To be an Asian American, to be an ethnic American, is a unique combination which is a beginning. With the plus of our rich cultural heritage, to be an Asian in America is our distinction.

Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

“East'll meet West anyway” says Japhy Ryder (Gary Snyder) to Ray Smith (Jack Kerouac), answering Ray's comment on Westerners being “all excited about being real Orientals and wearing robes” and “actual Orientals over there ... reading surrealism and Charles Darwin and ... [being] mad about Western business suits” (Kerouac 2000 [1958]: 170). Yet, it was not their generation, the Beat generation, who had started “the thing”: Transcendentalist writers such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau had taken an interest in the East long before they had. In each case, it was West meeting East rather than the opposite. Anyway, such an encounter between East and West had already been prompted by a whole generation of Chinese young men who had arrived on the American shore, especially after 1849, because of labour opportunities in the gold mines, Hawaiian plantations, and railroads.

Between 1850 and 1889, approximately 300,000 Chinese men emigrated to the United States, though as many as half eventually returned to China. By 1851, 25,000 farmers coming from South China had arrived in California (which they renamed “Gold Mountain”) to be recruited as manual labourers in mining,

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<sup>3</sup> *East Goes West: The Making of an Oriental Yankee* (1937) is a memoir by Korean American writer Younghill Kang.

construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and service industries. In 1862, the US Congress approved the construction of the transcontinental railroad awarding contracts to the Union Pacific and the Central Pacific companies: the latter employed more than 10,000 Chinese workers. The railroad was completed in 1869 and no recognition was given to the Chinese workers. When the Gold Rush was over, Chinese miners moved to San Francisco and became low-paid workers in tobacco and textile factories. In the rural areas, they worked as farm hands. During the economic crisis, white workers' level of employment sharply decreased while low-paid Chinese workers were still largely employed. This situation led to growing anti-Chinese sentiments culminating in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 which prevented the Chinese from migrating to the United States and obtaining US citizenship. Obviously, this precluded the reunification of families or the starting of new ones. As a consequence, a "bachelor society" made of single male workers developed. This kind of society was doomed to grow old because of the impossibility to have their wives come from China and so to have children and start a family. This act was only repealed during the Second World War, in 1943, when the Chinese began to be seen as allies and the Japanese as enemies and, thus, forced to live in relocation camps such as Manzanar, Lake Tule, Topaz, Poston, and Amache. Yet, more than 30,000 second-generation Japanese served the US army during the war and one unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, became the most decorated unit of its size in US history.

The Japanese started to arrive in Hawai'i as field hands in the sugar cane fields in 1868 and in the fruit and vegetable farms of California in 1869. In 1885, the Japanese government allowed about 30,000 Japanese to emigrate to America to work in the Hawaiian plantations. Japanese labourers rapidly increased after the decision of the Japanese government to abolish the ban on emigration in 1886. However, after the annexation of Hawai'i, bans and laws valid in the continental United States were extended to the islands, such as the ban on contractual employment. Consequently, many Japanese started to move

to the continent. In 1908, Japan agreed to discourage immigration to the United States after an informal agreement with the US government known as the Gentlemen's Agreement. In 1913, the Alien Land Law prevented all aliens ineligible for citizenship, and therefore all Asian immigrants, from owning agricultural land in California. The period between 1908 and 1924 was characterized by the arrival of the so-called "picture brides": marriages were arranged by parents and couples were married while the bride was in Japan and the groom was in the United States, having seen each other only in picture. So, husband and wife met for the first time upon their arrival at the pier in Honolulu, San Francisco, or Seattle, using photographs to identify one another. Therefore, the Japanese American community transformed from a male migrant labourer community to a family-oriented people looking for permanent settlement. Japanese Americans have developed their own way to identify themselves: Issei are the Japanese who first immigrated to the United States; while Issei were born in Japan, their children, Nisei, were born in the United States, and so were their grandchildren, Sansei. These terms were coined after the Japanese words for number one, two, and three (*ichi, ni, san*).

When Kerouac and his fellow Beat writers were hanging out in San Francisco, the American soil was by then inhabited by about 800,000 Asian Americans. Besides, like today, most of them were settled in California (all the more reason for Kerouac to realise that the revolution they were envisaging had, to a certain extent, already happened). Moreover, the Immigration Act of 1965 produced a great change in the Asian American population by abolishing the national origin quotas and annually permitting the admission of 170,000 immigrants from the East. Yet, Japanese Americans stopped being the main group as the strong economy of Japan did not prompt Japanese to emigrate any more. After the Vietnam War, the United States also saw the coming of almost 800,000 South-Asian immigrants. Today, 5,6% of the US population, over 19 million people, is of Asian origin; the three largest groups are Chinese, Filipino, and Indian (census.gov 2015).

So, it was at least one century before than the publication of *The Dharma Bums* that East had met West and that the two had started to mingle. Later, during the 1960s, the label “Asian American” was introduced, a very interesting mixture of East and West, as well as a highly problematic category where identity issues are at the core:

While African American Studies, Chicano/a Studies, and Native American Studies courses are generally thought to focus on politics and history, the central concern of Asian American study courses is assumed to be identity. Specifically, Asian American subjects are interpreted as the site of struggle and reconciliation between ‘Asian culture’ and ‘American culture.’ (Chang 2007: 867-868)

As a matter of fact, Asian Americans have not been as politically active as African Americans or Chicanos, who started the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s. Because of their quietness in the political arena, Asian Americans came to be designated as “the model minority”, that is, “successfully assimilated, law-abiding, and Anglo-identified citizens” (Lim 1997: 289), contrary to blacks, Hispanics, and Native Americans. Yet, Asian Americans have made attempts to resist the hegemony of the dominant group even though this has not been done through political militancy but rather through literary commitment. Asian Americans have been extremely productive in the literary field and literature greatly contributed to tackle identity issues: the earliest works were written in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century but they are not considered as significant as those produced throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century by authors such as Chinese American Sui Sin Far, Jade Snow Wong, Louis Chu, Frank Chin, Chuang Hua, Hualing Nieh, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, and David Henry Hwang, or Japanese American Thosio Mori, John Okada, Hisaye Yamamoto, Wakako Yamauchi, Mitsuye Yamada, Monica Sone, David Mura, and Cynthia Kadohata. Not to mention all the writers of Bangladeshi, Burmese, Cambodian, Filipino, Korean, Indian, Indonesian, Laotian, Nepali, Pakistani, Sri Lankan, Thai, and Vietnamese descent. Indeed, Asian American literature can be defined as “... works by

people of Asian descent who were either born in or who have emigrated to North America” (Cheung 1997: 1). Elaine H. Kim (2006: 235-236) points out that

... Asian American writing mirrors the evolving self-image and consciousness of an often misunderstood and increasingly significant racial minority group, not only by documenting the experiences of Asians in the United States, but also by giving powerful expression to individual experiences and perceptions through the particular voices of Asian American artists.



## 1.2 From Asian-American to Asian/American

Now, it is essential to briefly describe some significant debates which are at the core of Asian American studies. First, the category “Asian American” should be introduced. The umbrella term “Asian American” was coined in the late 1960s, under the influence of the Civil Rights Movement, for political reasons, that is, to give voice to Asian immigrants in America. Indeed, the only way to give visibility to Asian groups in front of the dominant group was to form a broad-base movement which included both immigrants and American-born Asians. Therefore, the price to be paid for political and cultural visibility was to level differences among the various Asian subgroups in America and promote political solidarity in the light of common experiences and treatments in the United States. The main reasons of dissatisfaction were the perception of being considered as perpetual foreigners and the stereotypical representations usually linked with “Orientals”. Thus, while the term “Oriental” was used in North America to indicate both Asians across the Pacific and inhabitants of the American soil, the term “Asian American” came to emphasize the American status of immigrants from Asia and their descendants:

*Asian American* has ... been adopted as the preferred self-designation of the ‘ethnically conscious’ elements in the community, in contradistinction to the exoticizing *Oriental*. ... Nevertheless, this subsumption of identity ... is not meant to obscure the unique experiences of each subgroup, but merely to provide an instrument for political mobilization under chosen circumstances. Otherwise, the term *Asian American* is in danger of reproducing some of the damages caused by the earlier, stereotypical *Oriental* label. (Wong 1993: 6)

Evidently, this was not a merely descriptive geographic label but rather a conscious and strategic appropriation in antagonistic and counterhegemonic terms of the racist homologation as indistinct “Orientals” (Izzo 2006: 10). So,

Asian Americans were fashioning their own identity against the stereotypes produced by the whites to identify them. This claim became the cornerstone of the group's cultural nationalist propaganda.

It is interesting to notice that, originally, a hyphen was interposed between "Asian" and "American" and this was, more than a sign of union, a hint at the irreducibility of the Asian American experience to either Asia or America. Hence, the uniqueness of this experience. By creating the category "Asian-American", Asians in America were claiming not only an identity and a voice of their own but also America itself. This is why great emphasis was originally given to the fact of being born in America. The centrality of "Americanness" eventually led to the suppression of the hyphen so that "Asian" could become an adjective of "American". Maxine Hong Kingston, for instance, has stressed the need "to leave out the hyphen in 'Chinese-American,' because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight. ... Without the hyphen, 'Chinese' is an adjective and 'American' a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American" (cited in Cheung 1997: 6). More recently, David Palumbo-Liu has introduced a new compound: "Asian/American". The slash stands for equality and describes an Asian American identity for which the claim of America or of any other nationality is less and less important. "Asian/American" then reflects the shift from cultural nationalism to a transnational or diasporic trend (see Izzo 2006: 14-15).

Cultural nationalism was especially supported by Frank Chin, Jeffrey Paul Chan, Lawson Fusao Inada, and Shawn Wong, co-editors of the first important anthology of Asian American literature, *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, published in 1974. Their catchphrase was "claim America" and, to them, Asian American identity was masculine, militaristic, and working class. This essentialist definition especially aimed at contrasting the white stereotype of the effeminate Asian man. Moreover, only Asians who were born in America and spoke and wrote in English could be regarded as "Asian-Americans" and would be included in their anthology:



Our anthology is exclusively Asian-American. That means Filipino-, Chinese-, and Japanese-Americans, American born and raised, who got their China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture ... (Chin et al. 1974: vii)

The first thing to notice is that only Americans of Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese origin are taken into account. Moreover, according to Chin and his colleagues, real Asian Americans are those who know Asia through the filter of the American mass media and the stereotypes it produces (within the vast repertoire of stereotypical images associated with “Orientals”, there are, notably: the figure of Charlie Chan, a Chinese American detective created by Earl Derr Bigger and protagonist of a series of films, and that of the charming Suzie Wong, protagonist of the eponymous film, saved by her love for a white man). Yet, this emphasis on “Americanness” does not imply that the American part or side should be stronger than the Asian. As it has been said above, the Asian American experience cannot be explained by either Asia or America separately:

We have been encouraged to believe that ... we are either Asian ... or American ... or are measurably both. This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor we were half and half or more one than the other. Neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define us except in the most superficial terms. (Chin et al. 1974: viii)

This position will be later challenged by the two following phases of Asian American studies, that is, the feminist and the diasporic. Both the diasporic and the feminist trend have been questioning two requirements of the “real” Asian American as expressed by Frank Chin and its colleagues: on the one hand, American nativity, and on the other hand, masculinity. It is obvious that this

essentialist definition of Asian American identity excluded foreign-born Asians and women.

The feminist phase started in the late 1970s and was particularly strong until the 1990s (but it is still on-going). Its concerns emerge clearly in the debate between those who supported Chin's androcentric notion of Asian American identity and literature and those who sustained Kingston's attempt to consider women as an important part of Asian American identity and culture formation. This debate was initiated by the publication, in 1976, of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. Elaine H. Kim was one of the first to criticise the *Aiiieeeee!* anthology and its sexist assumptions in a chapter of her study *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context* (1982). In 1989, two anthologies of women's writing were published as a response to the Chin group's male-centred anthologies: *The Forbidden Stitch: An Asian American Women's Anthology* (edited by Shirley Geok-lin Lim and Maumi Tsutakawa) and *Making Waves: An Anthology of Writings by and about Asian American Women* (edited by Asian Women United of California).<sup>4</sup> These anthologies, besides presenting works by Asian American women writers, criticise Chin's denial of a "dual personality" by emphasising "the instabilities of identity and representing the oscillating and crisscrossing of national, racial, and subjective borders that characterize the experience of biculturalism ..." (Lim 1993a: 578). Another critique came from Amy Ling who, in her work *Between Two Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese Ancestry* (1990), observes that Chinese American women are often torn "between two worlds" and so claims the reality of a "double consciousness" (an expression used by W. E. B. Du Bois to refer to African Americans). In her essay, "I'm Here: An Asian American Woman's Response", she also mentions Elaine Showalter's notion of "divided consciousness" and Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of "dialogic imagination" (Ling 1987: 154-155). Moreover,

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<sup>4</sup> Asian Women United (AWU) is a non-profit organisation founded in 1976 by a group of San Francisco Bay Area Asian American women. The organisation aims at exploring the many aspects of Asian American women's experiences and varied cultural heritages through publications and video productions (AWU 2016).

these women's anthologies, unlike the *Aiiieeee!* editors, do not attempt to design a specific kind of Asian American sensibility: rather, they acknowledge "the affirmation of sensibilities marked by softened categories, elastic cultural spaces, and a more global antihegemonic construction of identity" (Lim 1993a: 578). Furthermore, writers are not separated according to the ethnic group they belong to but rather thematically or sequentially. As Lim (1993a: 579) underlines, "The ethnic culture of these anthologies is nonauthoritative, decentered, non dogmatic, unprogrammatic, uncategorizing, inclusive, qualities that some feminist theoreticians ... argue characterize female sensibilities". Nonetheless, ethnicity remains at the core of Asian American feminism precisely because it is "Asian American" and so ethnically marked. Thus, gender and ethnic issues mingle. For instance, Kingston's focus on women's liberation from patriarchal norms has been read as subversive towards her ethnic community. So, Asian American women find themselves, once again, divided between two loyalties: gender and ethnicity.

The transnational or diasporic phase, which started in the 1990s, reflects on the changes produced by the immigration acts of 1965 (United States) and 1967 (Canada) in Asian immigration to North America. Indeed, much more diverse Asian populations (in terms of gender, class, and region) have been migrating to North America in larger numbers. This means that it makes no longer sense to define Asian American identity on the basis of American nativity. In 1988, King-Kok Cheung and Stan Yogi published their *Asian American Literature: An Annotated Bibliography* giving voice to the contributions of the newer Asian American groups. However, this phase was especially inaugurated by Lisa Lowe's article "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity" published in the first issue of *Diaspora* in 1991. Lowe introduces the idea that there is no unifying or fixed Asian American identity but rather, as the title of her article suggests, heterogeneous, hybrid, and multiple Asian American identities:

... we are *extremely different and diverse* among ourselves: as men *and* women at different distances and generations from our 'original' Asian cultures – cultures

as different as Chinese, Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Indian, Vietnamese, Thai, or Cambodian – Asian Americans are born in the United States *and born in Asia*, of exclusively Asian parents and of mixed race, urban and rural, refugee and nonrefugee, fluent in English *and non-English-speaking*, professionally trained and working class. ... the Asian-origin collectivity is unstable and changeable. [emphasis added] (Lowe 1996: 66)

Furthermore, the concept of “dual personality” is not only accepted but even expanded; Donald C. Goellnicht (1997: 340), for instance, suggests to introduce the notion of “multiple consciousness”: “Rather than thinking in binary terms of inside/outside, we should perhaps think of hybrid positions as a web of multiple interesting and shifting strands in which the precise location of the subject is extremely difficult to map”. Diasporic writers, indeed, do not have specific national interests and, in this sense, they oppose cultural nationalism. Their works encompass the United States and their Asian countries of origin, with which they maintain a strong connection, but also other countries; hence, they are transnational. While critics such as Kim have been very positive about this openness of Asian American writing towards “an ever-widening range of perspectives” and believe that “Asian American writers cannot be confined by ‘Asian American’ themes or by narrow definitions of ‘Asian American’ identity” (Kim 2006: 244), critics such as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong<sup>5</sup> and King-Kok Cheung warn against uncritical acceptance of the diasporic trend. The main argument is that the urge to “claim America” should remain strong as it constitutes the very basis of the Asian American experience. Diasporic means non-national and thus non-political whereas the very category “Asian American” was born for political as well as cultural reasons. This is why, according to these critics, the diasporic paradigm is not adequate to represent the Asian American experience and carry

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<sup>5</sup> Particularly relevant to this matter is her essay “Denationalization Reconsidered: Asian American Cultural Criticism at a Theoretical Crossroads” published in 1995 on *Amerasia Journal*.

it on. Finally, precisely because of their lack of interest in claiming America, diasporic writing has been said to form a counter Asian American literary canon.

These three phases marking Asian American studies are overlapping even though they emerged in chronological order. Not only the feminist phase overlaps with the diasporic in chronological terms but also because of shared views (e.g. divided or multiple personality). Besides, many diasporic writers are women: for instance, Chuang Hua, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Lin Tai-yi, Diana Chang, Sara Suleri, Jessica Hagerdon, Nora Okja Keller, and Ruth L. Ozeki. As for Asian American feminists, they have never denied the importance of claiming America and in this sense they are not different from cultural nationalists.

There is one more debate which needs to be dealt with: that around the links between history and language, politics and literature, ethnicity and individuality. As Werner Sollors (1986: 9) underlines, “Ethnicity specialists sometimes tend to misread literature or misinterpret it as direct social and historical evidence, whereas literary critics in many cases have stayed away from newer sociological and anthropological approaches to ethnicity”. So, literary critics tend not to be interested in ethnic writing and only focus on “the leading American writers” whilst sociologists do analyse ethnic writing but only as social and historical documents, underestimating their literary dimension. Thus, “readers have overemphasized and exaggerated the (frequently exoticized) ethnic particularity of the works – even if they were published in English by major American publishing houses” (Sollors 1986: 11).

This is certainly true for Asian American literary works which have often been considered as sociological documents reporting the experience of a given ethnic community. Therefore, the expression of the author’s individuality and, particularly, of a non-ethnic self, has frequently been overlooked by critics. Moreover, much criticism has concentrated on the political content of Asian American works rather than their literary form and style. Surely, Asian American literature cannot be separated by its social and ethnic concerns: their link is

made clear by the very subtitle of Kim's work (*An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*) and by the editors of *Aiiiiiiii!*: "... the distinction between social history and literature is a tricky one, especially when dealing with the literature of an emerging sensibility. The subject matter of minority literature is social history, not necessarily by design but by definition" (cited in Cheung 1997: 15). However, too much focus on the political content of these works risks to overshadow their literary quality. Besides, forms and contents influence each other and a formal analysis of the text can lead to a more accurate interpretation. After all, history and culture are always mediated by language and language is always a construction which varies according to place, time, society, and individuals.

### 1.3 Ethnic and women's autobiography

To complete this introductory chapter, a brief overview of ethnic and women's life narratives<sup>6</sup> will be provided since all the works analysed here are autobiographical and, specifically, they are written by women belonging to ethnic minorities. Both ethnic and women's autobiography were scarcely considered by the first waves of autobiographical criticism (which only emerged at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Georg Misch, Georges Gusdorf, and William Spengemann, for instance, only studied the autobiographies of great men such as Augustine, Jean Jacques Rousseau, Benjamin Franklin, and Henry Adams.

Early autobiographical criticism, dominated by Georg Misch's theory, selected life narratives written by notorious people who had played a significant role in the public sphere participating in important historical events. These requirements could only be met by men, certainly not by women, perpetually excluded by the public sphere according to the separate spheres ideology, or by subjugated people, who equally lived at the margins of society. Accordingly, letters, diaries, journals, memoirs, and other autobiographical models of everyday and private life were considered low culture and thus not worth investigating. Moreover, only works written in the West were included in the canon while those written in the East (such as China, Japan, or India which all have major autobiographical traditions), and especially those based on oral traditions, were just ignored or consigned to anthropology or folklore. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001: 113) provide this very useful definition of autobiography based on these assumptions: "a master narrative of Western rationality, progress, and superiority". So, while these criteria enabled autobiography to gain literary value and to cease to be considered as "a form of

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<sup>6</sup> The terms "autobiography" and "life narrative" are synonyms while "life writing" refers to both autobiography and biography (Smith and Watson 2001: 197).

biographical marginalia, they constricted the field of study, excluding the heterogeneous narratives and texts of many kinds of people” (Smith and Watson 2001: 119).

Georges Gusdorf and Francis R. Hart inaugurated the second wave of autobiographical criticism by emphasising the creative nature of autobiographical writing, an art rather than history. This second phase, influenced by Marx’s analysis of class-consciousness, Freudian psychoanalysis, Saussurian and formalists theories of language, is characterised by the crisis of the self as coherent and unified. As a consequence, autobiography is conceived as a process through which identity is shaped, and so, direct access to the truth of the self through self-narrating is no longer available. However, the self is still thought of as autonomous and its construction can happen without it coming into contact with other selves. This idea of the self as isolated is typically Western, and therefore, it excludes once again works produced in the East, where the individual exists in connection with others. Smith and Watson (2001: 128) also observe that “the gendering of the representative life as universal and therefore masculine meant that narrative by women were rarely examined ...”.

The Western concept of an autonomous self started to be challenged under the influence of Lacanian, Derridean, Althusserian, Foucauldian, and Bakhtinian notions of the self; by the development of ethnic, post-colonial, and feminist studies; and thanks to anthropological research. This caused a shift from the notion of self to that of subjectivity. The self is thus perceived as a centre of relations rather than a separate unit and loses its stability. In the literary field, critics have to deal with the works of “writers around the globe [who] are proposing new concepts of subjectivity, as transcultural, diasporic, hybrid, and nomadic. ... [and who] move the ‘I’ toward the collective ...” (Smith and Watson 2001: 132). It is during this third wave that ethnic and women’s life narratives are finally taken into consideration.



### 1.3.1 Ethnic autobiography

First, it may be useful to define what ethnic autobiography is: this term refers to immigrant autobiography, exile autobiography, second-generation ethnics' autobiography, bicultural autobiography, and multicultural autobiography; that is, all life narratives written by ethnic subjects who have migrated to another country or were born by immigrants and who live in a society where they represent a minority and have to struggle to combine their cultural heritage with that of the host country. Autobiography has always been a popular genre among immigrants who, finding themselves in difficult and confusing situations, have felt the need to express their feelings and tell their life experiences. In a way, autobiographical forms have represented to them a sort of therapy (Durczak 1994: 23). Furthermore, by telling their story, the ethnic subject implicitly claims the right to a voice and self-definition (Vastolo 2006: 39). Indeed, self-representation has historically been denied to ethnic subjects and oppressed minorities; as Michel Foucault would argue, it is those in power who can impose the knowledge of oppressed subjects, that is, the way society knows and represents them. Therefore, autobiography becomes a counter-discourse through which oppressed subjects "appropriate a colonizer's (or dominant culture's) discursive models, thereby 'transculturating' them into indigenous idioms and producing hybrid forms of collectivized life narrative" (Pratt cited in Smith and Watson 2001: 185). So, autobiography is also a means of self-affirmation and self-representation within a society whose knowledge of the ethnic subject is based on stereotypes, mostly negative.

Ethnic autobiography is still at the margins of American literary criticism; what Sau-ling Cynthia Wong affirmed about two decades ago is still basically true: "Just as immigrants are often seen as less than fully American, immigrant autobiography has been customarily assigned to the peripheries of American autobiographical scholarship"; and it is even more surprising that so little

attention has been paid to such genre considering the centrality of the immigrant experience in American history (Wong 1998: 299).

William Boelhower's *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States: Four Versions of the Italian American Self* (1982) is the only book length study devoted to immigrant autobiography providing a theory able to describe its features. Boelhower (25-52) delineates a sort of "macrotext" or "single story" which can be found in all immigrant autobiographies; although, he warns, "in no way does the macrotext exhaust the individual variants (the microtexts) pertaining to it" (31). According to this schema or paradigm, the immigrant experience is articulated in three phases:

- "anticipation" ("Old-World reality vs New-World ideal");
- "contact" ("New-World ideal vs New-World reality");
- and "contrast" ("Old-World reality vs New-World reality").

So, starting with a phase of "dream anticipation" about the New World, the immigrant undertakes a journey from the Old World to the New World; there, the immigrant experiences a series of contacts and contrasts which are at the core of a process of "transformation" or, more specifically, of "Americanization". Then, the immigrant acknowledges the gap between the "New-World ideal" and the "New-World reality" and has to balance two cultures ("a culture of the present and the future and a culture of memory") into a single model. The central phase is that of "dream anticipation" as this is what prompts the individual to emigrate from the Old World to a mythic New World.

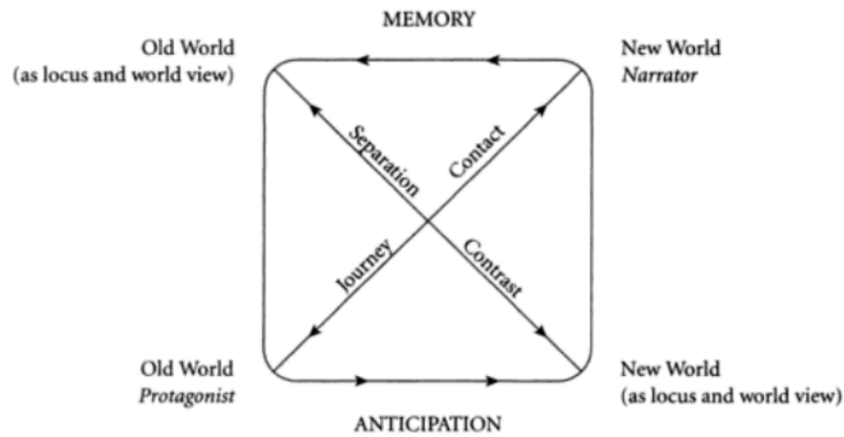


Figure 1: the immigrant autobiographical model (Boelhower 1982: 35)

Wong (1998: 299-315) has detected the limits of this pattern which, she argues, cannot be applied to all immigrant autobiographies, especially those written by people from the East. First, as Boelhower (33) himself underlines, the language used in the autobiographies chosen as examples sustaining his theory is highly Biblical: the New World is referred to as a kind of Lost Eden, Lost Golden Age, New Jerusalem, or the City on a Hill. As Wong (395) asserts, “these are European-origin fictions. For those coming from the real Orient it would be impossible to think of America as ‘a type of fabulous new Orient’”. Indeed, Boelhower’s study focuses on a restricted corpus of works by European immigrants of Judeo-Christian tradition. Chinese American autobiographies, for instance, significantly depart from Boelhower’s model:

... ‘anticipation’ is minimal, ‘contact’ with the ‘utopian grammar’ of American and its consequences hardly portrayed, and cultural ‘contrast’ either not drawn or drawn more to enlighten Anglo readers than to map the protagonist’s own ‘Americanization.’ Instead, the majority of the autobiography is devoted to the protagonist’s pre-immigration life in China. (304)

Moreover, Wong sees a matter-of-fact attitude underlying her ancestors’ decision to emigrate to America which differs from the “dream anticipation” indicated by

Boelhower. She also believes that Boelhower has underestimated the audience's role in the making of immigrant autobiographies: often, Chinese American autobiographies were attentive to what Anglo readers liked to read. As Wong explains, "these texts are subtly 'sponsored'; certainly they are not as self-authorized and inward-looking as we would be led to believe by Boelhower's theory" (307). Therefore, autobiography may be something different than the expression of an individual's negotiation of cultural forces. Lastly, she proposes to distinguish between immigrant autobiography and second-generation or American-born autobiography since important differences exist between the experiences of first- and second-generation ethnics. This is another aspect that Boelhower has eluded by lumping together different generations into an invariable model of immigrant experience. Thus, following Wong's opinion, I will also avoid using the term "immigrant autobiography" to refer to the works analysed here since they are written by American-born and not immigrant writers.

Another study of ethnic autobiography, *Selves between cultures: Contemporary American bicultural autobiography* by Jerzy Durczak, was published in 1994. The critic observes that

the term 'immigrant autobiography' used by Boelhower is not particularly popular among autobiography critics. Most of them tend to ... [employ the term] 'ethnic autobiography.' The term 'ethnic,' however, tied even more questions than the term 'immigrant.' The chief specialist in the field of ethnic literature, Werner Sollors, admits that though the term 'ethnicity' is certainly a better term than, for example, 'minority,' it is often 'used confusingly.' ... stating precisely what ethnic literature is might be difficult, since the term 'ethnicity' has never been satisfactorily defined. ... ethnic literature is not a uniform phenomenon ... (Durczak 1994: 19)

Nevertheless, Durczak believes that there is a common feature to ethnic autobiographies which he names "bicultural quality" (20) since their

protagonists are always torn between two cultures; for this reason, he dismisses the terms “immigrant” and “ethnic” and employs the term “bicultural”. He later adds that “according to Thomas Couser, the term ‘bicultural autobiography’ may be applied to those texts which ‘recount lives that originated in distinctive minority subcultures but did not end there.’ This definition may safely be extended to cover ... immigrant autobiographies” (21). In Durczak’s opinion, interest in ethnic autobiography has grown as a consequence of: the recognition, after the Second World War, of immigration as a central aspect of the American experience; Americans’ awareness of the immigrants’ achievements and growing position in American culture; the emphasis given to ethnicity during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>7</sup>

### 1.3.2 Women’s autobiography

As for women’s life narrative, the interest in this genre was acknowledged as a field around 1980. Criticism has been more productive, mainly focusing on three interconnected fronts: “building the archive of women’s writing, claiming models of heroic identity, and revising dominant theories of autobiography” (Smith and Watson 1998: 5). I will concentrate on the last aspect, that is, the way in which feminists have challenged previous notions of autobiographical forms.

Initially, critics focused on women’s experience as the proper feminist content of women’s autobiographies. All women would go through certain phases of the life cycle: childhood, adolescence, marriage and/or career, aging. Besides, all women are seen as being in a condition of subjugation to the patriarchal order, perceived as a universal system. Likewise, sisterhood is conceived as a universal bond uniting women with very different backgrounds but all living under oppression. The first anthology of essays in the field,

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<sup>7</sup> See also James Holte’s work, *The Ethnic I: A Sourcebook for Ethnic-American Autobiography*, published in 1988.

*Women's Autobiography: Essays in Criticism*, was edited by Estelle C. Jelinek and published in 1980. According to Jelinek, all women's autobiographies, regardless of ethnic, class, historical, political, and geographical differences, share some distinctive qualities which separate them from men's autobiographies. Particularly, women's writing is narratively discontinuous, non-linear, and fragmented whilst men's autobiographies are chronological, linear, and coherent. According to Mary G. Mason (1998: 321-324), what distinguishes women's autobiographies from men's autobiographies is the fact the women construct their subjectivity through the other:

... the self-discovery of female identity seems to acknowledge the real presence and recognition of another consciousness, and the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other.' This recognition of another consciousness ... this grounding of identity through relation to the chosen other, seems ... to enable women to write openly about themselves. (321)

On the contrary, the self in men's autobiographies may be incoherent but it does not renounce to its autonomy. In slightly different terms, Susan Stanford Friedman (1998: 71-82) describes women's sense of identity as collective and criticises Gusdorf's notion of the autobiographical self as individualistic, that is, separate from others. Thus, she introduces a *détournement* of a statement by Gusdorf according to which autobiography *cannot be produced* within cultures where

the individual ... does not feel himself to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that asserts its rhythms everywhere in the community ... (Gusdorf cited in Friedman 1998: 73)

To Friedman, autobiography *is possible* when

the individual does not feel *herself* to exist outside of others, and still less against others, but very much *with* others in an interdependent existence that assert its rhythms everywhere in the community ... (74)

She also stands against James Olney who, like Gusdorf, affirms that the autobiographer is “surrounded and isolated by his own consciousness, an awareness grown out of a unique heredity and unique experience. ... Separate selfhood is the very motive of creation” (Olney cited in Friedman 1998: 73). Friedman bases herself on the theories of Sheila Rowbotham and Nancy Chodorow about the development of female subjectivity.

In *Woman’s Consciousness, Man’s World* (1973), Rowbotham examines the formation of female self-consciousness and the role played by cultural representations in this process. When cultural representations, like mirrors, project an image of women that women do not recognise, women develop a dual consciousness: the self as it is shaped by cultural representations and the self departing from cultural representations. For this reason, women feel alienated. Still, “women can move beyond alienation through a collective solidarity with other women ... as a *group* [women] can develop an alternative way of seeing themselves by constructing a group identity based on their historical experience ...” (Friedman 1998: 76). It is precisely alienation which would prompt women to write their life stories as an opportunity to create their own self, different from the self imposed by dominant discourses.

Chodorow, a sociologist and a psychoanalyst, has tried to give scientific foundation to this idea of women’s subjectivity as collective. According to her, girls define their personality in relation to and in connection with other people more than boys do. This is because boys need to distance themselves from the maternal figure in the process of growing up so that they can identify with the father. Girls, on the contrary, do not have to interrupt their identification with the mother and so they do not experience a rupture. Therefore, girls have more flexible ego boundaries than boys: “The basic feminine sense of self is connected to the world, the basic masculine sense of self is separate” (Chodorow cited in

Friedman 1998: 77). Feminist critics, drawing directly from Chodorow's relational model of female selfhood, have introduced the term "relationality" to describe this feature of women's subjectivity (see Smith and Watson 1998).

Later, Chodorow was criticised because her theory ignores historical and cultural differences and so universalises a process which cannot be the same everywhere at any historical time. It was especially women of colour, for whom ethnicity was central, who started to see the risks of essentialist notions of womanhood as they completely erased ethnic and class diversity. Moreover, women of colour unveiled the white, Western, and bourgeois identity of universal woman – and clearly, universal woman could not speak for women of colour or working-class women. So, not only Chodorow's theory but all the theories illustrated above essentialise women's subjectivity by describing it as universal and by marking an insuperable gap between men and women as they are *essentially* different:

WOMAN ... has erased the historical specificity of many women. The danger of earlier 'essentialist feminism' was that it represented only women thinking about some women, and also that it was in danger of reinscribing patriarchal structures in valorizing differences between Woman and Man. (Culley 1992: 4)

Therefore, second-stage feminist critics have been challenging what were considered to be specific traits of women's autobiography (nonlinear narrative, fragmented textuality, relationality, the authority of experience) as gender essentialism. As a matter of fact, it is contradictory to define women's identity as more fluid than men's and, at the same time, strongly oppose the two: if women's identity is more inclusive than men's, it should also include men. Evidently, first-stage criticism had forgotten about Virginia Woolf's praise of the androgynous soul in *A Room of One's Own* (1929):

And I went on amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female ... The normal and comfortable state of



being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating ... Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine ... (Woolf 2002 [1929]: 96-97)

Thus, if any distinction has to be done, this should not be done between men and women but rather between oppressors and oppressed or, better, between those who are fully integrated into society and those who feel alienated. Friedman (79) herself asserts that a collective sense of self is typical not only of women but also of minorities (and therefore, men are included as well). Moreover, Rowbotham's theory of the development of women's self-consciousness is just another formulation of a discourse on identity developed by writers and critics such as Luigi Pirandello, Jean Paul Sartre, Frantz Fanon, and W. E. B. Du Bois. In their writings, they express the existential anguish caused by mirrors or gazes that create distorting images of the self, images that they do not recognise and do not accept. In Pirandello's *Uno, nessuno, centomila* [*One, No One and One Hundred Thousand*] (1926), the protagonist, Vitangelo Moscarda, realises that he is not one, an individual, but that there are as many images of himself as the people looking at him. In *Huis clos* [*No Exit*] (1944) by Sartre, one of the characters, Garcin, pronounce these very famous words: "L'enfer c'est les autres [Hell is other people]" because the others' look fixes one's identity and thus limits one's freedom. In a similar way, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Fanon denounces his condition of alienated black man whose sense of self is shaped by the gaze of the white man. Finally, it is Du Bois who coined the expression "double consciousness" to refer to African Americans having two selves: one as perceived by themselves, and one as imposed by white stereotypes. So, like women, these writers also feel alienated. In the case of Pirandello and Sartre, they do not even belong to minorities: they are white, Western, and of bourgeois up-bringing. Yet, they were surely outsiders, *étrangers*. So, as Leigh Gilmore (1994: 12-13) affirms,

the question of gender ... cannot be explored mainly through the compulsory lumping together of all male-authored texts, on one side, and all female-authored texts on the other. Instead, I think, the question can usefully be enjoined at a more specific level, at the level of each text's engagement with the available discourses of truth and identity and the ways in which self-representation is constitutively shaped through proximity to those discourses' definition of authority.

To conclude, alienation is a condition that affects both men and women, who may belong or not to minorities. In the case of ethnic subjects and women, alienation is what prompts them to tell their life stories as a way to assert themselves towards a society that suppresses their freedom of self-representation. The writers I will analyse are not only women and not only ethnic subjects but both: Asian American women writing their counter-discourse from the margins of American society against silence and invisibility.

### 1.3.3 Asian American women's life narratives

As Lim (1992: 254) observes, the tradition of Chinese American women's life narratives is quite recent and not vast but "it is nonetheless certain and existent". Lim believes that the presence of these texts is even more remarkable considering that Chinese women arrived to America later than Chinese men and that they often knew little English.<sup>8</sup> The first Chinese immigrants were men who worked in the gold mines or built railroads; moreover, the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented many Chinese women to migrate to America. Even when the Exclusion Act was repealed, other laws prohibited intermarriage between Asian

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<sup>8</sup> The first Chinese American writer in English was precisely a woman, Sui Sin Far, who published her work, *Mrs Spring Fragrance*, in 1912.

and whites and denied citizenship to Asian immigrants. Lim explains that “This legislation kept Chinese American women as well as men socially in the underclass, a position in which writing and publishing were not generally available cultural productions” (254). Early life narratives in English were mainly written by first-generation Chinese American women who had received an adequate education which enabled them to master the language. Wong (1997: 47) notices that

not unlike African American slave narratives beginning with the acquisition of literacy, Chinese American women’s life stories ... tend to contain accounts of how the author, contrary to the prevailing gender norms, came to be highly educated and to learn English.

These women’s works were published by mainstream publishing houses as they were considered of interest for the white American audience. Lim provides some examples: *A Thousand Springs* by Anna Chennault, *My Life in the United States* by Cynthia Chou, *Chinese Women of America: A Pictorial History* by Judy Yung, and *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Progressively, Chinese American women writers ceased to address the white audience and started to experiment with the genre of autobiography: such is the case of Maxine Hong Kingston.

As for Japanese American women’s life narratives, Traise Yamamoto (1999: 104) underlines that “Until very recently the entire, if small, body of Japanese American autobiographies was produced by Nisei”. Moreover, within the genre of Nisei autobiography, the most widely read texts are written by women: *Nisei Daughter* (1953) by Monica Sone, *Farwell to Manazar* (1973) by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, and *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese-American family* (1982) by Yoshiko Uchida. Nisei women’s autobiographies “constitute an identifiable tradition that distinguishes them from Sansei autobiographical writing” (104). Yamamoto sustains that the experience of interment in the relocation camps deeply influenced Nisei women’s life and works. Nisei autobiographies are more the expression of a communal rather than

individual experience and have a sort of didactic aim: that of preventing the recurring of similar historical events. This effacement of the individual has, according to Yamamoto, also another source: “the Nisei tendency to downplay the individual self, a behavioural adaptation largely shaped by the desire to ‘fit in’ and thus avoid racist discrimination” (105). As a result, Nisei autobiographies, especially women’s, “are frustratingly *unautobiographical*, not given to personal disclosure or passages of intimate self-reflection” (103). The texts analysed here are not actual autobiographies but short stories which nevertheless draw heavily on their authors’ life experience and share some stylistic features with Nisei life writing.

## 2. CHINESE DAUGHTERS AND WOMEN WARRIORS



## 2.1 *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

Chinatown in San Francisco teems with haunting memories for it is wrapped in the atmosphere, customs, and manners of a land across the sea. The same Pacific Ocean laves the shores of both worlds, a tangible link between old and new, past and present, Orient and Occident.

Jade Snow Wong, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*

### 2.1.1 The Wongs' fifth daughter

Jade Snow Wong (also known by her English name, Constance, and husband's surname, Ong) was born on 21 January 1922, a rare snowy day in San Francisco, California. Her father had emigrated from China to the United States at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with the idea of later returning to his homeland. However, he was able to set up a small clothing factory in San Francisco Chinatown and so, despite the harsh US legislation against Asian immigrants, he eventually sent for his wife and two daughters.

Jade Snow was the fifth among nine children, all raised in the strict Chinese tradition which values sons over daughters and family over the individual. Besides regular school work, she also had to help with housekeeping and attend the Chinese school in the afternoon to learn Chinese language and history. As she was an excellent student, she wanted to continue her education after high school but her parents refused to support her financially. That kind of investment was indeed meant for the sons since it is them and not the daughters who carry the surname of the family. Nonetheless, Wong worked to pay for her own college education and so she was able to attend San Francisco Junior College. She was then accepted to Mills College where she majored in economics and sociology in 1942.

During World War II, she worked first as a secretary and then as a researcher in a shipyard office. In 1944, she wrote her first autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, published a year later (a revised version appeared in 1950). After leaving her job, she decided to dedicate herself to pottery, to which she had been introduced during a summer class at Mills College. As she had no money to rent a studio, she asked a Grant Avenue merchant in Chinatown to let her work on her pottery wheel in the shop's front window. She became very popular as a ceramics artist, displaying her works at the M.H. de Young Memorial Museum and the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, among other locations. Moreover, her work is in the permanent collections of the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, and the International Ceramic Museum in Faenza, Italy. Wong was also a member of advisory councils for the China Institute of New York and a director of the Chinese Culture Center. She also promoted the construction of a new alumnae centre for Mills College in 1945 and in 1976 she was awarded an honorary doctorate by the same college.

In 1950, she married Woodrow Ong, also an artist, with whom she opened a travel agency. They had two daughters and two sons. In 1970, Wong published her second book, *No Chinese Stranger*, narrating her life after the publication of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*. Her literary activity also includes contributions for the *San Francisco Examiner* and periodicals such as *Holiday* and *Horn*. She died in San Francisco in 2006.

### 2.1.2 "Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour"

Wong's autobiography, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, is among the first published works by American-born Asians. It is important to underline that autobiography has been a prevalent genre among Asian American writers and that, very often,



it coincides with the *bildungsroman* (such is the case of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*). Furthermore, it might be useful to trace some differences between the autobiographies written by Asian immigrants and those written by American-born Asians. Indeed, as Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1998: 301-303) argues, it would be wrong to assume that the experiences of first- and second-generation ethnics are the same. Thus, she distinguishes between immigrant autobiography and second-generation or American-born autobiography. To begin with, the American-born's knowledge of the Old World is not direct but filtered by their parents; in other words, the American-born does not have any real memory of the Old World. So, whilst the immigrant actually experiences both the Old World and the New, the American-born rather experiences the confrontation between two cultural systems. For this reason, the structure of immigrant and second-generation autobiography cannot be the same: in second-generation autobiographies, there is no "Old World protagonist" looked upon by a "New World narrator" since both the narrator and the protagonist are located in the New World. Another important difference has to do with "Americanization":<sup>9</sup> unlike immigrants, the native-born are automatically conferred citizenship and so "the two groups do not really share the same expectations about the kind of place they can make for themselves in America" (Wong 1998: 302). Moreover, while immigrants use English as a second language, their children are more likely to be bilingual or even to use English as their mother tongue (and often they do not master their ethnic language).

Asian immigrant autobiographies (mainly Chinese) usually recount the protagonist's life in Asia and habitually end upon their arrival in the United

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<sup>9</sup> William Boelhower describes "Americanization" as the process of "transformation" that immigrants undergo when they come in contact with the New World, that is, America (see Section 1.3.1).

States (another aspect which confutes William Boelhower's immigrant autobiographical model).<sup>10</sup> Probably, authors

have sensed how far American interest in their life writings is based on the image of otherness, on exotic scenery and alien cultural practices. As the autobiographers become Americanized, the fascination they hold for the reader would fade; hence the sketchy coverage of their experience in the United States. (Wong 1992: 263)

Presenting Asian traditions and customs to the white audience had also the purpose of debunking negative images associated with "Orientals". So, it was against orientalist stereotypes that many early Asian American autobiographies were written with a didactic aim. This is the case with works such as *When I Was a Boy in China* (1887) by Lee Yan Phou, *The Grass Roof* (1931) by Younghill Kang, and *I've Come a Long Way* (1942) by Helena Kuo. The authors of these works have been defined as "ambassadors of good will" by Elaine H. Kim and their works as a "friendly guide to an exotic culture" by Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. Hence, their popularity among white readers, eager to read about exotic realities. However, the identity which resulted from these writings was still essentialised, albeit in a positive way (Vastolo 2006: 41).

Autobiography also became a way to express the ethnic subject's successful assimilation into society. The assimilationist aim is what differentiates immigrant autobiographies from second-generation ethnics' autobiographies such as *Father and Glorious Descendant* (1943) by Pardee Lowe, *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, and *Nisei Daughter* (1953) by Monica Sone. It was starting from these autobiographies that the idea of Asian Americans as "the model minority" developed. Lowe's and Wong's works, especially, are "presented as evidence of how America's racial minorities can 'succeed' through accommodation, hard

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<sup>10</sup> Boelhower's immigrant autobiographical model is based on the idea that the immigrant experience is articulated in three phases: "anticipation", "contact", and "contrast". The phase of contact and contrast occur in the New World (see Section 1.3.1).

work, and perseverance; and both more or less blame Chinese Americans – their families, their communities, their race – for whatever difficulties they face or failures they suffer” (Kim 2006: 237). Particularly, US politicians used these autobiographies to show to other, unrulier minorities that assimilation was possible and that it entirely depended upon their willingness to integrate and not upon external factors. Moreover, these autobiographies are built upon binary oppositions between Asia and America, past and present, tradition and progress, oppression and freedom (where America obviously stands for progress and freedom). These autobiographies are primarily set in the United States but, like immigrant autobiographies, they constitute anthropological, ethnographic, and sociological guides. Wong (1992: 262) describes them as a “guided Chinatown tour ... providing explanations on the manner and mores of the Chinese-American community from the vantage point of a ‘native’”. Their authors, conscious of their role of cultural interpreters and of the insider’s sight they can offer, believe that they can gain recognition from white readers (Wong 1992: 264); and surely, these autobiographies became very successful.

It has to be noticed that Japanese American autobiographies produced in the same period did not gain such popularity mainly because of the peculiar historical time: while the Chinese were considered as allies, the Japanese were confined in relocation camps throughout the United States. Thus, the publication of works by writers such as Toshio Mori and Monica Sone was hindered. It was not until the 1970s that Japanese American “success” stories were finally publicised and used as examples of assimilation to neutralise the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement.

So, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* belongs to the so-called genre of “autobiography as guided Chinatown tour”: the events take place in San Francisco Chinatown during the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the text contains, besides a naïve representation of assimilation, information about Chinatown and its exotic Chinese traditions. Elements which indicate the text’s belonging to this genre are

already present in the paratext. First, the author states in the introduction to the 1989 edition: "... I wrote with the purpose of creating better understanding of the Chinese culture on the part of Americans. That creed has been my guiding theme through the many turns of my life work" (vii). To Wong, writing about Chinese culture is a "battle against race prejudice" (xi). And later, in the very text of the autobiography, the narrator writes: "Behind her purpose had been a deep desire to contribute in bringing better understanding of the Chinese people, so that in the Western world they would be recognized for their achievements" (235). Second, the author's name, Jade Snow, is the translation of her Chinese name but she could have used her English name, Constance. As Jaime Cleland (2012: 67-68) underlines, the use of Chinese names gives the story that foreign quality which white readers particularly appreciated. Cleland also notices that in her earlier essays, published in the magazine *Common Ground* in 1945 and 1948, Wong uses English names such as Lincoln, Paul, Mary, and Jon to refer to her siblings. In *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, in contrast, her siblings have names such as Blessing from Heaven, Prosperity from Heaven, Jade Swallow, Jade Lotus, Jade Ornament, and Jade Precious Stone. Here, Wong also explains that she was not allowed to address an older person by name: "... it was always Older Brother, Older Sister, Second Older Sister, Third Older Sister ... and Fourth Older Sister" (2). The fact that Chinese names and rules to address older people do not appear in her earlier essays might be the sign of a strategic choice on the part of the author so that her work would be more appealing for American readers. Third, the presence of illustrations places the text near to the explanatory function of guides, manuals, and encyclopaedias; in this case, the autobiography turns into an anthropological guide about China and China in America. Moreover, the titles of some chapters are quite typical of guides: "Learning to Be a Chinese Housewife" (Ch. 7); "Marriage Old and New Style" (Ch. 16); "Rediscovering Chinatown" (Ch. 24). Last, the assimilationist spirit of Wong's autobiography is openly revealed by one of the reviews which appear on the back cover:

‘A fascinating narrative, not only because of the courage and humour which shine through every page of the book, but also because *it shows how the members of a typical Chinese family can adapt themselves to American conditions and take their part in the national life of the United States* without losing the essentials of the cultural heritage which they rightly prize.’ — *Times Literary Supplement* [emphasis added]

Then, throughout the book, the reader can learn about: where Chinatown is located and what can be found there (e.g. grocery stores, a shoe-repair man, a watch-repair man, a herbalist, etc.); which ingredients are most used in Chinese cooking, the aliments of the traditional Chinese breakfast, what is the favourite Chinese way of cooking chicken, how to cook and wash rice, how to cook egg foo young, tomato beef, and fruit-peel duck; the Chinese use of herbs; what Chinese people do to announce the good news, how they celebrate the coming of a new-born baby (boy), the Chinese New Year, and the Moon Festival; marriage practices; Chinese funerals and the Chinese practice of “gathering bones”; how to read a Chinese book, the principles of correct calligraphy (and see a picture of a Chinese ideogram), how to use a brush and how to care for it properly; Chinese games such as “making baskets”; how her father’s factory worked; the Chinese Presbyterian Church; episodes of racial discrimination; Chinese philosophy (e.g. fatalism); the Chinese opera. Clearly, if her work were addressed to other Chinese people, there would be no need to give descriptions of Chinese customs and habits; or to add explanations in square brackets for: “‘won-ton’ [a filled Chinese paste bathed in Chicken soup]” (87) or “Sien Sung [the equivalent of ‘Sir’]” (219); or to specify that the titles of Chapter 18 (“Learning Can Never Be Poor or Exhausted”) and Chapter 28 (“The Work of One Day Is Gazed Upon for One Thousand Days”) are Chinese proverbs.

All the elements that have been mentioned above demonstrate that *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is not the spontaneous and sincere account of a Chinese girl’s life in America but rather, as Wong herself writes in the note to the original

edition, “a *careful* record of an American Chinese girl’s first twenty-four years” [emphasis added] (xiii). *Careful* because built through the author’s awareness of her audience: white, American, enthusiastic about, and at the same time, suspicious of everything exotic and foreign. Thus, there were elements in her narrative that Wong needed to emphasise and others which she had to attenuate. As Elaine H. Kim explains,

Wong was encouraged to write *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by English teachers and publishing house editors, who were largely responsible for the final version of the book. The editor who asked her to write the book, Elizabeth Lawrence, cut out two-thirds of the manuscript, and the teacher, Alice Cooper, helped ‘bind it together again.’ ... When asked what had been left out, Wong replied that aspects that were ‘too personal’ had been eliminated by the editors, adding, ‘I was what, twenty-six then? And you know, it takes maturity to be objective about one’s self.’ (Kim cited in Bloom 1997: 113)

Frank Chin, Elaine H. Kim, and Sau-ling Cynthia Wong have disapproved Wong’s submissiveness to her white editors and her exoticised view of Chinese Americans.

The question which arises next is to what extent *Fifth Chinese Daughter* can be defined as a genuine autobiography. Wong’s “manipulation” of her own name is already an infringement of Philippe Lejeune’s autobiographical pact according to which there has to be “*identity of name* between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about” (Lejeune cited in Smith and Watson 2001: 140).

Wong’s autobiography is peculiar for another reason: it is written in the third person. Wong justifies her choice as a legacy of Chinese tradition. In the note to the original edition, she writes:

Although a 'first person singular' book, this story is written in the third person from Chinese habit. The submergence of the individual is literally practiced. In written Chinese, prose or poetry, the word 'I' almost never appears, but it is understood. ... Even written in English, an 'I' book by a Chinese would seem outrageously immodest to anyone raised in the spirit of Chinese propriety. (xiii)

A summary of this statement is provided in the introduction to the 1989 edition: "The third-person-singular style in which I told my story was rooted in Chinese literary form (reflecting cultural disregard for the individual)" (vii). Many critics have concentrated on this aspect using it either as an element able to decide upon Wong's biculturalism or as a demonstration of Wong's ability to reach her audience.

In the previous section, I mentioned the role of Wong's editors in the revision process of her work. While Wong's submissiveness to her editors' demands has been widely criticised, Cleland (2012: 61-82) sustains that Wong actively made some narrative choices which enabled her to have her work published and read at a time when works such as John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957) remained in obscurity. Cleland examines Wong's earlier essays to demonstrate that her narrative choices were conscious rather than imposed and that it was part of her strategy to create different versions of herself in order to adapt to different audiences. As Cleland points out, "Any autobiographical protagonist is necessarily a construction, and this is also true of the 'Jade Snow' of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*" (63). So, Wong uses a strategy of "impersonation": "... she adopts a pen name (an English translation of her Chinese name) and writes the life story of that pseudonymous self, always conscious of readers' expectations" (63). The critic individuates an evolution in Wong's self-presentation which goes from a more personal, American self (for a smaller audience) to a more exotic, Chinese self (for a broader audience). Her earlier essays, written for *Common Ground*, a quarterly of fiction and nonfiction read by a relatively small audience, seem to be more personal than *Fifth Chinese Daughter* even though much of the material is the same. These essays are indeed

written in the first person and they focus on family ties, portraying the Wong family as modern and “comfortably American” (Cleland 2012: 62). In contrast, the essays in which she concentrates on “foreign” customs (those written in the years immediately before the publication of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*) appear to be less intimate. Therefore, in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Wong would play with the notion of “dual personality” as this is what was expected to be typical of Asian Americans. However, in her essays there would be no trace of such a confrontation between an Asian self and an American self: Wong feels perfectly at ease with her “Americanness”. Therefore, Wong’s use of the third person in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is, according to Cleland, a distancing strategy from a Chinese and exotic self that she does not recognise but whose great appeal for the white audience she acknowledges. Thus, the third-person narration would serve “to mask her sense of her own *Americanness*. ... Wong creates a marketable persona that is ‘foreign’ both to a white majority audience and, in some ways, to her own idea of herself ...” (73). This argument opposes the idea that Wong internalised the white gaze as she is actually distancing herself from such a vision. So, while she provides an exotic portrait of herself, her family, and community, she is also, through the third person narration, disassociating from it. Differently from Chin, Kim, and S. C. Wong, Cleland praises Wong for her artistic skills and her marketing cunning:

Wong’s construction of different selves for different audiences indicates her artistic and psychological strength. By creating the figure of ‘Jade Snow,’ Wong is able to meet the orientalist expectations of her world in order to be published and, simultaneously, to separate herself from those expectations at a personal level. (62)

Answering to those critics who believe that the price Wong paid for reaching the American audience was too high, Cleland highlights the importance of sharing and communicating the message of one’s artistic creation. He seems to imply



that for an Asian American woman, compromise was the only way to have her voice heard.

In Cleland's essay, the issue of biculturalism also emerges. To Cleland, Wong was more American than Chinese although *Jade Snow*<sup>11</sup> is presented as struggling to reconcile her Asian self with her American self. On the contrary, Patricia Lin Blinde (1979: 51-71) believes that Wong is unquestionably Chinese but, at the same time, she complies with the dominant sociocultural system. Blinde assumes that autobiography is a "uniquely Western European genre that emerged from the Christian confessional" (54) and so considers Wong's use of the third person narrator as a sign of her rooted "Chineseness" and her willingness to remain separate from America and its cultural forms. Nonetheless, her "Chineseness" would also be a product of the American public since it constitutes a repetition of "white world's articulations and expectations as to what Chineseness is or is not" (58). Especially, Wong would support the idea that "the Chinese people are radically different from the general American mainstream ... [and must] remain separate as an ethnic segment of the general population" (56). Thus, Wong would be, consciously or unconsciously, fully integrated into the dominant sociocultural system and would accept its rules (and literary forms). This is why, in Blinde's opinion, Wong's autobiography does not add anything new in terms of knowledge about Chinese people in America and rather perpetuates racial discrimination. Finally, Blinde considers that what prevents Wong's autobiography from expressing a bicultural identity is also her rigid sense of identity which results from "a self image [which] coalesces early in life" (53). Therefore, Wong would write a "good autobiography" (53) which fulfils the expectations of the genre and is based on a view of life which privileges totality rather than fragmentation. To Blinde, such a perspective would come from the stability which characterises the years before World War II

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<sup>11</sup> From now on I will refer to the author as Wong and to her character as *Jade Snow* to distinguish between the real person and her fictional self.

(during which Wong developed her sense of self) and from Wong's little awareness of the injustice affecting Chinese females.

Kathleen Loh Swee Yin and Kristoffer F. Paulson (1982: 53-59), argue that Wong's divided consciousness or biculturalism is expressed precisely by the third person narrator: not because autobiography is a typical Western literary form and the refusal to write in the first person a typical Chinese habit, but because the third person narrator enables Wong to be both the author and the protagonist of her narration. It is as if she had a "divided voice" reflecting her divided consciousness. To Yin and Paulson, Wong's life experience does not rest on totality but it is fragmented and confusing as she is caught between Asia and America. Moreover, they maintain that Wong's use of the third person narrator signals that her approach is not "strictly autobiographical" (Blinde 1979: 54): in that case, she would have conformed to the much more common first person autobiography. Yin and Paulson also disagree with Blinde (1979: 55) when she describes Jade Snow as "mildly aware of a certain injustice". They underline that Jade Snow does realise that she is not recognised as an individual and struggles to be considered as such: she does not "... unquestionably succumb to the traditions which seek to entrap her. ... Her actions require that her family and community recognize her independence and that Chinese-American women can be persons in their own right" (Yin and Paulson 1982: 55). At the same time, she also questions American norms and values and in doing so she actively searches for a balance between her "Chineseness" and her "Americanness". For this reason, Yin and Paulson define Wong's autobiography a "bi-cultural narrative" (58): "... an extraordinary literary form, one which effectively renders the divided consciousness of dual-heritage" (59).

To sum up, Wong's statements might be enough to explain her use of the third person narrator; nevertheless, it is necessary to answer the assumptions that have been made so far. It seems clear that Wong compromised with her editors to have her work published and so she used different narrative voices to please the taste of the American audience for exotic realities. Consequently, the

voice which finds expression in *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is not likely to be Wong's authentic voice. Thus, Wong is a cultural interpreter taking her readers on a pleasant guided Chinatown tour rather than a Chinese American woman talking freely of her life experience. Furthermore, it is difficult to say if Wong used the third person narrator to distance herself from Jade Snow: since she repeatedly affirms that such a narrative choice comes from her Chinese heritage, this might be merely part of her strategy of attracting the American audience by creating a foreign quality for her work. Certainly, considering that autobiography is not a peculiarity of the West, she did not use the third person narrator to distance herself from such a genre as an expression of "Westernness". Finally, as Yin and Paulson have argued, an analysis of the text shows that Jade Snow is aware of her inferior status as a woman and so she struggles to assert herself. Besides, her sense of identity is not rigid and undivided as she strives to build an identity which is a balanced blend of China and America. Yet, all this can be said about Wong only if we consider *Fifth Chinese Daughter* as an autobiography and, for many aspects, this is more a work of fiction than a life narrative. For this reason, we can only decide upon Jade Snow's attitudes and psychology but not upon Wong's.

### 2.1.3 "New America" versus "old China"

So far, critics have analysed *Fifth Chinese Daughter* mainly on two fronts: ethnic representation ("autobiography as guided Chinatown tour") and narrative techniques (third person narrator). Jade Snow's self-fulfilment as a Chinese American woman has been examined only superficially: *Fifth Chinese Daughter* is typically presented as the story of a Chinese American girl who is able to assert herself in America despite her "upbringing by the nineteenth-century standards of Imperial China" (vii). Although some critics have highlighted the naïveté of Wong's representation of her assimilation into American society, this is a

consideration that has been made about second-generation autobiographies in general. An attentive feminist perspective on the matter of Jade Snow's assimilation and self-realisation seems to be missing.

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* is scattered with references to Jade Snow and her sisters' inferiority compared to their brothers as a result of their upbringing by Chinese tradition. Jade Snow is brought up following the principles of discipline, respect, and order and she is punished if she does not abide by them:

... one did not dispute one's father if one were a dutiful little girl taught to act with propriety. (4)

Only through punishment did she learn that what was proper was right and what was improper was wrong. (3)

Daddy firmly believed that severe whipping was the most effective means of bringing up creditable daughters and illustrious sons. (60)

While both boys and girls had to conform to these principles, only boys were expected to carry on their academic education: "Some people who take up a profession study at college six or more years. *But you are a girl*, so you need not worry about that. *It will not be necessary for you to go to college*" [emphasis added] (18). Even when Jade Snow tells Daddy that she has skipped a grade, Daddy's only answer is: "That is as it should be" (19). It is also significant that when she turns to her mother, the latter replies: "What did your father say?' ... 'Your father was right,' ..." (19) showing no independence of thought. Daddy presents her as his "inferior woman" (49) and Jade Snow also notices that "Mama would not leave the house the year 'round ..." (38). The house is indeed where the woman should be and things such as cooking rice correctly is "one of the principal accomplishments or requirements of any Chinese female" (57). When Jade Snow is eleven, she is considered old enough for taking over her mother's housework. So, she "could hardly find a moment of her life which was

not accounted for, and accounted for properly, by Mama and Daddy” (65). As a matter of fact, individual needs have to subside face to family needs: “... family is more important than the individual” (78). Therefore, according to Daddy, the only reason why girls should be educated is that “*we must have intelligent mothers*. If nobody educates his daughters, how can we have intelligent mothers for our sons? If we do not have good family training, how can China be a strong nation?” [emphasis added] (14-15).

It is with her younger brother’s birth that Jade Snow begins to realise that girls are less valued than boys in Chinese society. For Forgiveness from Heaven’s birth the Wongs organise a great celebration:

The Wong family had never before seen such merrymaking, and Jade Snow enjoyed all the excitement. Just one remark she had heard, however, marred the perfect celebration, and remained in her mind as she lay in bed after the guests had departed. It was something she had overheard one of her older sisters say to the other ...

‘This joyfulness springs only from the fact that the child is at last a son, after three daughters born in the fifteen years between Blessing from Heaven and him. When Jade Precious Stone was born before him, the house was quiet. There was no such display.’

Under the comfortable warmth of her covers, Jade Snow turned over restlessly, trying to grasp the full meaning of the remark. Forgiveness from Heaven, because he was a brother, was more important to Mama and Daddy than dear baby sister Precious Stone, who was only a girl. But even more uncomfortable was the realization that *she herself was a girl and, like her younger sister, unalterably less significant than the new son in their family*. [emphasis added] (27)

As an adolescent, Jade Snow decides to take a position on this matter:

At fourteen, her life was on the whole a continuation of the same routine. But it was considerably darkened by the *stubborn, unhappy struggle* which began *between her and her family*.

The difficulty centered around Jade Snow's desire for *recognition as an individual*. [emphasis added] (90-91)

This last quote contradicts Blinde's judgement of Jade Snow as completely unaware of the injustice which affects her as a Chinese female. Chapter 13, "A Person as Well as a Female", summarises Jade Snow's main preoccupation: that of being recognised as an individual with the same rights as her brothers. So, Jade Snow wants to challenge two cornerstones of Chinese tradition: the importance of family over the individual and the superiority of men over women. It is in this chapter that Jade Snow asks her parents for financial support in order to go to college. However, coherently with their tradition, her parents answer:

'You are quite familiar by now with the fact that it is the sons who perpetuate our ancestral heritage by permanently bearing the Wong family name and transmitting it through their blood line, and therefore *the sons must have priority over the daughters where parental provision for advantages must be limited by economic necessity*. Generations of sons, bearing our Wong name, are those who make pilgrimages to ancestral burial grounds and preserve them forever. Our daughters leave home at marriage to give sons to their husbands' families to carry on the heritage for other names.' [emphasis added] (108-109)

Jade Snow is very upset about her father's answer:

'... Why should Older Brother be alone in enjoying the major benefits of Daddy's toil? There are no ancestral pilgrimages to be made in the United States! *I can't help being born a girl. Perhaps, even being a girl, I don't want to marry, just to raise sons!* Perhaps I have a right to want more than sons! *I am a person, besides*

*being a female! Don't the Chinese admit that women also have feelings and minds?*  
[emphasis added] (109-110)

'My parents demand unquestioning obedience. Older Brother demands unquestioning obedience. By what right? *I am an individual besides being a Chinese daughter. I have rights too.*' [emphasis added] (125)

Interestingly, Jade Snow's words ("I am a person, besides being a female! Don't the Chinese admit that women also have feelings and minds?") recall Shylock's monologue in *The Merchant of Venice* (1600) by William Shakespeare:

I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, sense, affections, passions? — fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die? (Act III, Scene 1, Lines 53-74)

These are both pleas against discrimination: gender discrimination in the case of Jade Snow and racial discrimination in the case of Shylock.

As her parents refuse to support her financially, Jade Snow decides to work as a housekeeper for an American family to finance her studies. When she graduates from high school, his father is not there:

Yes, it was more important for Daddy to attend his civic duty than to see his daughter graduate from American high school, even though the graduation program had an asterisk before Jade Snow's name, with the notation, 'Elected to life membership in the California Scholarship Federation, in recognition of academic achievement.' (118)

It will take some time and other achievements to make Jade Snow's father proud of her. Shirley Geok-lin Lim (1986; 1992) has underlined a contradiction

concerning Jade Snow's desire to subvert the patriarchal order and the fact that she values her success on her father's recognition. In other words, Jade Snow seems to reject patriarchy but her realisation greatly, if not entirely, depends upon her parents' and especially her father's approval (the work is indeed dedicated to them): "While Chinese attitudes and values frustrate and demean the female protagonist in her daily life, her true purpose as she develops and grows is to prove herself worthy of approval from her father, who symbolizes Chinese patriarchal society" (Lim 1986: 60). In a later essay, Lim once again stresses the nature of this paradox: "Paradoxically, the daughter's rebellion results from and in her desire to win the father's approval. The narrator is careful to qualify each point where the daughter struggles and succeeds in vanquishing her father, indicating the tremendous ambivalence surrounding the struggle" (1992: 259). Jade Snow's father is a very complex and ambiguous figure, being he himself a blend of tradition and progress: he wants his daughters to study but only so that they will become "intelligent mothers"; he does not want to have their feet bound but he nevertheless whips them; he refuses to pay for Jade Snow's education but he affirms: "Education is your path to freedom, ... Make the most of your American opportunity" (108). Wong closes her story by reporting a conversation with her father during which he expresses his satisfaction for her daughter's success:

'When I first came to America, my cousin wrote me from China and asked me to return. That was before I can even tell you where you were. But I still have the carbon copy of the letter I wrote him in reply, I said, 'You do not realize the shameful and degraded position into which the Chinese culture has pushed its women. Here in America, the Christian concept allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity. *I am hoping that some day I may be able to claim that by my stand I have washed away the former disgraces suffered by the women of our family*.'



Then Daddy turned and looked at her kindly, “And who would have thought that you, my Fifth Daughter Jade Snow, would prove today that *my words of many years ago were words of true prophecy?*”

As for Jade Snow, she knew that she still had before her a hard upward climb, but for the first time in her life, *she felt contentment*. She could stop searching for that niche that would be hers alone. She had found herself and struck her speed. And when she came home now, it was to see Mama and Daddy look up from their work, and smile at her, and say, ‘It is good to have you home again!’ [emphasis added] (246)

As Lim (1986: 60) affirms, Daddy’s speech is “self-ignorant and arrogant” considering that he has never supported his daughter’s ambitions; and “it is even more distressing to discover that the author/narrator is herself taken in by his hypocrisy” (Lim 1986: 60). Indeed, Jade Snow admits that “she felt contentment” (246) and so she remains his father’s dutiful fifth daughter: “despite the detailed and sincere expressions of conflict between the protagonist and her Chinese milieu”, this last scene reveals Wong’s vision as “unswervingly Chinese and only incidentally occidental” (1986: 60).

This speech enables me to proceed to the core of my analysis: the unproblematic opposition between East and West and, especially, the uncomplicated vision that the author provides of female freedom in the West. In second-generation life narratives, the protagonists build their experience upon a binary opposition between Asia and America where Asia is hypernym of past, tradition, and oppression and America of future, progress, and freedom. *Fifth Chinese Daughter* follows this very pattern: in the introduction to the 1989 edition, Wong affirms that “As an Asian in Asia, we would not find *the freedom of choice which is our particular American birthright*. We ... can be grateful for opportunities more expansive in this country than in most others ...” [emphasis added] (xi). Moreover, Jade Snow is depicted as being placed between two worlds and two cultures, confirming Yin and Paulson’s theory of Wong’s “divided voice”. Wong writes in the introduction: “... it was important to record that

period of my life, together with *conflicting cultural expectations ...* [emphasis added] (vii). Naturally, Jade Snow is not immediately aware of the differences existing between Asia and America. It is in Chapter 2, “The World Grows”, that, as a child, she realises that “the American school was going to be continuously different in more and more ways from Chinese studies ...” (18). However, the first significant opportunity for Jade Snow to see the distance between China and America is when she gets hurt in the schoolyard and the teacher comforts her: “She could not remember when Mama had held her to give comfort. Daddy occasionally picked her up as a matter of necessity ...” (20). As she specifies later, “affection had not been part of her training ...” (185). The teacher’s act of comforting her encapsulates the positivity of American ideals against Chinese manners. After this episode Jade Snow is aware that

‘foreign’ American ways were not only generally and vaguely different from their Chinese ways, but that they were specifically different, and the specific differences would involve a choice of action. Jade Snow had begun to compare American ways with those of her mother and father, and *the comparison made her uncomfortable*. [emphasis added] (21)

Here again, the only reason why such a comparison would made Jade Snow uncomfortable is that she feels that her parents’ ways are not as positive as the American ways. For instance, in Chapter 9, “Saturday’s Reward and Sunday’s Holiday”, Jade Snow compares Christian and Confucian precepts:

Daddy became as serious about Christian precepts as he was intent on Confucian propriety. It was a blend which was infused to all his children ... His *stern edict* to Jade Snow, ‘*Respect your older sister in all matters,*’ was somewhat *softened* by his addition of ‘*Love your brother and sister, according to Christ’s teaching.*’ [emphasis added] (73)

Yet, apparently, “foreign philosophy also was subject to criticism ... There was good to be gained from both concepts if she could extract and retain her own personally applicable combination” (131). So, to Jade Snow, Chinese culture also retains positive aspects but these are limited to “the Chinese spirit of hospitality” (164) or to cultural events such as festivity celebrations:

Yes, it was sometimes very lucky to be born a Chinese daughter. The Americans, Jade Snow heard, did not have a Moon Festival nor a seven-day New Year celebration with delicious accompaniments. Besides, they burned their Chinese firecrackers five months later on one day only — the Fourth of July! (43)

Jade Snow goes on comparing “new America” with “old China” (125) and she thinks that her parents should “change their ways ... open their minds to *modern truths*” [emphasis added] (126). When Jade Snow goes to college, she positively describes the American educational system against the Chinese:

The instructor came back neatly, ‘Sure, you learned a lot. But *now I am trying to teach you to think!*’ [emphasis added] (162)

Her mind sprang from its tightly bound concern with facts and the Chinese absolute order of things, to concern with the reasons behind the facts, their interpretations, and the imminence of continuous change. (163)

Thus, Jade Snow develops a divided voice or a double vision as she is simultaneously an insider and an outsider of her community: “... she now felt more like a spectator than a participant in her own community” (199). The climax of these comparisons is represented by his father’s words in the last chapter: “... the shameful and degraded position into which the *Chinese culture* has pushed its women. Here in America, the *Christian concept* allows women their freedom and individuality. I wish my daughters to have this Christian opportunity” [emphasis added] (246). In fact, American women were expected

to do their duty as good housewives just like Chinese women (as shown by 1950s sexist advertising). Moreover, American women obtained the right to vote only in 1920 and in many European countries this did not happen until the 1950s or even later (e.g. Switzerland, 1971). Wong might not have been aware of women's suffrage issues but as a sociologist she should have noticed earning differences between men and women and the difficulties women faced to access education. Oddly enough, in Chapter 27, "A Life Plan Is Cast", Wong reports this statement by her boss:

'Don't you know that as long as you are *a woman* [ethnic identity is not specified so he is referring to *any woman*], you *can't compete for an equal salary in a man's world?* ... It's not a question of whether he's smarter than a woman or whether a woman is smarter than he. It's just plain economics!' [emphasis added] (234)

Therefore, it seems contradictory that she does not question her father's statement on "Christian opportunity". Not long before the publication of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, in Europe, Virginia Woolf was complaining in her works (e.g. *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas*) about women's lack of higher education and financial independence. She herself had been denied the possibility to study at Cambridge unlike her brothers.<sup>12</sup> Clearly, Western women were not as free and independent as Wong believed. It is not a matter of universalising women's condition but of contextualising such a radical statement as the one made by Jade Snow's father. If it is true that women of colour's condition in white society is certainly worse than white women's and that certain Western ways may seem much more liberal than Confucian norms, this does not mean that white women's shiny houses and dresses can be regarded as a sign of emancipation.

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<sup>12</sup> It is also interesting to notice that both Woolf and Wong stress the importance of having a "room of one's own" or "a miniature penthouse room, surrounded by a ribbon of windows. These pleasant quarters gave Jade Snow her first complete privacy in studying and in personal living, and at least gave her inner peace" (155).

#### 2.1.4 "The pride of personal creation"

To conclude my analysis of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, I will deal with the means by which Jade Snow reaches individual freedom. Education is certainly one of them but it seems that artistic creation plays an equally important role. Here again, personal creativity is associated with the West against her parents' requirements of obedience and discipline: "... Daddy had severely nipped her early efforts to draw pictures instead of square characters. 'You can learn nothing from your own pictures,' ..." (18). However, to Jade Snow "Painting was great fun, because no one told Jade Snow what to do or how to do it!" (18).

Later, she discovers "the joy of expressing herself in the written word" (132) and she understands that, in order to fulfil her desire to bring "better understanding of the Chinese people" (235), she should write. The other important reason is that "In writing, a woman would not be competing against men" (235). It is after her boss's talk on gender pay gap that she comes to this realisation. She is also aware, at this point, that writing will not enable her to make a living and so she decides to dedicate herself to another kind of artistic production: pottery and ceramics. To Jade Snow, "The clay forms became a satisfying reflection of personal will and skill" (177).

Finally, even though it is not a form of artistic production but rather of artistic consumption, Jade Snow greatly values reading as a "source of joy and escape. ... Temporarily she forgot who she was, or the constant requirements of Chinese life ... in these books there was absolutely nothing resembling her own life" (69). It may be possible to conclude that art, together with education, is what enables Jade Snow to fulfil herself as an individual and to find her own way.



## 2.2 *The Woman Warrior*

When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen.

Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

### 2.2.1 A girl among ghosts

I think of myself as somebody who's been given a gift of an amazing literary voice, and so I want to be the voice of the voiceless.

Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine (Ting Ting) Hong was born on 27 October 1940 in Stockton, California, the eldest of six American-born children of Chinese immigrants. Her father, a village teacher and a poet, arrived in New York in 1924 while her mother, a midwife trained in Western and Chinese medicine, arrived fifteen years later. They run a gambling house and then a laundry in Stockton. Kingston's first language was *say yup*, a Cantonese dialect, and she did not speak English until she was five years old. She obtained a BA in English in 1962 at the University of California, Berkeley, where she also met her future husband, actor Earl King. They married soon after her graduation and had a son in 1964. She was then an educator in California and in Hawai'i where the couple moved in 1967 and where they stayed for ten years. Kingston has taught at the University of Hawai'i, Eastern Michigan University, and the University of California where she is now Professor Emerita.

In 1976, she published her first work, *The Woman Warrior*, followed by *China Men* (1980). These works are part of the same project: recounting the immigrant experience from respectively a female and a male perspective. *The*

*Woman Warrior* won the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction; *China Men* won the 1981 National Book Award and was runner-up for the Pulitzer Prize. In 1989 *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* was published, the story of Wittman Ah Sing, a fifth-generation Chinese American hipster poet graduated from Berkeley who tries to find his identity between East and West (the novel itself is a blend of Western and Eastern literary traditions). *Tripmaster Monkey* won the 1989 PEN West Award for Fiction. Kingston has also written articles and poems: *Hawai'i One Summer* (1987) is a collection of essays; *To Be the Poet* (2002) is a book of and about poetry; and *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003) is a work connected with her anti-war activism. As a graduate student at Berkeley, she was active in the Free Speech Movement of 1964 and in the anti-war movement when the United States began bombing Vietnam. In 1993, Kingston started to run a series of writing and meditation workshops for veterans and their families. She then collected their stories in *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (2006). In 2003, she was even arrested in Washington D.C. for crossing a police line while protesting against the war in Iraq. Her main literary sources and influences are: Nathaniel Hawthorne, Walt Whitman, William Carlos Williams, Virginia Woolf, and the Beats but also Asian literature, especially classical and folkloric classic writing.

Kingston has received many honours: the National Humanities Medal in 1997 by President of the United States Bill Clinton, the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature in 1998, and the 2013 National Medal of Arts by President of the United States Barack Obama. She was also honoured as “Living Treasure of Hawai'i” by a Honolulu Buddhist sect in 1980. She now lives in Oakland, California.



### 2.2.2 Between facts and fiction

Since *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, critics' main preoccupation has been to define its generic status. Although the subtitle clearly states that it is a collection of "*Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*", the very presence of the word "ghost" immediately suggests the merger with the genre of fiction. As Patricia Lin Blinde (1979: 60) sustains, the subtitle

provides an indication that a violation of generic expectations is in the winds, for although the work is purportedly a memoir, it is a memoir of a girlhood among *ghosts* and so is rooted only minimally in the convention that demands the clear separation between truth and ephemeral.

Moreover, the label "memoir" is problematic as there has been a tendency to confuse the genre of memoir<sup>13</sup> with that of autobiography. As Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2001: 198) underline, a memoir is "a mode of life narrative that historically situates the subject in a social environment, as either observer or participant; the memoir directs *attention more toward the lives and action of others than to the narrator*" [emphasis added]. However,

In contemporary parlance autobiography and memoir are used interchangeably. But distinctions are relevant. As Lee Quinby notes, "[W]hereas autobiography promotes an 'I' that shares with confessional discourse an assumed interiority and an ethical mandate to examine that interiority, memoirs promote an 'I' that is explicitly constituted in the reports of the utterances and proceedings of others. The 'I' or subjectivity produced in memoirs is externalized and ... *dialogical*". [emphasis added] (Smith and Watson 2001: 198)

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<sup>13</sup> A memoir is traditionally defined as: "A historical account or biography written from personal knowledge" or "An account written by a public figure of their life and experiences" (oxforddictionaries.com).

Furthermore, postmodernist memoirs subvert the traditional categories of autobiography: the “I” is less and less central, if narrator and protagonist share the same name they do not necessarily identify with each other, time is not linear, objectivity and truthfulness are not guaranteed.

*The Woman Warrior* is a collection of five short stories (or “talk-stories”) which only indirectly concern the narrator as they mainly recount the lives and experiences of her female ancestors (her mother, Brave Orchid, and her aunts, “no name woman” and Moon Orchid) and of mythical and heroic female figures (Fa Mu Lan and Ts’ai Yen). Episodes from Maxine’s<sup>14</sup> own life are spare in comparison and this is why her voice sometimes disappears to make space for other voices. Essentially, *The Woman Warrior* is characterised by what Mikhail Bakhtin called “dialogism”.

Here is a summary of the structure of *The Woman Warrior*, its contents, and narrative voices. According to Marjorie T. Lightfoot (1986: 59) “these chapters are psychologically arranged to reveal how [the protagonist’s] individual vision evolved, ...”.

- 1) “No Name Woman”: it is the story of Maxine’s aunt, her father’s sister, who died in China. She is a “no name woman” because she committed adultery and so she was punished by being forgotten, “as if she had never been born” (3). The story opens with Maxine as narrator but since her mother told the story to her it is Brave Orchid who continues the narration. When the story is over, the narrator is Maxine again. She reflects on her aunt’s story and makes conjectures about her (her mother does not provide many details). So, the narration is always in first person; yet, there is a subtle swift (only signalled

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<sup>14</sup> I will employ the name Maxine to refer to the protagonist and Kingston to indicate the author. As Kingston (cited in Lightfoot 1986: 56) herself states, “... that narrator girl. It’s hard for me to call her me, because this is an illusion of writing. She is so coherent and intense always, throughout. There’s an intensity of emotion that makes the book come together. And I’m not like that”.

by inverted commas) from Maxine's voice to her mother's and then again to Maxine's.

- 2) "White Tigers": this section contains Kingston's version of the myth of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who became a warrior. Initially, it is Maxine who tells Fa Mu Lan's story by imagining that she herself is the mythical heroine. Therefore, she uses the conditional: "The call *would come from* a bird ... The bird *would cross* the sun ... I *would be* a little girl of seven ... The brambles *would tear off* my shoes ... but I *would keep* climbing ..." (20). However, at a certain point, there is a shift from the conditional to the simple past which marks the passage from the realm of the would-be to that of facts: "The door opened ... they greeted *me*" (21). The myth becomes reality. Moreover, it is Fa Mu Lan herself who tells her story. When the story is over, Maxine speaks again in first person to comment, as she does in the previous section, on Fa Mu Lan's story by comparing it with her own life experience in America. As in "No Name Woman", there is an alternation of first person narrators: Maxine – Fa Mu Lan – Maxine.
- 3) "Shaman": this is the story of Brave Orchid but it is told by Maxine (third person narrator). The story divides into two parts recounting respectively Brave Orchid's life in China, when Maxine's father was already in America, and her life in America. At the end of this section, Maxine talks about her last visit to her parents and the conversation she has with her mother (first person narrator). The story of Maxine's mother is intertwined, in a sort of Chinese box structure, with episodes from Maxine's own childhood, Maxine's reflections, Brave Orchid's stories told in the first person or in the third person by Maxine (like the story of "the village crazy lady"), and Chinese folktales.
- 4) "At the Western Palace": here, a third person narrator tells the coming of Maxine's aunt, Moon Orchid, to America. There are no shifting narrative voices but it is interesting that Kingston chooses to report this story by using an anonymous third person narrator. In the following section, Maxine's voice

returns to specify that her story is actually third hand and so she explicitly unveils her unreliability as a narrator.

- 5) “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”: the conclusive section mainly deals with episodes from Maxine’s childhood. At the end, Maxine narrates Ts’ai Yen’s story, a mythical female figure. It is always Maxine who speaks but, as she specifies, this is “a story my mother told me ... *the beginning is hers, the ending, mine*” [emphasis added] (206). This phrase encapsulates the very nature of Kingston’s work: a dialogical memoir made up of different stories (not just the author’s/narrator’s) and told through different voices which intersect and become part of a single and yet multiple voice or self.

So, Kingston employs different, “*plural and shifting pronouns* [which] create a constant stream of narrator’s ‘subjectivities’ in which everything is transformed, ‘digested’ by an omnivorous and *multiple subject*” [emphasis added] (Lim 1992: 257). According to Lee Quinby (1992: 304), “the first person pronoun ‘I’ is not at all simple; nor is it as unified as the ‘I’ of autobiography implies”. Margaret Miller (1983: 17) believes that “the assertive and uncomplex English ‘I’ ... is false to the Chinese part of her”. Indeed, young Maxine cannot “understand ‘I.’ The Chinese ‘I’ has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American ‘I,’ assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?” (166). The “intricacies” of the Chinese “I” symbolise its relational, non-individualistic nature which contrasts with the Western sense of self. Thus, Kingston “reflects the Chinese emphasis on kinship rather than on individual identity by defining herself in terms of her place in a kinship line” (Miller 1983: 17). This is why the text is not written following a chronological line but rather a “kinship line” which results in its non-linearity. Its “unstructured flow” is, for Blinde (1979: 61), the result of Kingston’s inability

to come to terms with anything as rigidly defined as a ‘Self.’ Her inability results in a work that reports ‘reality’ at its most real – namely the unstructured flow of

events, thoughts, places, and people without the constraints of time, place or other predetermined concepts.

Furthermore, the text's "referential grounding is tenuous" (Wong 1992: 252). These features remove *The Woman Warrior* from the genre of autobiography, normally written in a chronological order with verifiable references to the outer world.

Lastly, the narrator is unreliable for various reasons. First, there is no single narrator but many and so there is not a single and unambiguous perspective. Second, the main narrator, Maxine, cannot distinguish between fact and fiction:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies? (5-6)

Besides, she provides divergent accounts of the same story or she reports third hand stories. It is the narrator herself who, telling the episode of her mother and aunt meeting Moon Orchid's husband in America, admits that she was not there: "... it wasn't me *my brother told* about going to Los Angeles; *one of my sisters told me what he'd told her. His version* of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, *not twisted into designs*" [emphasis added] (163). As a matter of fact, Maxine

has elaborated the stories: there are long stretches of dialogue, always suspect in an autobiography given the probable inaccuracy of memory, as well as description of her mother's most private and evanescent feelings. ... In telling her mother's stories, she gives us no indication of what is hers and what is Brave Orchid's ... (Miller 1983: 25-26)

Nevertheless, as Kingston herself has underlined, her aim was “not writing history or sociology [with the imperative of referring to verifiable facts] but a ‘memoir’ like Proust” (Kingston cited in Quinby 1992: 298-299).

As for generic experimentation, Donald C. Goellnicht (1997: 344) believes that the subversion of traditional generic conventions is “one of the most powerful and productive aspects of life-writing by marginalized peoples ...”. Yet, Kingston’s “white publishers chose to ignore that radical inversion of generic expectations when it came to marketing her book to a predominantly mainstream audience” (344) and so they labelled it “nonfiction”. This label, if not completely misleading, is certainly not exhaustive since it should be paired with that of fiction but also biography. As Kingston (cited in Durczak 1994: 80) declares: “... I am writing biography and autobiography of imaginative people. I am writing about real people, all of whom have minds that love to invent fictions. I am writing the biography of their imaginations”. *The Woman Warrior* is indeed a blend of autobiography, biography, fiction, myth, folklore, and narrative poetry and it is actually a memoir considering that Maxine’s self-fashioning is the result of its dialoguing with other female selves, specifically her real and chosen ancestors. Miller (1983: 25) suggests that “James Olney would classify *Woman Warrior* under ‘autofictography,’ autobiography in which techniques of the novelist play a prominent part”.

To summarise, *The Woman Warrior* is a very complex, multifaceted, and multi-layered text. Miller (1983: 27) defines the complexity of the text “baroque”. Such complexity is rendered by a metaphor contained in a passage of *The Woman Warrior*:

Long ago in China, knot-makers tied string into buttons and frogs, and rope into bell pulls. There was one knot so complicated that it blinded the knot-maker. Finally an emperor outlawed this cruel knot, and the nobles could not order it anymore. If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker.  
(163)

As Kingston herself explains, the metaphor of the knot-making exemplifies her writing: "... what I write are all intricate inventions [in contrast with her brother's "bareness", his stories being "not twisted into designs"] ... I feel that I break through the pigeonholes of what's fiction and what's nonfiction, of what an autobiography is. ... I think that I am constantly experimenting in new literary forms and they are very complicated" (Fishkin and Kingston 1991: 791). Particularly, Kingston stresses the need to create a new kind of autobiography, able to give expression to the inner life of women, especially women of colour, "always on the brink of disappearing" (786), to their "dreams and visions and prayers" (786).

### 2.2.3 Finding a voice, breaking the silence

*The Woman Warrior* is the story of a Chinese American girl who strives to shape her own self between two cultures: Chinese culture and American culture. As Jerzy Durczak (1994: 84) affirms, "Maxine wants to overcome her psychological marginality which is sentenced both by her gender and ethnicity; to achieve this she must define herself in terms of her relation to her Chinese legacy and her American present". In an interview with Shirley Geok-lin Lim (2008: 158), Kingston stated that the function of *The Woman Warrior* was "self-understanding, understanding myself in relation to my family, to my mother, my place in my community, in my society, and in the world". Maxine's difficulty to figure out what is her "village" (45) has to do with the multiple and ambiguous meanings of both Chinese and American culture. As an American-born Chinese, Maxine's knowledge of Chinese culture is indirect and so it is partial and confused. As it has been mentioned above, Maxine cannot say if her knowledge of China and Chinese culture is "pure" or if it is corrupted by fictions she takes from the movies or from her mother's talk-stories: "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just

movies, just living” (205). Especially regarding her mother’s talk-stories, Maxine cannot say “what’s a cheat story and what’s not” (206):

You [Brave Orchid] lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or, ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference. ... *I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up.* [emphasis added] (202)

Furthermore, Chinese parents, when they tell their stories about China, leave out many details or they do not tell the story at all:

There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China.

... sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell,’ said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know. ...

...

They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves ghost-like. They called us a kind of ghost. (183)

The word “ghost” (the same which appears in the subtitle) is used to refer to American people but also to American-born Chinese children since they are partly Chinese and partly American. Thus, their parents do not consider them as completely reliable and cannot tell them everything about themselves and China. The reason why the Americans and Chinese American children are defined as ghosts is that they both speak another language which Chinese immigrants cannot understand. Hence, they are invisible to them: “She [Brave Orchid] would not allow anybody to talk while eating. In some families the children worked out a sign language but here *the children spoke English, which their parents didn’t seem to hear*” [emphasis added] (123). So, Chinese American children have a special status as



they are not introduced to the secrets of the elders, yet they have to show solidarity with the rest of the Chinese community and defend its interests. This situation makes it difficult for the American-born to decide on their loyalties and allegiances ... (Durczak 1994: 91)

One of the aspects of Chinese culture with which Maxine has more trouble is the role of women. She soon learns that being a Chinese girl is only a disgrace to the family:

‘Girls are maggots in the rice,’ (43)

‘Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,’ ... ‘There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise girls geese than girls.’ ... ‘When you raise girls, you’re raising children for strangers.’ (46)

‘When fishing for treasures in the flood be careful not to pull in girls,’ ... (52)

I read in an anthropology book that Chinese say, ‘Girls are necessary too’; I have never heard the Chinese I know make this concession. (52-53)

[In China] Among the sellers with their ropes, cages, and water tanks were the sellers of little girls. ... There were fathers and mothers selling their daughters, ... (79)

Maxine is also aware of the different treatment of girls and boys, especially in occasion of their birth:

... prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl. ‘The midwife or a relative would take the back of a girl baby’s head in her hand and turn her face into the hashes,’ said my mother. ‘It was very easy.’ (86)

I minded that the emigrant villagers shook their heads at my sister and me. ‘One girl—and another girl,’ they said, and made our parents ashamed to take us out together. The good part about my brothers being born was that people stopped saying, ‘All girls,’ but I learned new grievances. ‘Did you roll an egg on *my* face like that when *I* was born?’ ‘Did you have a full-month party for *me*?’ ‘Did you turn on all the lights?’ ‘Did you send *my* picture to Grandmother?’ ‘Why not? Because I’m a girl? Is that why not?’ (46)

Moreover, women are considered as their husband and his family’s dutiful servants:

It was said, ‘There is an outward tendency in females,’ which meant that I was getting straight A’s for the good of my future husband’s family, not my own. (47)

There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues! (47)

‘A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that.’ Confucius, the rational man. (193)

And yet, in contrast with all this,

When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen. (19)

She [Brave Orchid] said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman. (20)

Maxine is caught between contrasting messages imparted by the same culture and by the same person. On the one hand, she feels haunted by Chinese stories and their unpleasant and distorted images and meanings:

To make my waking life American-normal, I turn on the lights before anything untoward makes an appearance. I push the deformed into my dreams, which are in *Chinese, the language of impossible stories*. Before we can leave our parents, *they stuff our heads* like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear. [emphasis added] (87)

Maxine describes Chinese parents' act of telling stories as violent and coercive: "... they stuff our heads". On the other hand, she also feels attracted by her mother's talk-stories:

I did not always listen voluntarily ... I'd overhear before I had a chance to protect myself. Then ... a curtain flapped loose inside my brain. I have wanted to say, 'Stop it. Stop it,' but not once did I say, 'Stop it.' (91)

Her feelings toward Chinese culture are ambiguous and conflicting. The same can be said for American culture. When Maxine is an adult and away from home she feels she can breathe (108); to her, America is "the place where rationality and logic prevail over unexplained forces of imagination" (Durczak 1994: 103):

I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, t.v. dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (204)

However, American culture promotes an ideal of femininity which is marked by submissiveness. Maxine observes: "Normal Chinese women's voices are strong

and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine” (172). So, “The position of women outside Chinatown, in the Caucasian world, though incomparably better, is not altogether satisfying” (Durczak 1994: 98).

Another controversy has precisely to do with Maxine’s voice or tongue and her mother cutting her fraenum: when she asks her mother why she did that, Brave Orchid answers that she “cut it so that 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). Nevertheless, Maxine suspects that her mother cut her tongue to make her silent since the Chinese say “a ready tongue is an evil” (164). She cannot trust her mother’s words because she often lies or makes up her stories and she does not see why her mother should act against Chinese norms (cutting her fraenum so that she “would not be tongue-tied” in spite of the belief that “a ready tongue is an evil”).

The opposition between voice and silence, talking and not talking, is central to *The Woman Warrior*. It is by finding a way to express herself that Maxine also finds *herself*. Until then, silence dominates her life. Two aspects have already emerged: Chinese parents demanding their American-born children that they do not tell or explain anything to the “ghosts” (as a result of anti-immigration laws and discrimination) and Chinese girls having to whisper in order to be American feminine. Besides, American-born children had to face the difficulty of learning English at school.

*The Woman Warrior* opens with an injunction to silence: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you ...’” (3). Brave Orchid is going to tell Maxine the story of her father’s sister in China, the no name aunt. Because she committed adultery, she was first punished by the other villagers with a raid on her house and then by forgetting her, “as if she had never been born” (3). Her real punishment is precisely that of being forgotten and so her story should not be told since this is a way of remembering her. She is basically

denied an identity and this is why she has no name. While adultery in itself could be forgiven, the no name aunt's act of "extravagance" during a time of poverty becomes a crime as she gives birth to a child when there already are enough mouths to feed. In other words, her fault is having given priority to her individual needs and ignored "Necessity", the needs of the community: "The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them" (13). As Maxine says, her aunt "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" (8). Thus, she eventually commits suicide by throwing herself into the family well with her new-born child (which constitutes another act of rebellion against the community which will have to take responsibility for the woman's suicide). Maxine realises that she has participated in her punishment: "I have not asked for details nor said my aunt's name; I do not know it" (16). However, Maxine has not only given her aunt a name, "no name woman", but she has also told her story: "... after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her" (16). Maxine remembers her aunt by telling her story and so she gives her a voice. While her mother tells the story only as a warning to Maxine not to do the same thing her aunt did and thus humiliate her family, Maxine does not judge her and even elects her as her forerunner (8) since she is "a rebel—a breaker of conventions" (Cheung 1988: 167).<sup>15</sup> The most important message Maxine infers from her aunt's story, far from her mother's intentions, is the importance of having a voice in order to have an identity.

In the last chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", Maxine recounts the astonishing episode of her bullying another girl who is always silent. The dumb girl is actually Maxine's double. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993: 87) notices that "Maxine concedes important similarities between herself and her victim ... Both tormentor and victim suffer from an inability to make themselves heard".

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<sup>15</sup> Yet, Maxine is also haunted by her aunt: "I don't think she always means me well. I am telling on her, ..." (16). This is because, at this early stage of Maxine's process of self-creation, her attitude towards Chinese behavioural norms is still ambiguous: Maxine's "profound conflict about where her loyalty lies regarding the experience of this aunt ... serves to convey her own agonized indecision about what stance to take towards her own Chinese-American upbringing" (Hunt 1985: 7).

For three years, in kindergarten, Maxine does not utter a word and in her first grade record it is written that she has “no IQ—a zero IQ” (183). Therefore, Maxine’s confrontation with the silent girl is actually a confrontation with herself and her limits. Maxine tries to make the girl/herself see that “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (180). Maxine’s bullying does not have any positive effect on the girl and, as a kind of punishment for her coercive use of language and “the worst thing I had yet done to another person” (181), she becomes ill and is forced to stay in bed for a year and a half. This episode is controversial and its conclusion is not easily interpretable but it seems that its main function is that of emphasising young Maxine’s rage against herself for not being able to express herself. As Cheung (1988: 166) underlines, “young Maxine is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her external silence and her inner possibility”. Moreover, it stresses the link between having a voice and having a personality, that is, an identity.

Maxine also comes to the realisation that “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). It is only through talking that Maxine can cure her “illness”:

Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that *I had to tell my mother* so that she would know the true things about me and *to stop the pain in my throat*. [emphasis added] (197)

The “list of grievances” (35) is what Maxine has in common with Fa Mu Lan, the warrior woman. When Fa Mu Lan has finished her training and has become an adult, she returns home where her parents welcome her as if she were a son. Before she goes to fight barbarians and bandits with her new army, her parents tattoo revenge on her back: “We’ll write out oaths and names” (34). Although Fa Mu Lan has become a swordswoman, her real weapon are precisely the words at her back and her actual revenge is “the reporting”:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. ... What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are 'report a crime' ... The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words ... that they do not fit on my skin. (53)

These sentences close the chapter on Fa Mu Lan and they are particularly significant as they contain the profound meaning of the story. Some critics (King-Kok Cheung, Feng Lan, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong) have highlighted the ambiguity of Fa Mu Lan as a feminist model. As a matter of fact, she gains recognition from her family only because she acts as a son and she must disguise as a man to be able to fight in battle:

My parents killed a chicken and steamed it whole, as if they were welcoming home a son ... (34)

I put on my men's clothes and armor and tied my hair in a man's fashion. (36)

'On *his* side,' they said. I never told them the truth. Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations. (39)

Furthermore, Fa Mu Lan fights not for herself but for her family and community and she finally returns home to play the role of dutiful daughter-in-law and becomes an example of "perfect filiality" (45): "I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons" (45). This is why critics such as Sidonie Smith have indicated the Amazon-like women as the real feminist models as they do not disguise themselves as men. Fa Mu Lan explains: "... they turned into the band of swordswomen who were a mercenary army. They did not wear men's clothes like me, ... They killed men and boys" (44-45). Yet, Fa Mu Lan admits: "I myself never encountered such women and could not

vouch for their reality” (45). As is known, Kingston is a pacifist and has always disapproved of violence: this is why, eventually, “the reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words”.<sup>16</sup> Thus, if it is true that Kingston does not make any significant effort to turn Fa Mu Lan into a more suitable feminist model, she nevertheless introduces an important change by shifting the emphasis from swords to words. As Cheung (1988: 169) formulates it: “... her departures from the Chinese legends shift the focus from physical prowess to verbal injuries and *textual power*” [emphasis added]. This is the relevant aspect of the Fa Mu Lan myth, not her being an imperfect feminist model. Maxine needs to find a sense in Fa Mu Lan’s story which is also valid in her American present, she needs: “... a ‘free’ translation that renders ‘the sense’ rather than ‘the letter’ of the story transforming the warrior into ‘a word warrior’” (Bolaki 2009: 46). As Linda Hunt (1985: 10) underlines, “... Kingston reminds us that new situations require new myths. The warrior woman legend may have been the best Chinese society could offer her mother, but if she herself is to use it, fundamental modification will be necessary”. In 20<sup>th</sup> century America, Maxine’s enemies are not the same as Fa Mu Lan’s: they are “each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye” (48), “the stupid racists” (49), and “the tyrants who for whatever reason can deny my family food and work” (49). Maxine realises that “To avenge my family, I’d have to storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists; I’d have to rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California” (49). Still, Maxine dislikes armies (49). To the young girl, who struggles to find some parallel between her and the swordswoman, Fa Mu Lan’s real weapon is not the sword but the word, the reporting of the crime. The real victory consists in finding a voice and breaking the silence.

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<sup>16</sup> In fact, it was not Kingston who chose the title of her work but her publisher. She admits: “I don’t really like warriors. I wish I had not a metaphor of a warrior ... I guess I always have in my style a doubt about wars as a way of solving things” (Kingston cited in Cheung 1990: 243).



Maxine is eventually able to use her voice against her parents and her own culture since, being a girl, she is considered as worthless, only good to become somebody's wife:

I stood up, talking and burbling. I looked directly at my mother and at my father and screamed, 'I want you to tell that hulk [a retarded man who has been hanging around her parents' laundry for some time], that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again. I know what you're up to. You're thinking he's rich, and we're poor. You think we're odd and not pretty and we're not bright. You think you can give us away to freaks. You better not do that, Mother. ... If I see him here one more time, I'm going away. I'm going away anyway. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I'm not, I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. *I'm smart*. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A's, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. *I can make a living and take care of myself*. So you don't have to find me a keeper who's too dumb to know a bad bargain. ... *I am not going to be a slave or a wife*. [emphasis added] (201)

Apparently, it is not her mother's Chinese talk-stories which teach Maxine that she can be something else than just a wife but her Western "Teacher Ghosts". Yet, it is through her personal interpretations of her mother's talk-stories that she learns how to assert herself: through her aunt's story, Fa Mu Lan's story, and also her mother's own story.

For, although Brave Orchid clearly embodies Chinese tradition and values (Durczak 1994: 84), she is also a feminist model. While her husband is in America, she decides to become a doctor. She leaves her village and goes to a school of medicine where she is assigned a room in the dormitory: "Not many

women got to live out the daydream of women—to have a room” (61).<sup>17</sup> Brave Orchid is a “champion talker” (202), she is a model of strength and courage: her name, as Kingston herself underlines, is not casual: “... *who* has a name like that? It’s so different from ‘Plum Blossom.’ It’s so powerful. It’s so odd” (Fishkin and Kingston 1991: 788). More importantly, she keeps her maiden name even when she is married and, after almost fifty years of marriage, she still does not wear any rings. She also affirms: “... your father couldn’t have supported you without me. I’m the one with the big muscles” (104). Moreover, she faces ghosts, ape-men, and baby-monsters. So, Brave Orchid is a very ambivalent character: on the one hand, she is a strong and self-assertive woman; on the other hand, she is greatly attached to Chinese tradition and beliefs. She is a pragmatic woman but at the same time she sees the world through the lenses of Chinese fairy tales. She represents China, the invisible world, the world of impossible things, against America, the solid world, the world of facts. Her explanation for the moon eclipse, for instance, is that a frog is swallowing the moon. Maxine needs at the same time to identify with and separate from her mother (and her Chinese background) in order to shape her own identity, her own talk-story.

Thus, grown-up Maxine tells a story “my mother told me ... when I told her *I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine*” [emphasis added] (206). Here, Maxine “recognizes that she herself is a powerful spinner of yarns and not just a receptacle for her mother’s tales” (Cheung 1988: 171). The last story is that of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess<sup>18</sup> born in 175 A.D. and captured when she was twenty years old by the chieftain of a barbarian tribe. During her captivity she has two children who cannot speak Chinese. The barbarians are primitives and Ts’ai Yen believes that the only music they can make is that of their arrows producing “high whirling whistles ... death sounds” (208). But one night, she hears them playing their flutes: “They reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held—an icicle in the

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<sup>17</sup> Virginia Woolf’s motif of the “room’s of one own” returns here as in *Fifth Chinese Daughter*.

<sup>18</sup> It is worth noticing that the figure who closes Kingston’s work is not a warrior but a poetess.

desert. The music disturbed Ts'ai Yen" (208). After some sleepless nights, Ts'ai Yen finally sings "a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. ... Her words seemed to be Chinese ... Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering" (209). One of her songs is called "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe": "... a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. *It translated well*" [emphasis added] (209).

As with the Fa Mu Lan myth, Kingston produces her own version of Ts'ai Yen's story: Cheung (1988: 171) explains that "The Chinese version highlights the poet's eventual return to her own people ... Kingston's version, by contrast, dramatizes interethnic harmony ...". Ts'ai Yen's song, like Kingston's work, is the result of the hybridisation of two cultures. Particularly, "In reshaping her ancestral past to fit her American present ... Kingston is asserting an identity that is neither Chinese nor white American, but distinctively Chinese American" (Cheung 1988: 169). Thus, by translating her Chinese legacy into the American English language, Maxine creates a Chinese American self and a bilingual autobiography: "... the deracinated Kingston, in the act of autobiography, finds her voice, a unique blend of the Chinese and the barbarian [American] which is comprehensible to both. Truly bilingual, she mediates between two realities ..." (Miller 1983: 29). So, separation is followed by reconciliation with her mother<sup>19</sup> ("The beginning is hers, the ending, mine"), with her Chinese legacy, and between Chinese and American culture.<sup>20</sup> Maxine is able to translate her own experience as a Chinese American girl and finds her own voice: a combination of Chinese and American traits and of the voices of her Chinese female ancestors. It is through the art of writing that she is able to do this: the story of Ts'ai Yen is indeed "a celebration of the woman who is powerful because she can speak, can write" (Juhasz 1985: 184).

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<sup>19</sup> *The Woman Warrior* is indeed dedicated to the author's mother and father.

<sup>20</sup> Maxine goes even beyond reconciliation between two cultures, she is aware that: "*We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we're no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot*" [emphasis added] (107).

#### 2.2.4 "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific"<sup>21</sup>

An analysis of *The Woman Warrior* would not be complete without hinting at the debate originated around Kingston's work between feminists and cultural nationalists. The reason why I did not mention it before in my analysis is that it was my intention to approach this work as such, that is, without the filters that the arguments of this debate would have inevitably introduced. Quite often critics have presented *The Woman Warrior* almost solely as the centre of this debate, which certainly constitutes a central moment of ethnic and particularly Asian American studies but which should not obscure the literary nature of text. *The Woman Warrior* should be first appreciated for its literary features and its themes before probing its social and historical connections. In other words, *The Woman Warrior* should not be read as the response to this debate but as its origin.

This being said, I will provide a brief summary of the debate which Wong (1992: 248) considers to be "at the heart of any theoretical discussion of ethnic American autobiography in particular and ethnic American literature in general". Indeed, the debate on *The Woman Warrior* has contributed to highlight two aspects that are crucial to ethnic studies: ethnic women's double marginality and their being placed between two allegiances, ethnicity and gender; the contrasting concepts of art as an instrument of the community, regulated by certain norms of representation, or as an instrument of free and creative self-expression.

When *The Woman Warrior* was published, Kingston was contested by critics and writers such as Frank Chin, Jeffery Paul Chan, Benjamin R. Tong, and Katheryn Fong for presenting her work as autobiography. As a consequence, non-Chinese readers would read *The Woman Warrior* "as true accounts of Chinese and Chinese American history" (Fong cited in Wong 1992: 250).

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<sup>21</sup> "The Woman Warrior versus The Chinaman Pacific: Must a Chinese American Critic Choose Between Feminism and Heroism?" is an essay by King-Kok Cheung (1990).

However, Kingston's work is fictional and does not recount the history of a whole community but just her "unique" experience (Chan). Other accusations also concern the way Kingston translated certain Chinese terms (such as the word "ghost" which in Cantonese is *kuei* or *gwai* and can refer to ghosts but also demons and so Kingston's translation appeared too neutral) and her personal reinterpretations of Chinese folklore and legends (the most significant example being the myth of Fa Mu Lan). Finally, Kingston was charged with reinforcing stereotypical images of Asian Americans as inassimilable aliens and of Chinese American men as sexist.

As for *The Woman Warrior's* generic status, Kingston had little responsibility for the nonfiction label on the book cover: "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'" (Kingston cited in Wong 1992: 249). Moreover, an analysis of the text, like the one undertaken here, immediately reveals a combination of various genres where autobiography is not prevailing. It is true that there is a strong tendency to read ethnic literary texts as sociological and anthropological documents but this just means that responsibility for reading *The Woman Warrior* as a literary text rather than a document rests ultimately on the readers (Wong 1992: 250).<sup>22</sup>

With regard to Kingston's manipulation of traditional Chinese culture, it is essential to consider that Maxine-Kingston, as an American-born, does not have direct access to it: "... having been born and raised in 'ghost country' without benefit of explicit parental instruction in cultural practices, [the native-born] is barely more enlightened than an 'an outsider' would be" (Wong 1992: 267). Thus, Maxine-Kingston's "distortions" (Chin) are not only justified but also authentic: "Where culture is problematic as a source of identity, cultural ignorance itself is part of what is authentic about the experience" (Deborah Woo

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<sup>22</sup> In 1982, Kingston published an essay entitled "Cultural Misreadings by American Reviewers".

cited in Wong 1992: 268). So, misinterpretation and appropriation of Chinese folktales and language are part of the Chinese American experience, especially as the individual tries to make sense of his or her Chinese heritage in relation to his or her American present. As Wong (1992: 268) affirms, *The Woman Warrior* is a meditation of what it means to be Chinese American. This is why *The Woman Warrior* cannot be read as a thoroughly Chinese text: Kingston's artistic enterprise "is to establish the legitimacy of a unique Chinese American (as opposed to 'Chinese Chinese') experience and sensibility" (Wong 1991: 27).

Last but not least, Kingston's has been condemned for concentrating only on her personal experience, thus neglecting or even distorting that of the Asian American community. This is quite an ironical aftermath if one considers that the opening story of *The Woman Warrior* deals precisely with the life of a woman who was punished for giving more importance to her personal life than that of the community. So, Kingston has been accused of perpetuating stereotypical representations of the Asian American community and, especially, of Chinese American men. According to cultural nationalists, Kingston depicts Chinese American men as oppressive and misogynist towards Chinese American women who consequently would turn to superior white American moral values as opposed to those of their culture of origin (Vastolo 2006: 45). Therefore, Kingston conforms to the white American public's taste by privileging white feminists themes which harm the image of the Chinese American man and by providing an exoticised and assimilationist representation of Chinese American culture (Vastolo 2006: 46). Hence, the great success of *The Woman Warrior* among the white public. However, Maxine's critical behaviour towards both Asian and American culture is a sufficient element for not labelling *The Woman Warrior* as "autobiography as Guided Chinatown tour" and Kingston as an "ambassador of goodwill". Wong (1992: 267) believes that "Only a careless reader ... would be able to conclude that Kingston's stance in *The Woman Warrior* is that of the trustworthy cultural guide".

The most controversial aspect is the portrayal of Asian American men as sexist: while feminists see Kingston's "reporting" of the mistreatment of Chinese and Chinese American women as an act of rightful "vengeance" and self-affirmation, cultural nationalists consider it as a deplorable betrayal of her community. To them, the ethnic writer should support his or her community and portray it in a "favourable light, purged of annoyingly 'unique' features, and free of useless fantasy which diverts attention from sordid facts of oppression in American society" (Wong 1988: 4). Literature is thus reduced to historical or sociological document and the ethnic writer to the spokesperson of his or her community. Kingston has expressed the weight of such a responsibility: "I need to be free, to be socially irresponsible with no allegiances to anybody. I have to have times when I will say 'Okay, I don't represent anybody'" (Lim and Kingston 2008: 165). Still, "to pursue goals and desires or 'self-fulfillment' is seen as disruptive" (Miller 1983: 15) first of the family and then of the community. This is why ethnic women, who are doubly marginalised because of their race *and* their gender, find themselves having to choose between "Necessity" and "extravagance", that is, "social responsibility" and "self-actualization" (Wong 1988: 5). As for Asian American women, their need for self-expression was a to-be-expected consequence of Chin's and his colleagues' restrictions of what is and is not Asian American. Their main preoccupation was to create a heroic identity for the Asian American man, emasculated by the white American society, and so they completely excluded Asian American women's needs from their agenda. It was just natural that Asian American women wanted to shape their own identity outside these limits and find a place within the Asian American literary field.





### 3. LIKE CHERRY BLOSSOMS

Very brief –

Gleam of blossoms in the treetops

On a moonlit night.

Bashō



### 3.1 *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*

Yamamoto selects as her main characters those who are hurt, who have deviated from the norm, who are grasping for some bits of beauty in their desperation ... all those who seek but lose are of interest to Yamamoto, and somehow she wins our understanding ...

Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald and Katharine Newman

#### 3.1.1 An unconventional housewife

Most of the time I am cleaning house, or cooking or doing yard work. Very little time is spent writing. But if somebody told me I couldn't write, it would probably grieve me very much.

Hisaye Yamamoto

Hisaye Yamamoto was born on 23 August 1921 in Redondo Beach, California. Her parents, Issei coming from Kumamoto, were strawberry farmers. She “early contracted the disease of compulsive reading” (Yamamoto cited in Cheung 2001: ix) and, as a teenager, she regularly wrote a column under the pen name Napoleon for the local journal *Kashu Mainichi*. After high school, she attended Compton Junior College where she studied foreign languages (French, Spanish, German, and Latin) and earned an associate of arts degree. In 1942, she and her family (her father and her three brothers; her mother had died in 1939) were sent to a relocation camp in Poston, Arizona. Here, she worked as a reporter for the prison camp newspaper, *The Poston Chronicle*, and met Wakako Yamauchi with whom she became great friends. She was then relocated to Springfield, Massachusetts, with two younger brothers, and worked as a cook. They soon returned to Poston at their father's request as their 19-year-old brother Johnny had died in Italy while he was fighting with the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team.

In 1945, she returned to Los Angeles and found a job as a columnist for the *Los Angeles Tribune*, an African American weekly.<sup>23</sup> In 1948, at the age of 27, she was accepted for the first time by a literary magazine and one of her stories, “The High-Heeled Shoes, A Memoir”, was published on the prestigious *Partisan Review*. The same year, she left her job at the *Los Angeles Tribune* and, in 1950, she obtained a John Hay Whitney Foundation Opportunity Fellowship which enabled her to write full time. Her stories and articles appeared in *Partisan Review*, *Kenyon Review*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Carleton Miscellany*, *Arizona Quarterly*, and *Furioso*. Impressed by social activist Dorothy Day’s articles in *The Catholic Worker*, Yamamoto refused a Stanford Writing Fellowship (offered by poet and literary critic Yvor Winters) and moved to New York in 1953 to work as a volunteer in a farm run by the organisation. Here, she met Anthony DeSoto whom she married in 1955. They moved to Los Angeles and had four children.<sup>24</sup> She devoted herself to her family<sup>25</sup> but she continued to write for *Rafu Shimpo* and other Japanese American, Japanese Canadian and Japanese journals.

Four of her stories (“Seventeen Syllables”, “The Brown House”, “Yoneko’s Earthquake”, and “Epithalamium”) were chosen for the annual listings of “Distinctive Short Stories”, included in the *Best American Short Stories* volumes. “Yoneko’s Earthquake” was also selected as one of *The Best American Short Stories: 1952*. It was not until 1985 that her writings were first collected and published in a condensed edition in Tokyo entitled *Seventeen Syllables*. The same collection (with the title *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*) was published in 1988 by Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press in a volume introduced by King-Kok Cheung which won the 1988 Award for Literature from the Association of Asian American Studies. In her stories Yamamoto deals with gender, race, class,

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<sup>23</sup> As Yamamoto herself explained, “while the Japanese were gone, Little Tokyo [in Los Angeles] had become ‘Bronzeville,’ the blacks had moved into that area, and interracial friendship was the aim. They [the *Tribune* staff] wanted an interracial paper ...” (Crow and Yamamoto 1987: 77).

<sup>24</sup> She also had a foster son, Paul, whom she had adopted after leaving her job at the *Tribune*.

<sup>25</sup> Yamamoto admitted that when she had to fill out a questionnaire, she had to “in all honesty list [her] occupation as housewife” (Yamamoto cited in Cheung 2001: ix).

and generational issues and much of her work refers to places and people of her life. She declared that she “didn’t have any imagination, I just *embroidered* on things that happened, or that people told me happened” (Crow and Yamamoto 1987: 74). Her literary sources are both Anglo-American and Japanese American but all her protagonists are Japanese Americans and “her sympathy is invariably with those who are on the fringes of American society” (Cheung 2001: xi). Cheung (2001: x) compares Yamamoto’s writing with that of Katherine Mansfield, Toshio Mori, Flannery O’Connor, Grace Paley, and Ann Petry. She also underlines that “Yamamoto was one the first Japanese American writers to gain national recognition after the war, when anti-Japanese sentiment was still rampant” (xi). Furthermore, Yamamoto was awarded the 1986 American Book Award for Lifetime Achievement from the Before Columbus Foundation and a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Asian American Writers Workshop in 2010. She died in Los Angeles on 30 January 2011, at the age of 89.

### 3.1.2 Hidden plots and limited point of view

Yamamoto has been appreciated not only for the content of her short stories but also for her remarkable narrative techniques, notably, the use of hidden plots and of a limited point of view. As I indicated in the Foreword, I will concentrate on three short stories taken from the collection *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories*: “Seventeen Syllables” (1949), “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” (1950), and “Yoneko’s Earthquake” (1951).<sup>26</sup> These stories, especially SS and YE, are good examples of how Yamamoto employs these techniques.

In SS and YE, a third person narrator reports the story of the girl-protagonists, Rosie and Yoneko. Yamamoto’s technique may be compared to

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<sup>26</sup> Abbreviations: SS = “Seventeen Syllables”; LMS = “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara”; YE = “Yoneko’s Earthquake”.

Gustave Flaubert's and Giovanni Verga's technique of impersonality:<sup>27</sup> the narrator limits him/herself to recounting the events and does not comment upon or judge them or the characters. The narrator, however, is only apparently objective as he or she expresses the characters' point of view. This technique is also known as internal focalisation and it is usually combined with free indirect discourse: "the narrator takes on the speech of the character, or, if one prefers, the character speaks through the voice of the narrator, and the two instances are then *merged*" (Genette cited in Stevenson 1992: 32). Thus, it is sometimes tricky to distinguish the narrator's voice from the character's voice:

*Now, how to reach her mother, how to communicate the melancholy song? Rosie knew formal Japanese by fits and starts, her mother had even less English, no French. [emphasis added] (SS 8-9)*

Rosie ran past him toward the house. *What had become of her mother?* [emphasis added] (SS 18)

But for an instant she turned away, and her mother, hearing the familiar glib agreement, released her. *Oh, you, you, you, her eyes and twisted mouth said, you fool.* [emphasis added] (SS 19)

So, the narrator takes on the protagonist's point of view or, as in LMS, it is Kiku herself, a young girl, who gives her own version of the events. In any case, the narration is characterised by a limited point of view since the narrator is not omniscient (LMS) or identifies with the protagonists (SS and YE). Moreover, Rosie, Kiku, and Yoneko are young girls with a restricted knowledge of the world and especially of the adult world. Therefore, they do not understand what happens around them thoroughly. Finally, there is an evident lack of communication between parents and children, Issei and Nisei, which does not

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<sup>27</sup> Cheung (1991: 278) links this technique to modernist experimentation. See, for instance, Henry James.

help the young protagonists to fully comprehend reality. This is especially visible in SS where Rosie's mother cannot communicate to her English-speaking daughter the beauty of *haiku*<sup>28</sup> and Rosie cannot explain herself either:

... Rosie pretended to understand it thoroughly and appreciate it no end, partly because she hesitated to disillusion her mother about the quantity and quality of Japanese she had learned ...

See, Rosie, she said, it was a *haiku*, a poem in which she must pack all her meaning into seventeen syllables only, ...

'Yes, yes, I understand. How utterly lovely,' Rosie said, and her mother, either satisfied or seeing through the deception and resigned, went back composing.

... It was so much easier to say yes, yes, even when one meant no, no. Besides, this was what was in her mind to say: I was looking through one of your magazines from Japan last night, Mother, and towards the back I found some *haiku* in English that delighted me. ...

Now, how to reach her mother, how to communicate the melancholy song? Rosie knew formal Japanese by fits and starts, her mother had even less English, no French. It was much more possible to say yes, yes. (SS 9)

Now, as Cheung (2001: xvii) underlines, "the use of limited point of view and the juxtaposition of a manifest and a latent plot ... are interconnected: the limited point of view allows the author to suspend or conceal one of the plots of a given story". While LMS is not a suitable example, both SS and YE reveal the presence of a double plot: a "manifest" plot which deals with the daughters and a "latent" plot concerning their mothers. Cheung (1991) defines this technique "double-telling", that is, "conveying two tales in the guise of one" (278), while Yogi (1989) names it "buried plots". Yogi (179) sustains that

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<sup>28</sup> A *haiku* is the shortest poetic form in literature; it is a three-line poem with seventeen syllables, written in a 5/7/5 syllable count. It often contains images from Nature and it stresses simplicity, intensity, and directness of expression. *Haiku* originated in Japan in the 13th century as the opening phrase of *renga*, an oral poem, usually 100 stanzas long, which was also composed syllabically.

Whereas double plots involve an explicit presentation of a secondary, albeit related, plot in a story or play ... buried plots in Yamamoto's stories are not always clearly delineated. Often the reader must piece together a buried plot from clues garnered in the 'main' or 'surface' plot.

For instance, it is only through what Rosie glimpses of her mother's activities that we learn that Mrs Tome Hayashi has developed a passion for *haiku* and that whenever she is sharing her passion with somebody (Mr Hayano, Aunt Taka and Uncle Gimpachi, or Mr Kuroda) her husband is not there. Rosie does not pay too much attention to this but a careful reader may presume that Mr Hayashi's absence, far from casual, is an expression of his annoyance at or disapproval of his wife's new passion. As Rosie herself notices, "The new interest has some repercussions on the household routine. ... Now if her father wanted to play cards, he had to resort to solitaire ..." (SS 9).

In YE, Yoneko tells of a family trip to the city on a weekday afternoon, which is very unusual: her father brings her mother to the hospital on the day their hired man, the Filipino Marpo, leaves. On their way back home, Yoneko's mother is evidently in pain but her daughter does not understand why: "Yoneko inquired as to the source of her distress, for she was obviously in pain, but she only answered that she was feeling a little under the weather and that the doctor had administered some necessarily astringent treatment" (YE 54). Yoneko is satisfied with this answer but the reader knows from what the narrator has been recounting that: Yoneko's mother is "even yet a beautiful person" (53) and she was once compared to "a dewy, half-opened rosebud" (53); Marpo can do anything and "... it would take an entire leisurely evening to go into his accomplishments adequately (49) while Mr Hosoume, Yoneko's father, has become invalid and impotent and stays "at home most of the time" (51). Meanwhile, Marpo has become "indispensable" (51). One day Marpo is not there anymore and the Hosoumes hire someone new: "*an old Japanese man* who wore his gray hair in a military cut and who, unlike Marpo, had no particular interests



outside working, eating, sleeping, and playing an occasional game of *goh* with Mr Hosoume” [emphasis added] (54). So, the reader can presume that Mrs Hosoume and Marpo had a love affair and that she went to the hospital to have an abortion. Eventually, the “buried” plot turns out to be as significant as the “surface” plot by revealing “the experiences of Issei women and the troubling legacies they pass on to their daughters” (Yogi 1989: 170).

In his (1989) essay, Yogi also highlights the connections of this technique with feminist literary theories. As a matter of fact, feminist critics such as Elaine Showalter individuate double plots as a typical feature of women’s writing. Showalter, for instance, uses the expressions “muted stories” and “double-voiced discourse” to describe a kind of narrative where “The orthodox plot recedes, and another plot, hitherto submerged in the anonymity of the background stands out in bold relief like a thumbprint” (Showalter cited in Yogi 1989: 179).

However, both Yogi and Cheung believe that there is another source for Yamamoto’s technique, that is, Japanese and Japanese American communicative patterns. Indeed, non-verbal communication and indirection are still very common among the first two generations of Japanese Americans (Cheung 1991: 277). Thus, “What some American linguists ... regard as ‘women’s language’ or ‘powerless language’ is shown ... to be the communicative norm in Japan” (277). Both Yogi and Cheung reveal the importance of *enryo* in Japanese American culture:

... it involves different types of behavior including the denial of something proffered even though that item is wanted, the acceptance of a less desired object even if given a choice, and the hesitancy to ask questions or to make demands. The actions associated with *enryo* originated with norms in Japan that governed the ways in which ‘inferiors’ were to behave towards ‘superiors.’ Transferred to and altered in America, *enryo* now encompasses a whole range of behaviors from ‘what to do in ambiguous situations, to how to cover moments of confusion, embarrassment, and anxiety.’ (Yogi 1989: 180)

In the interaction between Japanese subordinates and their superiors or between Japanese Americans and whites, 'One of the main manifestations of *enryo* was the conscious use of silence as a safe or neutral response to an embarrassing or ambiguous situation'. (Cheung 1991: 280)

Cheung introduces another term, *gaman*, which also has to do with behavioural norms: it means "internalization ... and suppression of anger and emotion" (Kitano cited in Cheung 1991: 280).<sup>29</sup> So, both *enryo* and *gaman* lead to forms of indirect communication, silence, and repression of emotions. In addition, Cheung (1991: 278) highlights the infrequency of communication between Issei spouses and "the peculiar interaction between issei parents and nisei children. Issei parents (especially fathers) tend to be authoritative and protective toward the young, so that free verbal exchange between parents and children is frequently suppressed". Finally, generational gaps and language barriers also contribute to this lack of communication.

In SS and YE, the characters do not communicate with each other or suppress their feelings:

'I'm sorry,' her mother said. 'You must be tired.' *Her father*, stepping on the starter, *said nothing*. 'You know how I get when it's *haiku*,' she continued, 'I forget what times it is.' *He only grunted*. [emphasis added] (SS 11-12)

'What have I done now?' [Rosie] yelled after [her father]. She suddenly felt like doing a lot of yelling. *But he did not answer ...* [emphasis added] (SS 14)

When Rosie's father burns the prize which her mother won for her *haiku*, she does not cry or protest: "Her mother was very calm" (SS 18). In YE, Yoneko, unlike Rosie, is never told what happened to her mother. Although signs of lack

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<sup>29</sup> Cheung (1991: 277) stresses the importance of considering these cultural aspects (often neglected by feminist scholars) in order to avoid the risk of concentrating solely on women's silence under patriarchy since men are required to repress their emotions too as a sign of manhood and strength.

of communication are more numerous in SS, in YE there is no final confession. Her mother's injunction not to kill anyone is very murky and Yoneko does not seem to grasp its actual meaning.

So, Yamamoto's technique of "double-telling" is a form of indirection which can be connected with her being an Asian American writer: not with her gender, as some feminist scholars argue, but with her ethnicity since Asian American men are also subject to forms of suppression which lead to silence and indirect communication. In the light of this, it is possible to read the silences in Yamamoto's short stories not only as a sign of (female) oppression but also as a major aspect of Japanese and Japanese American culture, as a consequence of communication problems (between parents and between parents and children), and as a way to show one's strength.

As for Yamamoto's style, it has been compared to the very form of *haiku*, a poem whose meaning and beauty are contained in only seventeen syllables. It is through "remarkable verbal economy" (Cheung 1991: 287), that is, by telling less, that Yamamoto is able to tell more or double-tell.

### 3.1.3 The woman artist

In this paragraph, I will analyse the figure of "the woman artist". This definition is modelled on the title of Kingston's work, *The Woman Warrior*, but takes into consideration Kingston's act of shifting the focus from swords to words, that is, from warriors to writers and so, in a larger sense, artists. In SS, LMS, and, in a nuanced way, YE, a figure emerges, that of the woman artist: women who choose "extravagance" over "Necessity"<sup>30</sup> as a way to find self-expression and individual freedom.

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<sup>30</sup> These terms are also taken from *The Woman Warrior*. See Sau-ling Cynthia Wong's use of them in *Reading Asian American Literature: From Necessity to Extravagance* (1993).

## “Seventeen Syllables”

I’m telling my mother’s story in ‘Seventeen Syllables’ but I’m probably telling my own, that women express their creativity under all kinds of circumstances ... Yet it is not just about Japanese women here. All over the world I think women are kept from doing what they are capable of doing.

Hisaye Yamamoto

SS is at the same time Rosie’s story, a Nisei girl who is introduced for the first time to the adult world, and her mother’s story, an Issei woman who has undergone much suffering and who finds, even though only temporarily, a cure: writing *haiku*. Yamamoto declared that SS is her mother’s story, who used to write *senryō*,<sup>31</sup> although all the details are invented (Cheung 2001: ix).

The story opens with the narrator telling about Mrs Hayashi’s new passion and reporting a conversation during which she unsuccessfully tries to make her daughter understand the beauty of *haiku*. Then, the narrator introduces to the reader Mrs Hayashi’s double, Ume Hanazono:

... [Rosie’s] mother was writing the *haiku* for a daily newspaper, the *Mainichi Shimbun* ... her mother became an extravagant contributor, taking for herself the blossoming pen name, *Ume Hanazono*.

So Rosie and her father lived for awhile with two women, her mother and Ume Hanazono. Her mother (Tome Hayashi by name) kept house, cooked, washed, and ... did her ample share of picking tomatoes out in the sweltering fields and boxing them in tidy strata in the cool packing shed. *Ume Hanazono*, who came to life after the dinner dishes were done, was an earnest, muttering stranger who often neglected speaking when spoken to and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper or carefully copying characters on good paper with her fat, pale green Parker. [emphasis added] (9)

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<sup>31</sup> A form of satirical verse which contains seventeen syllables.

To Rosie, and certainly to her father too, her mother has become an “extravagant” woman, Ume Hanazono (literally, “Plum Flowergarden”), who comes to life in the evening, when housekeeping and work in the fields is over. During the day, Mrs Hayashi works in the house and in the fields since this is needed (“Necessity”) but to find some kind of personal satisfaction and realisation she turns into Ume Hanazono, a writer of *haiku*, a poetess (“extravagance”).

The narrator notices that

The new interest had some repercussions on the household routine. Before, Rosie has been accustomed to her parents and herself taking their hot baths early and going to bed almost immediately afterwards, unless her parents challenged each other to a game of flower cards or unless company dropped in. Now if her father wanted to play cards, he had to resort to solitaire ... and if a group of friends came over, it was bound to contain someone who was also writing *haiku*, and the small assemblage would be split into two, her father entertaining the non-literary members and her mother comparing ecstatic notes with the visiting poet. (9)

This description of the “repercussions on the household routine” is very matter-of-fact. Yet, although the narrator does not say it, it is clear, from what is described, that Mr Hayashi is feeling left out: he has to “resort to solitaire” and see his wife having enthusiastic conversations with “the visiting poet” (almost certainly a man as in the case of Mr Hayano or Mr Kuroda). For instance, during the Hayashis’ visit to the Hayano family, while Mrs Hayashi discusses with Mr Hayano “a *haiku* that Mr Hayano was planning to send to the *Mainichi* ... [Rosie’s] father was sitting at one end of the sofa looking through a copy of *Life*, the new picture magazine” (11). At a point, Mr Hayashi abruptly tells Rosie that it is time to go home: “‘*Work tomorrow*,’ he said. He sounded irritated ... ‘We have to get up at five-thirty’, he told them ...” [emphasis added] (11). Besides feeling excluded (and being preoccupied with work), Rosie’s father does not

appreciate his wife's act of defiance of traditional gender roles. In fact, Mrs Hayashi still plays the role of devoted wife and mother but she has created for herself a double identity which she likes to take on once her daily duties have been carried out.

Mr Hayashi seems to accept, although reluctantly, such a situation until his wife's "extravagance" interferes with "Necessity". Thus, Mr Hayashi's tension explodes when Mr Kuroda, the *haiku* editor of the *Mainichi Shimbun*, visits Mrs Hayashi to give her the first prize, a Hiroshige print, of a contest she has joined. Mrs Hayashi stops working to welcome Mr Kuroda and offer him a cup of tea. Mr Hayashi is annoyed at her wife's behaviour. It is the hottest day of the year and tomato harvesting needs to be done by the end of the day: "This heat's not doing them [the tomatoes] any good. And *we've got no time for a break today*" [emphasis added] (15). At first, Mr Hayashi just comments: "Ha, your mother's crazy!" (17) and then asks Rosie to go and tell her mother to come back to work. Upon Mrs Hayashi's refusal to interrupt her conversation with Mr Kuroda, Rosie's father cannot contain himself anymore:

But suddenly, her father uttered an incredible noise, exactly like the cork of a bottle popping, and the next Rosie knew, he was stalking angrily toward the house ...

... Rosie saw her father enter the house ... Next her father emerged ... something in his arms (it was the picture, she realized), and going over to the bathhouse woodpile, he threw the picture on the ground and picked up the axe. Smashing the picture, glass and all ... he reached over for the kerosene that was used to encourage the bath fire and poured it over the wreckage. I am dreaming, Rosie said to herself, I am dreaming, but her father, having made sure that this *act of cremation* was irrevocable, was even then returning to the fields. [emphasis added] (18)

The prize, a symbol of Mrs Hayashi's passion for *haiku* and, therefore, an embodiment of Ume Hanazono herself, goes through an "act of cremation"

which sanctions Ume Hanazono's death: "The word cremation links object and person: the burning of the art object mirrors the expiring artist" (Cheung 1991: 284). As the narrator announces at the beginning of the story, "... Ume Hanazono's life span, even for a poet's, was very brief — perhaps *three months* at most" [emphasis added] (9). Three months make a season, the time for a plum (Ume) tree to blossom and bear fruit. So, writing *haiku* "one of the few escapes from her demanding life, is denied her" (Yogi 1989: 172).

Mrs Hayashi's reaction is quite astonishing: Rosie observes that, she "was very calm" (18). Her silence has been interpreted variously by literary critics but the most convincing interpretation is given by Cheung (1991: 284): "Her frightening calm reveals the depths of her misery. Though her reaction to her husband's outrage is not told, the incinerated picture speaks for the way rage and despair consume her". Then, Mrs Hayashi turns to her daughter and reveals the reason why she married her father: "The story was told perfectly, with neither groping for words nor untoward passion. It was though her mother had memorized it by heart, reciting it to herself so many times over that its nagging vileness has long since gone" (19).<sup>32</sup> When she was in Japan, at about Rosie's age, she had a lover of a higher social class and became pregnant. When her family discovered it, she was forced to abandon him and have an abortion (the child would be now *seventeen*). Then, she wrote to her sister in America, Aunt Taka, and threatened to kill herself if she would not send for her. Her sister organised a marriage with a young man, "of simple mind ... but of kindly heart" (19), who had just arrived from Japan. So, "Her mother, at nineteen, had come to America and married her father as an alternative to suicide" (18). Rosie's father was not told why "his unseen betrothed was so eager to hasten the day of meeting" (19). It is clear then that to Mrs Hayashi, writing *haiku* represented an escape from grieving over her lost lover and baby, from a loveless marriage, and from the demands of "Necessity".

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<sup>32</sup> At this point, the two plots, the daughter's plot and the mother's plot, come together.

Rosie, foreseeing and, at the same time, rejecting the profound meaning of her mother's story, wishes her mother would not talk about it now:

Don't tell me now, she wanted to say, tell me tomorrow, tell me next week, don't tell me today. But she knew she would be told now, that the telling<sup>33</sup> would combine with the other violence of the hot afternoon to level her life, her world to the very ground. (18)

The surface plot of *SS* deals with Rosie's bittersweet first experience with the adult world, with her sexuality. She has been kissed, for the first time, by Jesus Carrasco (who is probably *seventeen*), the Mexican son of seasonal workers:

When he took hold of her empty hand, she could find no words to protest; her vocabulary had become distressingly constricted and she thought desperately that all that remained intact now was yes and no and oh, and even these few sounds would not easily out. Thus, kissed by Jesus, Rosie fell for the first time entirely victim to a helplessness delectable beyond speech. (14)

So, when her mother, once finished her story, kneels on the floor, takes her by the wrists, and says: "Promise me you will never marry!" (19),<sup>34</sup> Rosie is not sure what to answer. Her mother is passing on her a "legacy of disruption and pain" (Yogi 1989: 170) which does not coincide with her present experience:

*Jesus, Jesus, she called silently*, not certain whether she was invoking the help of the son of the Carrascos or of God, until *there returned sweetly the memory of Jesus' hand*, how it had touched her and where. [emphasis added] (19)

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<sup>33</sup> Cheung (1991: 284) observes that "Her outpouring, like the father's reckless act, deviates from the code of emotional and verbal restraint observed thus far in the story".

<sup>34</sup> Paradoxically, Mrs Hayashi's posture corresponds to that of a marriage proposal (Cheung 1991: 285).



Her mother, however, who has married a man whom she does not love and who has deprived her of her only source of satisfaction and self-expression, does not want her daughter to make her same mistakes:

Still her mother waited for an answer, holding her wrists so tightly ... She tried to pull free. Promise, her mother whispered fiercely, promise. *Yes, yes, I promise, Rosie said.* But for an instant she turned away, and her mother, hearing *the familiar glib agreement*, released her. Oh, you, you, you, her eyes and twisted mouth said, *you fool.* Rosie, covering her face, began at last to cry, and *the embrace and consoling hand came much later than she expected.* [emphasis added] (19)

Rosie's answer to her mother's request, "Yes, yes, I promise", recalls the beginning of the story, when Rosie pretends to understand her mother's *haiku*: "Yes, Yes, I understand. ..." (8). Mrs Hayashi senses that this is "the familiar glib agreement" and so she knows that Rosie's promise is untruthful which is why she considers her a fool and denies her for a while "the embrace and consoling hand".

Interestingly, Yamamoto does not condemn Mr Hayashi for his actions. Far from conveying a single meaning, Yamamoto's stories give expression to opposite perspectives: although the focus is undoubtedly on women, men's silences and sufferings are also denounced. So, the final meaning is complex and ambivalent. If it is true that Mrs Hayashi is a victim, the same can be said for her husband whose actions are dictated by poverty and social background. During an interview with Charles L. Crow (1987: 80), Yamamoto affirmed that Mr Hayashi "was only acting the way he'd been brought up to act, the way men were supposed to be". Moreover, he is a simple man and so his concerns are mainly directed to how to provide for his family in a context of material difficulties. The narrator's words also reveal the husband's distress for his wife's estrangement and his being excluded from her activities. Besides being annoyed with her because of the obvious reversal of gender roles when she discusses

poetry with other men, he may be also rightfully jealous. His final outbreak, then, is not just a tyrannical man's act of oppression over his wife. According to Cheung (1991: 290), it is

mounting masculine anxiety, not habitual insensitivity, [that] sparks violence. The seemingly impassive Mr Hayashi may in fact be plagued by loneliness, inadequacy, and jealousy, though none of these feelings have been openly admitted by the character or noted by the narrator.

Indeed, Mrs Hayashi is not the only one to be denied self-expression: as Cheung (1991: 289) underlines, Mr Hayashi "is governed by a code of masculinity that calls for rigorous self-restraint". So, the experience of loss in Yamamoto's short stories does not only concern women but also men: such complexity results from an accurate portrayal of human reality in all its nuances and ambivalences.<sup>35</sup>

Ambiguity marks the end of the story as well. It is uncertain if Rosie will keep her promise not to marry. According to Elaine H. Kim (cited in Cheng 1991: 102), "there is still a chance that the daughter might come to comprehend the meaning of her mother's experience in time to benefit from it". This comment seems to imply that no matter what man Rosie will marry, marriage will always be an experience of loss and suffering. Yamamoto's story, however, is more likely to suggest that historical and social conditions have a great influence on people's action. Thus, a different man, from a different background and with a more elastic approach to tradition, may be sympathetic towards his wife's needs. Moreover, what makes Mrs Hayashi's marriage so unsatisfying is the fact that she does not love her husband.

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<sup>35</sup> This might be the reason why Yamamoto, unlike Kingston, has not been accused of reinforcing negative stereotypes of Asian American men.

What is certain is that differences between Rosie's and her mother's experience prevent Rosie from endorsing her mother's rejection of marriage.<sup>36</sup> More importantly, she does not comprehend the importance that artistic creation has for her mother and, in this sense, she is not different from her father. Mr Hayashi, a simple man, does not see why an individual should seek personal satisfaction outside family and community life. Above all, Mr Hayashi does not understand how "extravagance" can be stronger than "Necessity". According to Wong (1993: 167), SS "is in many ways a prototypical tale of the Asian American artist". Mrs Hayashi is made to choose between herself and her family, between "extravagance" and "Necessity". In fact, she has no choice: she must renounce self-expression and self-realisation, being a woman artist.

#### "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara"

The character of Miss Mari Sasagawara is based on a real woman whom Yamamoto met during her stay at the relocation camp in Poston. Miss Sasagawara is an artist, a ballet dancer, who has arrived at the camp with her father, a Buddhist minister (her mother died in the camp they come from). The narrator, a Nisei girl named Kiku, describes her splendid appearance:

Even in that unlikely place of wind, sand, and heat, it was easy to imagine Miss Sasagawara a decorative ingredient of some ballet. Her daily costume, brief and fitting closely her trifling waist, generously billowing below, and bringing together arrestingly rich colors like mustard yellow and forest green, appeared to have been cut from a coarse-textured homespun; her shining hair was so long it wound twice about her head to form a coronet; her face was delicate and pale, with a fine nose, pouting bright mouth, and glittering eyes; and her measured walk said, 'Look, I'm *walking!*' as though walking were not a common but a rather special thing to be doing. (20)

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<sup>36</sup> Considering Mrs Hayashi's repudiation of marriage, it is unlikely that her silence in front of the burning picture is "also the silence of complicity, an acknowledgement of partial guilt in her own death" (Cheng 1994: 100).

Miss Sasagawara is clearly not a common woman and her behaviour, besides her appearance, confirms it: she is rarely seen talking to other people, she does not eat in the mess hall, and she uses the shower room only when she is sure of being alone. Moreover, at the age of 39, she is not married and does not regret it: "... she said she wasn't sorry she never got married, because she's had her fun. She said she got to go all over the country a couple of times, dancing in the ballet" (21).

Soon, she becomes the favourite topic of discussion in the camp: "... if Miss Sasagawara was not one to speak to, she was certainly one to speak of, and she came up quite often as topic for the endless conversations which helped along the monotonous days" (22). Kiku also notices that everyone refers to her as "Miss Sasagawara ... although her first name, Mari, was simple enough and rather pretty" (22). Her naïveté does not make her see that using her surname instead of her name is a way to keep the distance from such a bizarre person, an outsider. Yet, in her simplicity, Kiku guesses Miss Sasagawara's sense of loneliness:

Another time Elsie and I passed in front of the Sasagawara apartment ... and we saw her there on the wooden steps, sitting with her wide, wide skirt spread splendidly about her. She was intent on peeling a grapefruit ... and Elise called out, 'Hello there!' Miss Sasagawara looked up and stared, without recognition. We were almost out of earshot when I heard her call, 'Do I know you?' and I could have almost sworn that *she sounded hopeful, if not downright wistful* ... [emphasis added] (22)

Kiku wonders what Miss Sasagawara does when her father prays for so long, also considering that they have to share "a cubicle because the once-empty

barracks had soon been partitioned off into six units for families of two” (22).<sup>37</sup> She asks herself: “... did she participate, did she let it go in one ear and out the other, or did she abruptly go out on the steps, perhaps to eat a grapefruit?” (23-24).

Miss Sasagawara goes twice to the hospital because she thinks she has an appendicitis but after her second visit she is eventually taken to a mental institution. When Kiku asks to an ambulance driver what is the matter with her he, “saying not a word, pointed at his head and made several circles in the air with his first finger” (27). She returns to the camp after several months, apparently changed: “She said hello and how are you as often and easily as the next person” (28). She even holds dancing classes for the younger girls who will exhibit at the Christmas party. Everyone seems to have accepted Miss Sasagawara and she even receives a Christmas gift: “... she was being rewarded for her help with the Block’s younger generation. Everyone clapped and Miss Sasagawara, smiling graciously, opened her package then and there. She held up her gift ... and everyone clapped again” (30). Yet, her “sanity” does not last long and, after two episodes in which she is seen behaving suspiciously (staring at some boys playing and then at other boys sleeping), she is sent again to a mental institution.

There are some clues in the text which indicate that Miss Sasagawara’s “madness” is not so incongruous given her living conditions and that, in fact, it is not her to be mad. First, Kiku admits that she does not know where Elise, the friend who tells her about Miss Sasagawara, has “accumulated all her items [information] ... probably a morsel here and a morsel there, and, anyway, I forgot to ask her sources ...” (20); “... Elsie’s sources were not what I would ordinarily pay much attention to ...” (32).<sup>38</sup> Moreover, life in the camp is much harder than Kiku may sometimes make it seem like: the camp is a “place of

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<sup>37</sup> Although the reference is not explicit, this passage could be read as a hint at the issue of the “room of one’s own” as described by Virginia Woolf.

<sup>38</sup> The very word “Legend”, which is part of the title, refers to a story whose truthfulness cannot be proved.

wind, sand, and heat” (20), a “desert scene” (30), and the days there are monotonous (22). According to Cheung (1991-1992: 116), “the most unbearable feature of camp is the total lack of privacy, though this information is also presented casually—as a matter of fact”. Thus, Miss Sasagawara’s behaviour can be considered as a *normal* reaction to a life of confinement that is the opposite of her previous life. Milton Eisenhower, former War Relocation Authority chief, wrote in a letter to President Roosevelt: “Life in a relocation center cannot possibly be pleasant. The evacuees are surrounded by barbed wire fences under the eyes of armed military police. ... it would be amazing if extreme bitterness did not develop” (cited in Cheung 1991-1992: 116). Yamamoto herself declared that she “didn’t really consider Miss Sasagawara insane, ... I tried to say that if it weren’t for being put in the camp, she might have gone on” (Crow and Yamamoto 1987: 81).<sup>39</sup>

But what makes Miss Sasagawara’s life truly unbearable is revealed by herself in a poem which Kiku discovers some time later on a small poetry magazine:

It was a *tour de force*, erratically brilliant and, through the first readings, tantalizingly obscure. It appeared to be about a man whose lifelong aim had been to achieve Nirvana ... This man had in his way certain handicaps, all stemming from having acquired, when young and unaware, a family for which he must provide. The day came at least, however, when his wife died and other circumstances made it unnecessary for him to earn a competitive living. These circumstances were considered by those about him as *sheer imprisonment*, but he had felt free for the first time in his long life. ...

This man was certainly noble, the poet wrote, this man was beyond censure. The world was doubtless enriched by his presence. But say that someone else, someone sensitive, someone admiring, someone who had not achieved this

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<sup>39</sup> Cheung (1991-1992) considers LMS a political text precisely because, through the figure of Miss Sasagawara, Yamamoto expresses the discrimination and the suffering experienced by Japanese Americans during those years of “dislocation”.

sublime condition and who did not wish to, were somehow called to companion such a man. Was it not likely that the saint, blissfully bent on cleansing from his already radiant soul the last imperceptible blemished ... would be deaf and blind to the human passions rising, subsiding, and again raising, perhaps in anguished silence, within the selfsame room? The poet could not speak for others, of course; she could only speak for herself. But *she would describe this man's devotion as a sort of madness*, the monstrous sort which, pure of itself, might possibly bring troublous, scented scenes to recur in the other's sleep. [emphasis added] (32-33)

Thus, madness concerns more the holy man than his daughter. Interestingly, however, no one in the community considers his behaviour abnormal: Kiku sees him "wandering lostly ... never talking directly to a person, as though, being what he was, he could not stop for an instant his meditation on the higher life" (22). Cheung (1991-1992: 110) observes that

... the *nikkei*<sup>40</sup> community ... judges the father's and the daughter's aloofness differently—evidently on account of gender. Traditionally man has been socialized to pursue individual goals, religious or otherwise; woman, only to socialize. It is not surprising, therefore, that the Reverend's blankness is deemed lofty and religious, while the daughter's similar expression comes across as unfriendly and unhealthy. His attitude is respected; hers, suspected.

Therefore, the community's judgement is cast solely upon the daughter increasing her misery for her mother's death, her confinement in the camp, and her father's total indifference. Yamamoto makes it difficult to decide who is actually mad. As usual in her stories, boundaries are blurred.

What determines the community's final judgement on Miss Sasagawara as mad is her defiance of gender roles. Besides being unmarried, she is an artist. Yamamoto invented Miss Sasagawara's profession as she did not know, at the

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<sup>40</sup> Japanese emigrants and their descendants.

time she wrote the story, that the woman in the camp was precisely a writer, a poetess (Crow and Yamamoto 1987: 80). To a woman, being 39, unmarried, and a flamboyant artist, meant being ostracised by the community. Nobody is ready to see beyond her “madness” as they do with her father, a peculiar but holy man. While her father is justified in his search for spiritual fulfilment, Miss Sasagawara, who does it through art, is not. Not even her father can support her passion and so, just like Mrs Hayashi, she also renounces being a woman artist. Yet, through her poem, she is eventually able to make her own voice heard, to speak for herself. Her poem, “the reporting”, is her revenge.

#### “Yoneko’s Earthquake”

In YE, mother and daughter become infatuated with the same man. However, the reader learns about Mrs Hosoume’s love for Marpo, a 27-year-old Filipino hired by the Hosoumes, only through Yoneko’s infatuation. As Yogi (1989: 174) affirms, “Through Yoneko’s infatuation ... Yamamoto establishes an innocent foil which mirrors the more serious relationship the mother develops with Marpo”. Yoneko is fascinated by this man who can do anything:

What, for instance, could Marpo do? Why, it would take an entire, leisurely evening to go into his accomplishments adequately, because there was not only Marpo the Christian and Marpo the best hired man, but Marpo the athlete, Marpo the musician (both instrumental and vocal), Marpo the artist, and Marpo the radio technician ... (48)

Yoneko’s admiration for Marpo (which reflects her mother’s) is such that she converts to Christianity because of him. Yet, she loses her faith when her prayers to God to stop the earthquake are ignored: “Yoneko Hosoume became a free-thinker on the night of March 10, 1933, only a few months after her first actual recognition of God. Ten years old at the time ...” (46).

Yoneko is not the only one to be shocked by the violence of the earthquake although “Yoneko’s reaction was so notable that the Hosoume



household thereafter spoke of the event as “Yoneko’s earthquake.” (51). Her father, who is driving when the earthquake starts, almost dies by electrocution:

Later it was found that he was left permanently inhibited about driving automobiles ... He spent the larger part of his later life weakly, wandering about the house or fields and laying down frequently to rest because of splitting headaches and sudden dizzy spells.

*So it was Marpo who went back into the house as Yoneko screamed, ‘No, Marpo, no!’ and brought out the Hosoumes’ kerosene stove, the food, the blankets, while Mr Hosoume huddled on the ground near his family. [emphasis added] (50)*

Even though the narrator does not say so, it is possible to deduce that Mr Hosoume has also become impotent. The above passage anticipates the important changes that occur within the family:

*... life returned to normal, except that Mr Hosoume stayed at home most of the time. Sometimes ... he would have supper on the stove when Mrs Hosoume came in from the fields. Mrs Hosoume and Marpo did all the field labor now ... Marpo did most the driving, too, and it was now he and Mrs Hosoume who went into town on the weekly trip for groceries. In fact Marpo became indispensable ... [emphasis added] (51)*

The narrator does not explicitly hint at the secret love relationship between Mrs Hosoume and Marpo but the reader knows that they are both attractive and that Marpo is the best candidate to take Mr Hosoume’s place as he is unable to play his role of husband and head of the family. Later on, the narrator provides a more evident clue: one day, “[Yoneko’s] mother came home breathless from the fields ... and pushed a ring at her ... saying, ‘Look, Yoneko, I’m going to give you this ring. If your father asks where you got it, say you found it on the street.’”

(52). Given the fact that Mrs Hosoume has come from the fields, it is very likely that Marpo has given the ring to her.<sup>41</sup>

So far, if a victim has to be identified, this is not Mrs Hosoume. While Marpo has become “indispensable”, Mr Hosoume is now “useless”. Yogi (1989: 175) notes that “Mr Hosoume is incapacitated to such a degree that Marpo displaces him in almost every respect, and this displacement results in tragedy”. In addition, his daughter has become ill-disposed towards him: “... she found the new arrangement rather inconvenient. Her father’s presence cramped her style ... on some days, she was very much annoyed with her father” (51-52). Therefore, Mr Hosoume feels frustrated both as husband and father. There is another aspect which deeply undermines Mr Hosoume’s sense of manhood: “Mr Hosoume stayed at home most of the time. Sometimes ... he would have supper on the stove when Mrs Hosoume came in from the fields” (51). Essentially, Mr Hosoume has taken on his wife’s role: “For Mr Hosoume to perform domestic duties and for Mrs Hosoume to take on traditionally masculine responsibilities is in itself a major upheaval” (Yogi 1989: 176). Mr Hosoume eventually explodes when, slapping his wife, Marpo comes to Mrs Hosoume’s defence:

‘Mind your own business,’ said Mr Hosoume in broken English. ‘Get out of here!’ Marpo left, ... Mr Hosoume muttered that Marpo was beginning to forget his place. Now that he thought of it, he said, Marpo had been increasingly impudent towards him since his illness. He said just because he was temporarily an invalid was no reason for Marpo to start being disrespectful. (54)

The reason why Mr Hosoume acts violently against his wife is also significant: after calling her “*nama-iki*, which is a shade more revolting than being merely insolent” (53), Mrs Hosoume answers back: “How dare you? I’ll not have anyone calling me *nama-iki*!” (53). Mrs Hosoume’s reaction represents the climax of a

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<sup>41</sup> Yogi (1989: 176) notices that “The ring establishes a complex link between Yoneko and her mother. It not only symbolizes Marpo’s feelings for Mrs Hosoume, it also connects Mrs Hosoume and Yoneko. The ring manifests the feelings they both share for Marpo”.

reversal of roles which Mr Hosoume cannot stand anymore. So, if Mrs Hosoume cannot be considered as a woman artist,<sup>42</sup> she can be nevertheless related to Mrs Hayashi and Miss Sasagawara: they all challenge gender roles and choose “extravagance” over “Necessity” and, therefore, they are punished.

After this episode, Marpo disappears and Mrs Hosoume is taken to the hospital:

[Mr Hosoume] drove very fast and about halfway to the city struck a beautiful collie which had dashed out barking from someone’s yard. The car jerked with the impact, but Mr Hosoume drove right on and Yoneko, wanting suddenly to vomit, looked back and saw the collie lying very still at the side of the road. (54)

This scene is highly symbolical: the killing of the collie is a metaphor for the abortion of the illegitimate child. It also highlights Mr Hosoume’s coldness to what he has just done (the killing of the collie) and to what he is about to do (make his wife have an abortion). Then, Mr Hosoume hires an old Japanese man with none of “Marpo’s various charms” (54). As a final punishment, for this is what Mrs Hosoume believes it is, her son, Seigo, dies. Completely overwhelmed by her sorrow, Mrs Hosoume starts to believe in Christ. During the earthquake, Yoneko loses her faith in God and, simultaneously, his father loses his authority. So, if Yoneko’s loss of faith in God can be read as a symbolical defeat of the male, paternal figure (Izzo 2006: 149), Mrs Hosoume’s conversion can be considered as a submission to the patriarchal order. It is only after Mrs Hosoume’s conversion/submission that her husband can treat her gently again (55), that is, after the reconstitution of the order previously disrupted. Thus, Mrs Hosoume’s words to Yoneko are a request of submission to its rules: “Never kill a person, Yoneko, because if you do, God will take from you someone you love”

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<sup>42</sup> Although she is not a woman artist, Mrs Hosoume is attracted by a man with artistic talent and who embodies “a more colourful and refined world of Extravagance” (Wong 1993: 169) which contrasts with Mr Hosoume’s world of “Necessity”.

(56). Mrs Hosoume is convinced that Seigo's death is God's punishment for killing her illegitimate child, the fruit of her "extravagance". Cheung (1991: 288) compares Mrs Hosoume's speech to Mrs Hayashi's request to her daughter not to marry and considers them as "oblique indictments of the husbands". However, while Mrs Hayashi is asking her daughter to step away from the patriarchal institution of marriage, Mrs Hosoume is warning Yoneko to submit to the patriarchal order after she has experienced the terrible consequences of her stepping outside its rules. Yet, Yoneko does not believe in God which means that she will not accept *his* rules:

'Oh, that,' said Yoneko quickly, 'I don't believe in that, I don't believe in God.' ... She had believed for a moment that her mother was going to ask about the ring (which, alas, she had lost already, somewhere in the flumes along the cantaloupe patch). (56)

The loss of the ring may be read as a metaphor for Yoneko's distance from her mother: "As if confirming that the daughter will not accept her mother's legacy, Yoneko loses the ring her mother gave her, a loss which symbolizes ... a severed link between Yoneko and her mother" (Yogi 1989: 178).

## 3.2 “Songs My Mother Taught Me”

My mother spoke often of returning to Japan, of smelling again the piney woods, tasting the exquisite fruits, of seeing her beloved sisters. The stories of her Japan came on like a flashback in the movies – misty, wavering, ethereal, and her beautiful eyes would grow soft.

Wakako Yamauchi, “Songs My Mother Taught Me”

... the Pacific. My mother said it was hard to believe these same waters broke on the shores of Japan.

Wakako Yamauchi, “Songs My Mother Taught Me”

### 3.2.1 “Shirley Temple, Hotcha-cha”<sup>43</sup>

I’m an American writer. I’m not a white American but I’m writing American stories. ... If you say Asian American they want exotica. They don’t read what happened to us. ... they don’t hear the fact that we never got to own land ... or that we didn’t get waited on. These are stories of people living in America.

Wakako Yamauchi

Wakako Yamauchi was born Wakako Nakamura on 25 October 1924, in Westmorland, California. She was the third child of five and her parents were Issei farmers coming from Shizuoka. She grew up in California’s Imperial Valley and so she experienced both geographical and racial isolation. As a reaction against such isolation, Yamauchi used to invent “white stories”:

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<sup>43</sup> This is the title of one of Yamauchi’s short stories.

When I was a little girl I wanted to be a writer. ... in the country there's nobody to play with, there's nothing to do but read old newspapers and magazines. So you have this dream world you can live in. It became fun to make up stories but they were all white stories I was dreaming. (Yamauchi cited in Uno 1993: 53)

As she explained, Nisei's heroes were white: "... Errol Flynn, Shirley Temple, all the matinee idols. Shirley Temple embodied everything that was American to us. *She was everything we weren't—white, free, wealthy*" [emphasis added] (cited in Uno 1993: 53). Indeed, her family had to move around because of California Alien Land Law.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, however, her mother would strengthen her awareness of her Japanese ancestry: "I never deceived myself to think that I was white. ... my mother never let me. ... People talk about identity crisis. ... my mother let me *know* I was Japanese" (cited in Uno 1993: 54). She then abandoned her white stories as she came to realise that "you can't write a good story without really feeling it or leaving it or knowing every aspect of it" (cited in Uno 1993: 54).

In 1942, she and her family were interned in the relocation camp of Poston, Arizona.<sup>45</sup> It was the same camp where Hisaye Yamamoto was staying and they both became contributors for the camp newspaper, *The Poston Chronicle*. Yamauchi was a painter at the time so she contributed as a layout artist. Yamamoto represented an important influence on Yamauchi: "I thought she was such a terrific writer ... I learned a great deal from her" (cited in Uno 1993: 55). After a year and a half in Poston, she was able to go to Chicago where she worked in a candy factory and started to become interested in theatre. She returned to Poston upon hearing the news of her father's death.

After the war, she moved to San Diego and then to Los Angeles where she roomed with Yamamoto and attended painting classes at the Otis Art Center. In

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<sup>44</sup> The California Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited "aliens ineligible for citizenship" from owning agricultural land. It affected all Asian immigrant farmers in California but, implicitly, the law was primarily directed at the Japanese.

<sup>45</sup> In barrack apartment 12-1-A, the title of a play she would later write.

1948, she married Chester Yamauchi with whom she had a child, Joy, in 1955. It was in the 1950s that she started to write. She attended a screenwriting course with the Writers Guild of America's Open Door Project and, from 1960 until about 1974, she wrote a story per year for the *Rafu Shimpo*. In 1974, Yamamoto asked her to contribute with one of her stories to *Aiiieeee!*, the pioneering anthology of Asian American literature edited by Frank Chin and his colleagues. So, Yamauchi's story "And the Soul Shall Dance" was published in 1974.<sup>46</sup> That same year, Mako, the founding artistic director of the East West Players in Los Angeles, convinced her to turn her story into a play. *And the Soul Shall Dance* won the Los Angeles Drama Critics Circle Award for best new play of 1977 and it was shown on national television on PBS in 1978. Yamauchi's works include *The Music Lessons*, *12-1-A*, *The Mement*, and *The Chairman's Wife*. In 1994, a collection of Yamauchi's plays and stories was published under the title *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Play, and Memoir*. All her work focuses on the Japanese American experience: immigration and farming during the early 20th century, imprisonment in the relocation camps during the Second World War, and readjustment after the war. Yamauchi has received various awards and fellowships, including Rockefeller grants, the Brody Art Fund Fellowship, and the American Theater Critics Regional Award for Outstanding Play.

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<sup>46</sup> It is interesting to notice that even though Yamauchi's stories often deal with Issei women oppressed by patriarchal norms, her work, like Yamamoto's, has been appreciated by male Asian American writers and critics such as Frank Chin and Shawn Wong. Wong (cited in Uno 1993: 56) declared that "her stories knocked me out. They were amazing glimpses of Japanese America before the war ... When we were trying to find the authors who wrote in the generation that came before us we ran across some really bad books, fake books, Chinatown tour guides, ... Wakako's work was a revelation". Probably, cultural nationalists considered Yamamoto's and Yamauchi's work worthy because of their complex representation of men and the realism of their stories, devoid of exoticism or myth.

### 3.2.2 "Less is more and more is less"

"Songs My Mother Taught Me" (1976) is an autobiographical short story, like most of Yamauchi's work. As she herself stated, "you can't write a good story without really feeling it or leaving it or knowing every aspect of it" (cited in Uno 1993: 54). The story is told by adult Sachiko who looks back on her childhood and recounts the events which occurred within her family during a particularly tormented time (from the summer of 1935 to the summer of 1936). Although these events affected the whole family, their actual protagonist is Sachiko's mother, Mrs Hatsue Kato. Like in Yamamoto's short stories, some circumstances are not openly described and remain under the surface. The narrator, as an adult, understands the events in their entirety but she seems to deliberately select her information. Thus, like in "Yoneko's Earthquake", Sachiko does not explicitly say why their hired man, Yamada, leaves abruptly at the end of the harvest (although she does provide some clues). Soon after, the family is given the news that Mrs Kato is pregnant. However, unlike Mr Hosoume, Mr Kato does not impose an abortion on her wife and so the reader may conclude that the child is not illegitimate. If this matter remains obscure, Sachiko explains quite clearly the reasons of her mother's depression while both Rosie and Yoneko are too young to be sympathetic to their mother's sufferings: "*I know now* what she meant: that time was passing her by, that with the new baby she was irrevocably bound to this futile life, that dreams of returning to Japan were shattered ..." [emphasis added] (38). So, the narrator's point of view is only partly limited as she is an adult and has gained an insight into the whole story.

The technique of hidden narratives is also less visible. Episodes which directly concerns Sachiko's childhood, like summer activities or her faith, are presented as intermezzi:

That summer we started north in early July, after we popped off the firecrackers my father had bought for Tets. They loved firecrackers; I can't remember a year



that we didn't have some, no matter how poor we were. Usually, though, they couldn't wait until the fourth, and they'd fire off a few each night, until there was nothing for the fourth. So, on Independence Day we often sat outside and watched the neighbors' fireworks a quarter mile away. Sometimes my mother made iced tea with sugar and lemons while we waited for the dark. That year we had enough to string out until the actual celebration. (33)

That summer there wasn't enough money for a vacation. Sometimes my father would drive us to town and give each of us fifteen cents for the movies: ten cents for admission and a nickel for popcorn. I loved the movies ... (38)

Sunday service was largely a congregation of children and adolescents. Adults were at the fields preparing for Monday's market. Whereas the previous minister geared his sermons to the young, using simple parables and theatrical gestures, Reverend Umino never talked down to us. ... The church people who lives in the city and had the most influence didn't like him, but I didn't care. I only hoped he'd sense my need and put in a special word for me. (38)

Then, there are some digressions concerning farmers' life in Imperial Valley, California:

The land was fertilized with tons of chicken manure and irrigated by the All American Canal that flowed out of the Colorado River. Planting started in late September: tomatoes, squash, cantaloupe. All during the winter months, it was thinning, the seedlings, weeding, building brush covers for them, repairing the covers after a storm, and starting the smudge pots to ward off the frost. In early spring, it was harvesting the crops. By May, after the broiling sun had reduced the plants to dry twigs, the plowing began. Then the land was flooded to start the weeds and fallen seeds growing, after which there was another plowing to destroy these sprouts, and once again fertilizing, furrowing, and preparing the land for late-September planting. (32)

A riceball is to a Japanese what a sandwich is to an American – a portable meal. It's a molded ball of rice sprinkled with sesame seeds and salt, and inside there's usually a red pickled plum. My mother once told me it was the mainstay of Japan's Imperial Army, the symbol of her flag: the red plum with the white rice around it. (39)

So, apart from these few excursions, the rest of the text primarily deals with Mrs Kato's depression. The hidden narrative, then, is not Mrs Kato's experience compared to her daughter's but what is not said about her.

As for her style, Yamauchi affirmed in an interview that her motto is "less is more and more is less":

A very important teacher in my painting life once told me: 'You must make a statement: the sun is warm; the petal is thin; the earth is barren. Do not clutter your painting with too many statements.' He always said less is more and more is less. This works for me in writing too. (Osborn, Watanabe, and Yamauchi 1998: 104)

Yet, in its bareness, her writing is also very poetic. Garrett Hongo (1994: 6-7) defines her style

of emotional intensity and rhetorical control ... She develops a somewhat spare prose, therefore, nonetheless musical, graced with an affection for rendering physical details with precision ... [her prose] is eloquent in understatement, rich in tone and drama, and sometimes operatic in the emotions it describes.

Hongo mentions the precision which characterises Yamauchi's description of physical details and which can be detected in this passage of "Songs My Mother Taught Me":

The baby grew steadily in my mother's belly, distending and misshaping her body. The black hair she wore in a smooth coil at her neck grew crisp and faded.

Broken strands hung from her temples like dry summer grass, and brown splotches appeared on her skin. (36)

As for the description of emotions, Dorothy Ritsuko McDonald and Katherine Newman (1980: 35) notice that the author frequently parallel “emotional and earthly landscapes. There is often a sense of the desert, of open space, and of souls dancing, yearning—but solitary and silent”. Here is an example:

The sound of my hungry father devouring his lunch, gulping his pale yellow tea, the rustle of wind in the cottonwood leaves, the put-put of a car far away – these lonely sounds depressed me so, I wanted to cry. Across the acres of flat land, the view to the house was unbroken. It stood bleached in the sun in awful isolation. (39)

Finally, Hongo (1994: 9) highlights her technique of quoting lyrics and invoking “pentatonic, Oriental melodies from popular prewar Japanese culture and the older folk traditions of Japan, importing a wealth of memories and associated emotions, invoking the past and a separate inheritance of aestheticized melancholy unavailable in literature written exclusively in English”. According to him, her technique comes not only from stylistic roots in contemporary literature but also from the Japanese tradition of *shigin* (narrative balladry) and of folkloric and popular love songs. In “Songs My Mother Taught Me”, Mrs Kato translates for her daughter a Japanese song entitled “*Mujo No Tsuki*” which means “transient moon”:

Today too  
Passes in solitude  
The evening sun is distant  
Beyond the rim of the sea  
Who is it that calls  
Who, that seeks me?  
The seabirds that

Cry from the shore  
(34)

### 3.2.3 "Transient moon"

Mrs Kato, like the women in Yamamoto's short stories, is a woman artist and has a remarkable aesthetic sensitivity. In the evenings, Mrs Kato sits "at the kitchen table writing, nibbling at the stub of a pencil, and looking past the window. ... she played the Victrola, usually the same record over and over: '*Mujo No Tsuki*,' which Sayo<sup>47</sup> said meant transient moon" (34). There is a close resemblance to Mrs Hayashi who "came to life after the dinner dishes were done, ... and stayed busy at the parlor table as late as midnight scribbling with pencil on scratch paper or carefully copying characters on good paper with her fat, pale green Parker" (9). Moreover, like Mrs Hosoume, Mrs Kato is attracted by a younger man, Yamada,

a *Kibei*, a Japanese born in America and reared in Japan. My father had hired him to help us with our good harvest. Yamada-san was different than my father – handsome and younger. ... Yamada-san had eyes that looked at you. When you talked, he committed himself to you. My father's eyes were squinty from the sun, and he hardly saw or heard you.

My father had been dissatisfied with Yamada-san. For a man of few words, I was surprised how strongly he spoke.

...

'You see how he is – plucking at that frivolous mandolin all the time ... The clothes he wears – those two-tone shoes, that downtown haircut, the fancy cigarettes. Like a woman! ...'

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<sup>47</sup> Sayo is a friend of Sachiko's and, most likely, the portrayal of Hisaye Yamamoto: "Sayo was two years older, and wiser, more perceptive, and knowledgeable than I. She wrote poetry and read masses of books and knew all the latest Japanese songs and the meaning of the lyrics" (34).

...

He was not like a woman. He had a quality of the Orient my father did not have. *He was the affirmation of my mother's Japan – the flaunting flutes, the cherry blossoms, the poetry, the fatalism. My mother changed when he was around.* Her smile was softer, her voice more gentle. I suspect this was what my father disliked more than the man himself – the change he brought over the rest of us. [emphasis added] (35)

Yamada's description recalls that of Marpo in "Yoneko's Earthquake" as they are both young, they both help with the harvest, and they both play a musical instrument. Yamada embodies Mrs Kato's Japan which is a land of artistic beauty: "the flaunting flutes, the cherry blossoms, the poetry, the fatalism". Yamada clearly contrasts with Mr Kato who is earthbound and apparently deprived of feelings: "My father's eyes were squinty from the sun, and he hardly saw or heard you". Like Mr Hayashi and Mr Hosoume, he represses his emotions: Sachiko observes that he is "a man of few words", "a quiet man ... he never revealed his dreams for us ..." (32). Sau-ling Cynthia Wong (1993: 169) notices that Mrs Hayashi, Mrs Hosoume, and Mrs Kato are all

unhappily married to men who personify Necessity: hard-working but austere, taciturn, and distracted Issei farmers, whose emotional side has been repressed in the struggle to wrest a living from the land. Both Mrs Hosoume and Mrs Kato are romantically involved with younger men ... who beckon from a more colorful and refined world of Extravagance.

Thus, Yamada represents "extravagance", Mr Kato "Necessity". Mr Kato is annoyed with Yamada because he brings happiness to Mrs Kato, which Mr Kato cannot do. Mrs Kato longs to be back in Japan:

My mother spoke often of returning to Japan, of smelling again the piney woods, tasting the exquisite fruits, of seeing her beloved sisters. The stories of her Japan

came on like a flashback in the movies – misty, wavering, ethereal, and her beautiful eyes would grow soft. (33)

Japan, however, like “the evening sun”, is “beyond the rim of the sea” (34), hence, unattainable. Her sadness is signalled by the repetitive act of continually listening to the same record. Sayo asks Sachiko: “Your mother plays the same record again and again. Why is she so sad?” (24). Like writing and listening to the music, Mrs Kato’s relationship with Yamada is an escape from a world marked by “Necessity” and solitude. Through him, she can reach the beauty of Japan.

Mrs Kato’s “transient” flight into the world of “extravagance” ends with Yamada’s departure and with Mrs Kato’s pregnancy. It is not clear if the child is illegitimate or not but Mrs Kato does give birth to the baby, a baby she did not want. Young Sachiko cannot understand her mother’s rejection of the baby but, having become an adult, she realises what troubled her:

I know *now* what she meant: that time was passing her by, that *with the new baby she was irrevocably bound to this futile life*, that dreams of returning to Japan were shattered, that through the eyes of a younger man she had glimpsed what might have been, could never and would never be. [emphasis added] (38)

The birth of another child, when her “children are all grown” (38), marks Mrs Kato’s return to her role of mother and wife. The negativity of such birth is anticipated by Sachiko who observes the physical changes of her pregnant mother:

The baby grew steadily in my mother’s belly, distending and *misshaping her body*. The black hair she wore in a smooth coil at her neck grew crisp and faded. Broken strands hung from her temples like dry summer grass, and brown splotches appeared on her skin. [emphasis added] (36)

Sachiko, however young, senses that something is wrong with her mother and looks for some kind of support:

I looked for someone to turn to. I chose the highest source. ... I thought if prayer and faith could heal the sickness in our house, I would build a faith matched by no one, and I would pray with every breath I drew. So with limited knowledge of ritual, I prayed to my eastern deity in western methods. The request was always the same: Sweet Buddha, let us be happy again. Let there be six living people in our family [Sachiko, her mother, her father, and her three siblings]. I was afraid something terrible and unmentionable would happen to my mother or the baby. (36-37)

When the baby is born, Mrs Kato's condition does not get better:

The more he cried, the less she liked him; the less she liked him, the more he cried.

She grew despondent from this perpetual drain on her body and her emotions, and slipped farther and farther from us, often staring vacantly into space. Every day I rushed from school to take care of the baby so he wouldn't start my mother's terrible strangled sighs. (37)

Mrs Kato's desperation reaches its highest point when she carelessly leaves the baby alone in the tub of water causing his death by drowning: "The front of my mother's dress was stained with water. 'I left him only a minute, and I found him face down in the water! I've killed him, forgive me, I've killed him!' she wept" (39). Sachiko, who was grateful to Buddha for saving the child, loses her faith.<sup>48</sup> Mrs Kato has involuntarily killed her child but her carelessness toward the baby had its roots in her seeing him as the cause of her suffering, that is, her

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<sup>48</sup> Here is another element of contact with "Yoneko's Earthquake" as Yoneko finds and loses her faith too. The two girls cease to believe in their gods when they realise that either God or Buddha cannot end their suffering.

being stuck in a role she is not able to accept: the role of Asian immigrant mother and wife in America, bound to live in a world of hard work and isolation. As Wong (1993: 174) underlines, “Extravagance is situated in Japan, whereas America is perceived as the land of Necessity”. With a new-born baby, she had lost every hope of returning to her blossoming Japan and, even though it is not openly stated, it is obvious that she had no more time for writing or listening to the music: she was physically and emotionally drained by the baby. No space was left for self-expression, for *herself*. Besides, Yamada, who embodied Japanese beauty, has gone. Like Mrs Hayashi, whose activity as a poet lasts a season, that is, the time for a plum tree to blossom and bear fruit, Mrs Kato’s ephemeral aesthetic life can be compared to the transient moon of her favourite song.



## Conclusion

Jade Snow, Maxine, Mrs Hayashi, Miss Sasagawara, Mrs Hosoume, and Mrs Kato, are all women artists who find meaning in their lives through art. Like the authors of their stories, almost all of them are *wordswomen*: Jade Snow and Maxine become writers, Mrs Hayashi is a *haiku* poet, Miss Sasagawara writes poems besides being a ballet dancer, and Mrs Kato writes too. Of course, differences have emerged.

Jade Snow struggles to achieve individual freedom and self-realisation against her parents' steadfast belief in Chinese tradition which values the individual and women very little. Through hard work and study, she finally reaches her goal and, especially, she understands what she wants to be: an artist. Yet, while she rebels against her father's tradition and principles, her actual satisfaction depends upon her father's approval: she basically remains her father's dutiful daughter and so her rebellion against the patriarchal system is limited. Moreover, Jade Snow sees America as the land of female freedom and China as the land of female slavery: such view is simplistic and conveys a wrong message about female freedom, which is why labelling this work as feminist is misleading.

Maxine, on the contrary, completely rejects what is patriarchal and oppressive for women in her parents' tradition and does not blindly embrace American culture as the opposite of Chinese culture: she is critical toward both as she senses that America can be a prison for women too. Surely, in plastic America, Maxine gets a breath of fresh air while her mother's nightmarish China suffocates her. However, Maxine does not throw away the colour of her mother's talk-stories: she reinterprets them. Maxine's personal reading of traditional Chinese myths offers her positive, powerful female models: women warriors but, especially, women poets like Ts'ai Yen. Maxine herself becomes a writer. Thus,

she transforms Fa Mu Lan, the swordswoman par excellence, into a *wordswoman* as she takes her revenge through “the reporting”, not the sword.

At a formal level, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* and *The Woman Warrior* are very different: the former is written in chronological order with precise references to the outer world while the latter does not follow a chronological line but rather a kinship line and it is a mixture of fact and fiction. Moreover, Wong’s autobiography was written to be read by a white audience, it is a “guided Chinatown tour”, whereas Kingston’s memoir does not belong to this genre. What they have in common is that neither *Fifth Chinese Daughter* nor *The Woman Warrior* are actual autobiographies: Wong writes Jade Snow’s bildungsroman but it is not sure if it is *her own* and Kingston’s work is more correctly a memoir where reality encounters myth.

Similarly, in Yamamoto’s and Yamauchi’s short stories, Issei women experience individual freedom and self-achievement mainly through writing. Unlike Jade Snow and Maxine, however, these women are unable to pursue their artistic activity which is why I compare them to cherry blossoms: their contact with art is very intense but ephemeral. Mrs Hayashi’s pen name is Ume Hanazono which means “Plum Flowergarden”, an omen of the short length of her activity as a *haiku* poet; Miss Sasagawara used to be an artist but she is not anymore; Mrs Hosoume and Mrs Kato have a short love affair with younger men who embody “extravagance”; Mrs Kato’s favourite song is entitled “Transient Moon” which recalls her passing, brief encounter with art. Probably, these Issei women, recently arrived from Japan, are not as detached as second-generation immigrants from tradition. Their aspirations subvert traditional gender roles but they are not ready to complete their rebellion: their daughters might be.

Their story is perhaps the story of many women all over the world who have been prevented from studying, writing, and accessing the public sphere. Yamamoto, for instance, stated that in “Seventeen Syllables”

I’m telling my mother’s story ... but I’m probably telling my own, that women express their creativity under all kinds of circumstances ... Yet it is not just about

Japanese women here. All over the world I think women are kept from doing what they are capable of doing. (Cheung, Yamamoto, and Yamauchi 2000: 348)

Yet, Yamamoto and Yamauchi, who are second-generation immigrants, succeeded in writing. By writing their cherry-blossom-like mothers' stories, Yamamoto and Yamauchi have made their voices heard and lasting. If men, poverty, a hostile society and historical time repressed their voices, their daughters carried out their vengeance through "the reporting".

Not long ago writers were mainly men (at least those who entered the canon and are now considered as classics) but Asian American literature is a successful example of the significant emergence of women writers in the last decades. Despite their "double marginality", that is, their gender and ethnic oppression, these women managed to express themselves in a society where being a woman of Asian origin meant having little choice for the future. These Asian American women writers demonstrate that oppression and marginalisation can be fought through words and they show what art, and specifically, literature can offer: a key to beauty, emotional richness, self-expression, self-achievement, and individual freedom.



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## Appendix

### Ode of Mulan

Anonymous (c. 5 A.D.)

Form: yuefu.<sup>49</sup>

Tsiek tsiek and again tsiek tsiek,  
Mu-lan weaves, facing the door.  
You don't hear the shuttle's sound,  
You only hear Daughter's sighs.  
They ask Daughter who's in her heart,  
They ask Daughter who's on her mind.  
"No one is on Daughter's heart,  
No one is on Daughter's mind.  
Last night I saw the draft posters,  
The Khan is calling many troops,  
The army list is in twelve scrolls,  
On every scroll there's Father's name.  
Father has no grown-up son,  
Mu-lan has no elder brother.  
I want to buy a saddle and horse,  
And serve in the army in Father's place."

In the East Market she buys a spirited horse,  
In the West Market she buys a saddle,  
In the South Market she buys a bridle,

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<sup>49</sup> Chinese poems composed in a folk song style.

In the North Market she buys a long whip.  
At dawn she takes leave of Father and Mother,  
In the evening camps on the Yellow River's bank.  
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,  
She only hears the Yellow River's flowing water cry tsien tsien.

At dawn she takes leave of the Yellow River,  
In the evening she arrives at Black Mountain.  
She doesn't hear the sound of Father and Mother calling,  
She only hears Mount Yen's nomad horses cry tsiu tsiu.  
She goes ten thousand miles on the business of war,  
She crosses passes and mountains like flying.  
Northern gusts carry the rattle of army pots,  
Chilly light shines on iron armor.  
Generals die in a hundred battles,  
Stout soldiers return after ten years.

On her return she sees the Son of Heaven,  
The Son of Heaven sits in the Splendid Hall.  
He gives out promotions in twelve ranks  
And prizes of a hundred thousand and more.  
The Khan asks her what she desires.  
"Mu-lan has no use for a minister's post.  
I wish to ride a swift mount  
To take me back to my home."

When Father and Mother hear Daughter is coming  
They go outside the wall to meet her, leaning on each other.  
When Elder Sister hears Younger Sister is coming  
She fixes her rouge, facing the door.

When Little Brother hears Elder Sister is coming  
He whets the knife, quick quick, for pig and sheep.  
“I open the door to my east chamber,  
I sit on my couch in the west room,  
I take off my wartime gown  
And put on my old-time clothes.”  
Facing the window she fixes her cloudlike hair,  
Hanging up a mirror she dabs on yellow flower powder  
She goes out the door and sees her comrades.  
Her comrades are all amazed and perplexed.  
Traveling together for twelve years  
They didn’t know Mu-lan was a girl.  
“The he-hare’s feet go hop and skip,  
The she-hare’s eyes are muddled and fuddled.  
Two hares running side by side close to the ground,  
How can they tell if I am he or she?”

From: Frankel, Han H. 1976. *The flowering plum and the palace lady: Interpretations of Chinese poetry*. New Haven: Yale University Press.





## Summary in Italian / Riassunto in italiano

Oggetto di questa tesi sono i testi di quattro scrittrici asiaticoamericane, due di discendenza cinese e due di origine giapponese: Jade Snow Wong (San Francisco, 1922-2006) e Maxine Hong Kingston (Stockton, 1940-) da un lato e Hisaye Yamamoto (Redondo Beach, 1921-2011) e Wakako Yamauchi (Westmoreland, 1924-) dall'altro. Sono tutte nate in California e sono tutte figlie di immigrati; Wong e Yamamoto sono morte di recente mentre Kingston e Yamauchi sono ancora vive. Le due autobiografie di Wong (*Fifth Chinese Daughter* e *No Chinese Stranger*) sono considerate classici della letteratura asiaticoamericana ma solo l'opera di Kingston è effettivamente entrata a far parte del canone letterario americano. Sia Yamamoto che Yamauchi hanno registrato l'esperienza nippoamericana nelle loro opere: la prima ha scritto principalmente racconti brevi mentre la seconda è meglio conosciuta come drammaturga. Nella mia tesi ho analizzato e messo a confronto l'autobiografia-romanzo di formazione di Wong *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945), *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) di Kingston, tre racconti di Yamamoto ("Seventeen Syllables", 1949; "The Legend of Miss Sasagawara", 1950; "Yoneko's Earthquake", 1951) presi dalla collezione *Seventeen Syllables and Other Stories* (1988) e un racconto di Yamauchi ("Songs My Mother Taught Me") preso da *Songs My Mother Taught Me: Stories, Plays, and Memoir* (1994). Tutti questi testi illustrano la vita di donne asiaticoamericane e le loro lotte per potersi esprimere e realizzare. Inoltre, sono tutti lavori autobiografici.

*Fifth Chinese Daughter* è un'autobiografia e un romanzo di formazione chiaramente rivolto ai lettori bianchi: il suo obiettivo è quello di dimostrare che i Cinesi erano in grado di integrarsi nella società americana e, allo stesso tempo, quello di decostruire le immagini negative associate ai sinoamericani e quindi accrescere l'interesse per la tradizione e la cultura cinesi. L'autrice ricopre allora il ruolo di guida culturale e accompagna il lettore bianco in un "tour guidato di

Chinatown” (Wong 1992) fornendo informazioni riguardo alle festività e ai piatti tipici. La protagonista, Jade Snow, è la quinta figlia di una famiglia cinese che vive nella Chinatown di San Francisco. Jade Snow lotta per ottenere una propria libertà individuale nonostante i genitori siano fermi sostenitori delle tradizioni cinesi. Essendo in America, è in grado di andare al college, di trovare un lavoro e di ottenere riconoscimento sociale. Alla fine, anche la sua famiglia dà atto delle sue abilità e dei suoi successi.

Analogamente, *The Woman Warrior* narra la storia di Maxine, una ragazzina che diventa una donna indipendente. I critici discordano sul genere di quest’opera che è stata ed è tuttora al centro di un dibattito che ha enormemente influenzato le definizioni di identità, letteratura e critica asiaticoamericane. Nonostante o grazie a ciò, *The Woman Warrior* è forse l’unica opera asiaticoamericana a essere entrata nel canone letterario americano e Kingston è, a quanto si dice, l’autore americano vivente più insegnato. La ragione principale per cui ho scelto quest’opera è che non è soltanto una delle opere asiaticoamericane più discusse e lette ma anche perché può essere fruttuosamente messa a confronto con l’autobiografia di Wong. Infatti, si tratta in entrambi i casi di testi asiaticoamericani scritti da due donne, figlie di immigrati cinesi in America, che condividono le stesse preoccupazioni, in particolare, l’emancipazione delle donne. Tuttavia un’analisi accurata mostra che una delle due eroine non ha colto i lati nascosti e le complicazioni del concetto occidentale di libertà femminile.

Yamamoto e Yamauchi sono state messe a confronto per le stesse ragioni per le quali Wong e Kingston sono state unite in una specie di legame letterario: sono entrambe scrittrici nippoamericane figlie di immigrati e preoccupate della condizione delle donne. Inoltre Yamamoto e Yamauchi diventarono amiche nel campo di concentramento di Poston, Arizona, dove entrambe si misero a lavorare per il giornale *The Poston Chronicle*.

I racconti di Yamamoto che ho analizzato sono tratti da una collezione nella quale vari temi vengono affrontati perciò ho selezionato i racconti che

trattano apertamente del problema della repressione delle donne e del loro desiderio di esprimersi. “Seventeen Syllables” narra le storie parallele di una madre e di una figlia che sono incapaci di capirsi. In particolare, Rosie non riesce a cogliere la profonda sofferenza della madre quando il padre distrugge il simbolo del suo lavoro artistico. “The Legend of Miss Sasagawara” è ambientato in un campo di concentramento: Miss Sasagawara, figlia di un monaco buddhista, è un’artista e si pensa che sia pazza ma alla fine della storia emerge una verità di dolore e repressione. Anche “Yoneko’s Earthquake” segue due trame parallele: quella della madre e quella della figlia, entrambe infatuatesi dello stesso uomo, un lavoratore filippino. Ciò che è interessante è che nelle storie di Yamamoto nulla è completamente bianco o nero: il significato finale non è mai chiaro e univoco. Anche il suo stile e le sue tecniche narrative, come l’uso di trame nascoste (cioè di trame secondarie nascoste sotto la superficie della trama principale e che possono essere ricostruite a partire da questa) e di un punto di vista limitato, sono notevoli.

Nonostante Yamauchi sia meglio conosciuta come drammaturga, ho deciso di esaminare uno dei suoi racconti in modo che il legame con l’opera di Yamamoto fosse più forte. Al centro dei racconti di Yamauchi c’è la tensione tra le aspirazioni di donne nippoamericane di prima generazione e le norme patriarcali della cultura giapponese. Yamauchi descrive queste donne che combattono per realizzare ambizioni che sfidano ruoli di genere tradizionali. Nel racconto “Songs My Mother Taught Me”, la protagonista è una donna nippoamericana di prima generazione che fugge dalla propria esistenza di moglie, madre e lavoratrice e cerca soddisfazione nell’arte.

In tutte queste storie ho individuato un *fil rouge*: le loro protagoniste trovano il modo di esprimersi e realizzarsi attraverso l’arte, specialmente attraverso la scrittura. Di qui il titolo della tesi, *Asian American (S)wordswomen*: la figura della *swordswoman* (spadaccina) compare in *The Woman Warrior*, il suo nome è Fa Mu Lan e la sua arma non è la spada (*sword*) ma la parola (*word*). Anche le autrici di queste storie e le loro protagoniste usano le parole per

combattere contro l'oppressione e il silenzio. Jade Snow, Maxine, Mrs Hayashi, Miss Sasagawara, Mrs Hosoume e Mrs Kato sono tutte artiste che trovano significato nelle loro vite attraverso l'arte. Come le autrici delle loro storie, quasi tutte sono *wordswomen*: Jade Snow e Maxine diventano scrittrici, Mrs Hayashi è una poetessa di *haiku*, Miss Sasagawara scrive poesie oltre a essere una ballerina e anche Mrs Kato scrive. Naturalmente, ci sono delle differenze tra di loro.

Jade Snow lotta per ottenere la propria libertà e realizzarsi nonostante i genitori difendano la tradizione cinese che sviscerisce l'individuo e le donne. Lavorando sodo e studiando, Jade Snow raggiunge il suo obiettivo e, soprattutto, capisce ciò che vuole diventare: un'artista. Tuttavia, pur ribellandosi alla tradizione e ai principi del padre, la sua soddisfazione dipende dall'approvazione di lui: Jade Snow resta la figlia diligente del padre e perciò la sua ribellione nei confronti del sistema patriarcale è limitata. Inoltre Jade Snow vede l'America come la terra della libertà femminile e la Cina come la terra della schiavitù femminile: è stato tuttavia necessario problematizzare e mettere in discussione questo passaggio apparentemente semplice dall'Asia all'America, dalla tradizione al progresso, dal patriarcato alla libertà individuale. Una visione simile, infatti, è semplicistica e trasmette un messaggio sbagliato riguardo alla libertà delle donne. Ecco perché definire quest'opera femminista è fuorviante.

Maxine, al contrario, rifiuta totalmente ciò che c'è di patriarcale e opprimente per le donne nella tradizione dei suoi genitori e non sposa ciecamente la cultura americana: Maxine è critica nei confronti di entrambe le culture poiché si rende conto che anche l'America può essere una prigione per le donne. Certamente, in un'America asettica, Maxine può trovare rifugio dalla Cina da incubo delle storie di sua madre. Tuttavia, Maxine non getta via il colore di queste storie: l'interpretazione personale dei miti tradizionali cinesi offre a Maxine modelli femminili positivi e potenti: donne guerriere ma, soprattutto, poetesse come Ts'ai Yen. Maxine stessa diventa una scrittrice. Quindi Maxine trasforma Fa Mu Lan, la donna guerriera per eccellenza, in una donna che usa le parole anziché la spada per portare a termine la sua vendetta.

A livello formale, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* e *The Woman Warrior* sono molto diversi: il primo è scritto seguendo un ordine cronologico con riferimenti ben precisi al mondo esterno mentre il secondo non segue una linea cronologica ma piuttosto una linea ancestrale ed è un misto di fatti reali e inventati. Inoltre, l'autobiografia di Wong è stata scritta per essere letta dai bianchi, è un "tour guidato di Chinatown", mentre *The Woman Warrior* non appartiene a questo genere. Ciò che hanno in comune è che né *Fifth Chinese Daughter* né *The Woman Warrior* sono vere e proprie autobiografie: Wong scrive il romanzo di formazione di Jade Snow ma non è sicuro che sia il suo e l'opera di Kingston contiene non solo la propria memoria ma anche quella delle sue antenate e in essa la realtà incontra il mito.

Anche nei racconti di Yamamoto e Yamauchi le protagoniste sperimentano libertà individuale e realizzazione di sé principalmente attraverso la scrittura. A differenza di Jade Snow e Maxine, però, queste donne non sono in grado di perseguire la loro attività artistica ed è per questo che le paragono ai fiori di ciliegio: il loro contatto con l'arte è molto intenso ma effimero. Lo pseudonimo di Mrs Hayashi è "Ume Hanazono" che vuol dire "giardino dei fiori di susino", presagio della breve durata della sua attività di poetessa; Miss Sasagawara era un'artista ma non lo è più; Mrs Hosoume e Mrs Kato hanno brevi relazioni amorose con uomini più giovani dalle qualità artistiche; la canzone preferita di Mrs Kato s'intitola "Transient Moon" richiamando il suo breve, passeggero incontro con l'arte. Probabilmente, queste donne, da poco arrivate dal Giappone, non sono così distaccate dalla tradizione come lo sono le seconde generazioni. Le loro aspirazioni sovvertono ruoli di genere tradizionali ma non sono pronte a completare la loro ribellione: le loro figlie potrebbero esserlo.

E infatti, le loro "figlie", Yamamoto, Yamauchi, Wong e Kingston sono riuscite a diventare artiste, scrittrici. Fino a non molto tempo fa gli scrittori erano soprattutto uomini (quantomeno coloro che sono entrati a far parte del canone e sono ora considerati classici) ma la letteratura asiaticoamericana è un esempio vincente dell'aumento significativo delle donne nel campo della

scrittura. Nonostante la loro doppia marginalità, cioè, il loro essere donne asiatiche, Wong, Kingston, Yamamoto e Yamauchi sono riuscite a esprimersi in una società dove essere una donna di origini asiatiche significava non avere grandi possibilità di scelta per il futuro. Queste scrittrici asiaticoamericane dimostrano che l'oppressione e la marginalizzazione possono essere combattute con le parole e mostrano cosa può offrire l'arte, e nello specifico la letteratura, alle persone: una chiave d'accesso alla bellezza, alla ricchezza emotiva, all'espressione e alla realizzazione di sé e alla libertà individuale.