APART AND A PART: CONTRACTING IDENTITY IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S _THE WOMAN WARRIOR_ AND AMY TAN'S _THE JOY LUCK CLUB_

A Thesis

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To my grandmother, Wilma Maude Toothman (M.A. English Literature, Columbia University, 1923) who, at 98, is still my greatest inspiration
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: NAVIGATING "THE SPACE BETWEEN"

"Through the same opening that is her danger, she comes out of herself to go to the other, a traveller in unexplored places; she does not refuse, she approaches, not to do away with the space between, but to see it, to experience what she is not, what she is, what she can be . . . And that is not done without danger, without pain, without loss--of movements of self, of consciousness, of persons one has been, goes beyond, leaves. It doesn't happen without expense--of sense, time, direction."

-- Helene Cixous, "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/ Ways Out/Forays" (106)

What Cixous describes here is a new pattern for the archetypal quest, on female terms. Carol Christ has described the female quest as the seeking of a "wholeness that unites the dualisms of spirit and body, rational and irrational, nature and freedom, spiritual and social, life and death, which have plagued Western consciousness" (8). Cixous, too, questions the Western notion of logic based on polar oppositions; but as her quote above suggests, the female quest is not to determine the correctness or authority of one side over another, but rather to immerse oneself in the gray area between. The triumph of the female quest is not in the conquering, but in the surrendering. An inflammatory idea, perhaps, this notion of women surrendering. But Cixous seems to suggest that surrender to ambiguity is triumph; a woman who rejects both ends of the polar spectrum, instead willingly immersing herself in the more realistic and revealing ambiguity between, shows profound strength, not weakness. It takes little strength to adopt unquestioningly one end of a time-honored, overargued polarity. The real
challenge is to enter a space without boundaries, where one must assume the
to create new terrain, name territory. To do so is not without pain and
sacrifice: one must abandon others along the way as well as false parts of
oneself. But a woman must complete the journey in order to become fully
realized—or, as several of the mothers in Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club phrase
it, to regain one’s chi, one’s spirit.

In Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior (1975) and Tan’s
The Joy Luck Club (1989), we encounter eight women—including five Chinese
American¹ daughters—who are in the process of confronting the “other” that
is a part of themselves: the daughter who “sprang from me like a slippery
fish” (Tan 274), the mother who is “in your bones,” but who one knows
nothing about. As if the process of eradicating and creating new boundaries
between mother and daughter were not difficult enough, the process is
further complicated for these women by other kinds of “otherness”: other
countries, other cultures, other languages, other times. There is even more
territory here to explore, understand, and recreate; but that is precisely the
process all the women go through in the course of both these works. As
Cixous describes it, they must move through the “persons one has been, goes
beyond, leaves.” In The Woman Warrior, the narrator describes the lives of
five influential women—both real and mythic—in her life, in a sense trying on
their lives as her own, before she finally tells us her own story in her own
voice in the final chapter. And in The Joy Luck Club, the mothers must

¹ Kingston prefers this terminology to the hyphenated version: “Lately, I have been thinking
that we ought to leave out the hyphen in ‘Chinese-American,’ because the hyphen gives the
word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has
double citizenship, which is impossible in today’s world. Without the hyphen, ‘Chinese’ is an
adjective and ‘American’ a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American” (“Cultural Mis-
readings by American Reviewers,” 60). This is the terminology I will use throughout.
retrace their own childhoods and their own mothers' lives before they can meet their daughters—who are engaged in the same struggle—at the boundaries between their identities.

In the male quest, the movement is typically forward, through a series of battles and conquests before the self is realized. In women's quests, particularly as they happen in these two works, the movement is initially backward, then forward: in short, the movement is nonlinear, circular, continually connecting the past with the present, sometimes not even making a distinction between the two. And in fact, the distinction is practically unnecessary, because the past and the present become the same, merging in ways similar to the way in which each of these women must merge with the other in order to find herself.

This concept of fluidity has philosophical and psychoanalytic implications for both of these works, hinting at the Eastern philosophy of Taoism as well as at Nancy Chodorow's theory that the female personality is constructed through relationship, rather than autonomously. The fluidity is represented at a formal level in both works as well, as both are constructed of separate chapters that are capable of standing alone. While the parts clearly have more meaning in relation to the whole, they are nevertheless fragmented units. It seems remarkable that two works by Chinese American women writers, both of whose protagonists are struggling to form clearer identities, should be so fragmented. And yet it seems apropos that the form should reflect the disjointed feelings and identities of the characters, who struggle to find the connections between parts of themselves that seem so

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2 As expressed in her 1978 study *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender.*
unrelated: they are part American, part Chinese, part mother’s child and part independent self.

Indeed, the books are similar not only in form but in their themes as well: both reflect the Chinese American daughters’ struggle to carve out a satisfactory identity for themselves in the midst of the chaos of their confused backgrounds, and the mothers’ attempts to understand their “wicked English-speaking daughters” (Lipson 3). Yet to examine these works together solely on the basis of their being written by Chinese American women would be reductive and patronizing, because this would assume that the experience of all Chinese American children is identical. More important even than the similar ethnicity of the writers is the similarity in the themes of both works, as well as the similarity among the symbols. Both The Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club feature mirrors and ghosts as backdrops for important episodes in identity formation, and both have a linguistic subtext that plays with the dubious nature of meaning (particularly between women who do not speak the same native languages) and the paradoxical nature of silence, its ability to be both powerful and pernicious. Both feature women who speak and women who are silent, demonstrating the range of possible consequences for speaking or not speaking.

But perhaps the most important element these works share is that of storytelling, especially storytelling between women. Both The Woman Warrior and The Joy Luck Club present storytelling as the surest path to identity formation. Just as little girls go into their mothers’ closets and try on their clothes in an attempt to imagine what it must be like to be “mommy,” so the Chinese American daughters here must go back into their mothers’
stories in order to discover where they came from and where they are going. They must “try on” the identities of the women around them—particularly their mothers—to see what fits, where they pull or cut. And ultimately, they must tailor these stories for themselves, alter them as needed to fit their own lives, take from them what they need. For the real test that one has settled in the experience of “the space between,” as Cixous put it, is one’s ability to retell the stories. The narrator of The Woman Warrior does it throughout the book, and June Woo, the central figure of The Joy Luck Club, is integrated at the novel’s end when she is finally able to tell her mother’s stories.

To tell one’s own stories and to reinvent those of one’s female ancestors is a commanding act of creation. In a sense, both these works posit the theory that all women—regardless of ethnicity—are “writers,” because all script their own lives even as they are being lived. The silent women in both novels are liberated by language: the No-Name aunt of The Woman Warrior is restored to dignity through her niece’s story, and Brave Orchid finds peace in an American mental institution where all the women speak the same language; in The Joy Luck Club, Rose Hsu Jordan’s life begins when she assumes the “power of her mother’s words.” And the women whose voices are already strong learn to tell new tales, empowered revisions of old myths and tragedies.

Lucille Clifton writes, “this is the tale / i keep on telling / trying to get it right; / the feast of women, / the feeding and / being fed” (35). And so it is in these works: the women feed each other the stories of their lives, hoping that each generation is nourished by the lessons of its predecessors and will have progressively happier tales to feed its own daughters.
CHAPTER II

FINDING FORM IN FORMLESSNESS: AUTOBIOGRAPHY AS QUEST FOR IDENTITY

"Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear . . ." (87)

So claims Maxine Hong Kingston about midway through her highly fictional autobiography The Woman Warrior. The statement rings true for virtually anyone who has undergone the painful process of sorting through the mental suitcase of one's heritage, one's past, to discover what is valuable and necessary and what is burdensome or ill-fitting; for Kingston's narrator, though, the process is complicated by her position as a first generation American, a first-born daughter of Chinese immigrants. Her suitcase, like her mother's medical-school diploma, is permeated by "the smell of China . . . a thousand-year-old bat flying heavy-headed out of the Chinese caverns where bats are as white as dust, a smell that comes from long ago, far back in the brain" (57). For the narrator, almost as much as for any Westerner, the mere thought of China conjures up images of exotic, unfathomable antiquity and "otherness." Yet such "otherness" impinges on the narrator's everyday life, on her identity--she is forced to reconcile with it. And it is this task that Maxine Hong Kingston sets out to complete through the course of The Woman Warrior.

 Appropriately subtitled Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, the work is also an attempt to make real the ghosts, the bats that shape her life, to
bring the East to life in the West. Being an autobiography rather than a work of fiction, this process is never really completed. Early in the book she makes a direct appeal to others similarly situated:

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? (6)

Kingston chose these “peculiarities” carefully, because these are precisely the issues she examines in the course of her work—her childhood, her family, the “many crazy girls and women...within a few blocks of [her] house” (186).

Yet, by the book’s end, these questions are only partially resolved: “I continue to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (205). One critic suggests that The Woman Warrior’s readers tend to infer a greater resolution than really exists at the end out of our own “need to see a search for self completed; we require realization, resolution, wholeness. That need—derived from our own incomplete selves and unfinished processes—explains our interest in autobiographies and perhaps our discomfort with Kingston’s ending” (E. Miller 151). Indeed, the narrator seems to make peace with her past only when she accepts ambiguity and realizes that she will never be completely able to extricate her childhood, movies, imagination, or the village from one another, and that because she is an American, part of China will remain an unknowable mystery, will always retain that musty, unfamiliar bat-scent.
The fact that the narrator never reaches a complete resolution and that this central mystery remains intact evokes the Robert Frost poem, "We dance round in a ring and suppose/ But the Secret sits in the middle and knows" (362). And truly, the form of Kingston’s "memoirs" is that of a continuous, circling dance—one that never reaches the center, but is content not to. The book is not a traditional linear autobiography by any means; as one critic put it, Kingston’s technique is one of "blandly juxtaposing the mythic and mimetic modes" (L. Miller 39). The nonlinear form of the book certainly calls attention to itself and demands analysis. Primarily, the technique seems designed to reproduce the narrator’s experience growing up with a mother who loved to “talk-story”; the narrator herself often did not know where the boundary between truth and fiction lay. In her climactic confrontation with her mother, she says,

I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You 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. (202)

Interestingly, though she resented her mother’s obscurity at the time, she has adopted it as her own technique in The Woman Warrior! Apparently, in the intervening years, she has come to realize the value of such a technique, and to appreciate the “talk-story” gift she inherited from her mother.

Besides imitating her childhood experience, though, Kingston’s technique serves other functions. The form of the book actually replicates the narrator’s own fractured identity. Being Chinese and American and a woman
profoundly complicates the narrator's sense of herself; consequently, she lives her girlhood "among ghosts," as the subtitle tells us. She herself is a ghost, a jumbled composition of half-truths and foreign realities which she strives, both in the book and in her life, to sort and reassemble.

The mythic/mimetic form also punctuates the subtle juxtaposing of Western and Eastern thought in the work. As Blinde points out, Kingston's "resistance to categorical schemes is fundamentally Chinese: the Taoist philosophical tradition that posits the flux between material and dream realities is seen in the dilemma of the Taoist master Chuang Tz'ū" (62). In Chinese philosophy, Blinde asserts, the world is governed by flux—nothing is absolute. Contrast this with the masculine, Western notion of logic, proof, and linear truth. The form Kingston employs here seems to be, on one hand, an attempt to bridge the gulf between these modes of thought by mingling them in order to reach a transcendent understanding of herself and her culture(s). On the other hand, there are places where the form seems to point an ironic finger at Western empiricism; that is, rather than accepting both modes as equally valid, Kingston favors the Eastern mode. As an organic whole, the book validates this idea: the story is told in a non-logocentric, "Oriental" way, which greatly enhances our understanding of the narrator's experience. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how Kingston would have told her story in a linear way, since her chosen form reproduces the narrator's real experience, because the story's fluctuations imitate the fluidity of human thought and experience. The psychic truth and mythic resonance of her story would be gone if told logocentrically, chronologically.
Helene Cixous has wondered "what would become of logocentrism, of the great philosophical systems, of world order in general if the rock upon which they founded their church were to crumble? . . . Then all the stories would have to be told differently" (92-93). Perhaps The Woman Warrior is an example of how stories might be told once freed from the constraints of logocentrism. At any rate, the form of the book itself, because it is controversial and because it refuses a neat genre label, is highly political, radical, revolutionary.

Of course, the main objective in writing the book this way seems to have been to make it as fictive—not obviously "autobiographical"—as possible. Such distancing techniques are often employed in autobiography: Jelinek says that all autobiographers, regardless of gender, "use various means of detachment to protect and distance themselves...in order to deal with their feelings" (13). However, the distance between the narrator of The Woman Warrior and Maxine Hong Kingston herself is far wider than usual. Not only is the narrator's life highly fictionalized, but the narrator is, in fact, never named—either by herself or others. Li says that "one way of reading this fact is to see her as a composite of all the five characters . . . they are her mothers who personify for her the meanings of constructing femininity in various historic times and socio-cultural contexts. . . . Her name is in the making" (503). This seems apt, except that the narrator does finally emerge with a voice of her own in the final chapter, one that is not merely a composite of the other women's voices, but one that, having tried all those voices, has transcended them.
Interestingly, Kingston herself views the narrator as a fictional character separate from herself. In an interview for *biography* magazine, Kingston refers to the protagonist as "the narrator" rather than as "I" or "me": "[A]fter the narrator has sorted out so much of what the mother has told her, her mother...tells the girl." By using referents like "the mother" instead of "my mother" and "the girl" instead of "me," Kingston creates a comforting distance from her childhood self. This techniques also makes her more of an "Everywoman" and allows "others"—not Chinese Americans, not women, not Maxine Hong Kingston—to enter her story and follow the quest.

How radical one thinks *The Woman Warrior* is as an autobiography depends on one's definition of autobiography. For the critics, this definition varies from "that uniquely Western European genre that emerged from the Christian confessional" (Blinde 54) to "a drama in which the autobiographer functions as both the playwright and the principal character" (Bloom 291). One must also examine *Woman Warrior* as an autobiography by a woman and decide how the writer's gender influences the form and themes of the book. Jelinek distinguishes between women's and men's autobiographies, saying that women's tend to focus inward on personal issues, family and friends, rather than outward, establishing the relationship between the writer and his society. This keeps with Chodorow's theory that women's identities tend to form through relation to others. Jelinek posits that men's autobiographies tend to describe their experiences "in heroic or exceptional terms: alienation, initiation, manhood, apotheosis, transformation, guilt, identity crises, and symbolic journeys" (5). Yet these are exactly the terms Kingston uses in her autobiography. Thus, *The Woman Warrior* seems also
to subvert the notion of what women’s autobiography should be, casting a female life in “male” terms and thus demonstrating that women’s lives can be equally as symbolic as men’s. Carol Christ believes that the female quest is quite different than the male quest; however, Kingston’s book does not fit neatly into her definitions either. Distinguishing between spiritual quest and social quest, Christ says that “women’s spiritual quest concerns a woman’s awakening to the depths of her soul and her position in the universe” (a definition that seems unnecessarily vague), while “women’s social quest concerns women’s struggle to gain respect, equality, and freedom in society” (8). What Christ fails to acknowledge is that the female quest contains elements similar to the male quest (the “alienation, initiation, (wo)manhood, apotheosis, transformation, guilt, identity crises, and symbolic journeys”); the difference is that women follow different, less straight paths to the same stages. Thus, *The Woman Warrior* is not a female autobiography in male disguise, but rather a new model for the female quest.

An autobiography is, literally, life as text; in the case of *The Woman Warrior*, it is woman’s life as text. How infinitely empowering for women to turn their lives into texts, to be able—as Kingston does—to re-vision and rewrite parts of their lives; to fictionalize events when they like, if fictionalizing makes the experiences more meaningful or coherent. Kingston’s autobiography not only fulfills the French feminists’ idea of “woman as text” figuratively, but literally in the “White Tigers” chapter, when the woman warrior’s parents carve words of revenge and family onto her back. The scene is a pivotal one in the book, one that unites its themes of language, revenge, and selfhood; for these reasons, it merits close attention:
My mother put a pillow on the floor before the ancestors. ‘Kneel here,’ she said. ‘Now take off your shirt.’ . . . my mother washed my back as if I had left for only a day and were her baby yet. ‘We are going to carve revenge on your back,’ my father said. ‘We’ll write out oaths and names.’

‘Wherever you go, whatever happens to you people will know our sacrifice,’ my mother said. ‘And you’ll never forget either.’ She meant that if I ever got killed, the people could use my dead body for a weapon, but we do not talk out loud about dying.

My father first brushed the words in ink, and they fluttered down my back row after row. Then he began cutting; to make fine lines and points he used thin blades, for the stems, large blades.

My mother caught the blood and wiped the cuts with a cold towel soaked in wine. It hurt terribly—the cuts sharp; the air burning; the alcohol cold, then hot—the pain so various.

. . . At the end of the last word, I fell forward. Together my parents sang what they had written . . . (34-35)

In this way, the woman warrior’s parents inscribe her with her heritage and her destiny, much as Kingston’s mother “carved” talk-stories into her soul, inscribing her with Chinese-ness. Significantly, the words are on the warrior’s back, so she cannot read them without a mirror, and then they are backwards, so she must recode the letters to determine the meaning. So too with the words of the narrator’s “inscriptions.” Not being native Chinese--
not knowing all the nuances of the language, not experiencing the culture—she cannot decode the inscriptions. Just as the warrior's inscriptions are literally behind her, the narrator's inscriptions are figuratively "behind" her. They come from China, a place her parents left behind, but which stands behind her, pushing and directing. To decipher the inscriptions, the narrator too needs a mirror; and perhaps the woman warrior is the mirror, the self-reflection of what stands behind her. Through the medium of this woman-warrior mirror, Kingston begins to understand her mother's talk-stories and make them her own.

The woman warrior is not the only mirror in the autobiography, though; each chapter features a different woman, another mirror, through which the narrator sees and reads herself, her family, and her heritage. In the first chapter, this mirror is the "No Name Woman," the aunt who drowned herself in the family well after giving birth to an illegitimate daughter. In the third chapter, the mirror is her mother; in the fourth, her Chinese aunt who goes mad; and in the last, she finally looks in the mirror to see herself—first as a child, then as an adult, and then as another legendary figure, the ancient poetess Ts'ai Yen, who sang Chinese songs among her captor barbarians.

Psychoanalytic critic Elise Miller notes the narrator's conspicuous silence through the first four chapters, and offers this explanation for Kingston's fragmented technique:

I have argued that the progression of Kingston's chapters represents successive stages of infant development. With each chapter, Kingston moves from rebirth to symbiosis to omnipotence, and in 'Shaman,' to the ambivalent swings
between merging and differentiation. But with every step forward, Kingston also regresses, gaining ground only to lose it in nostalgic gestures toward earlier, simpler states of being. . . . hence her conflict between oral fixations and mature perceptions. This pattern persists in the last two chapters, where Kingston continues to vacillate between poignant yearnings for symbiosis and clear celebrations of autonomy. (146)

Though Miller's reading seems a bit stretched-to-fit, her observation that the narrator swings from autonomy to dependence is apt. Throughout the work, the narrator merges with and separates from the mirror-women she encounters. And Miller's theory fits especially well with the book's final image, that of Ts'ai Yen, ancient poetess whose story, the narrator tells us, is both her mother's and her own. The final woman is neither "symbiotic" or "autonomous," as Miller seems to wish she would be; rather, she is both simultaneously, which seems the more realistic state of female identity.

In the course of this "mirror quest," the narrator unpacks the underwear from the "jam-packed suitcase" she inherited from her parents, throws some of it out, then refolds and repacks it to her liking—an odd metaphor for psychological separation from and reintegration with mother, family, heritage, and childhood—which is what occurs in the book. First the narrator must separate and individuate from her mother, her heritage, and both Chinese and American standards of womanhood; and that being accomplished, she must then rewrite and revise those standards, developing satisfactory new definitions of what it means to be both woman and Chinese American.
Women Without Voices: The Weak Mirrors

The primary quest in The Woman Warrior is the quest for a voice. The narrator—Kingston—is seeking her voice as a Chinese American, as a woman, and as a writer. The quest for all three of these identities is represented in the narrator’s very literal struggle to speak throughout the book. Kingston’s description of her “voice problem” is devastatingly painful. She tells us that

When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent. A dumbness—a shame—still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say ‘hello’ casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length. ‘What did you say?’ says the cab driver, or ‘Speak up,’ so I have to perform again, only weaker the second time. A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up that day’s courage. It spoils my day with self-disgust when I hear my broken voice come skittering out into the open. (165)

Notably, many of her descriptions of her voice carry adjectives like “broken,” “splintered,” “crippled”—all words that imply a lack of wholeness. Indeed, the narrator’s voice is not whole because she is not sure where it is coming from, or where it is supposed to come from. Should it be “strong and bossy” (172) like native Chinese women’s? Or should it be the “American-feminine”
voice? Her battle to negotiate the cultural and psychic territory between China and America takes place in her voice itself: "The immigrants I know have very loud voices, unmodulated to American tones . . . speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine. Chinese communication was very loud, public. Only sick people had to whisper" (11).

This early comment foreshadows the event in the last chapter when, after torturing a classmate who also cannot speak, the narrator comes down with a "mysterious illness" that leaves her bedridden for a year and a half. Her battle to find her voice ultimately does render her a "sick person." And though she mentions her voice problem in earlier parts of the book, she does not tell the full story about it until the final chapter. In fact, the narrator is at best a peripheral character in all four preceding chapters, only appearing occasionally, usually as an adult rather than a child. In one notable instance, Moon Orchid calls her name, "an American name that sounded like 'ink' in Chinese. 'Ink!' Moon Orchid called out, and sure enough, a girl smeared with ink said, 'Yes?"' (131). This is really the only time in the book the narrator gives us a glimpse of herself as a child, and even so, being smeared with ink, she seems to step into the narrative from the wings, where she is writing the story even as we are reading it. Kingston must gather strength through the telling of other women's stories in the first four chapters before she has the voice to tell her own story in the last. Strictly speaking, this final chapter is where the "auto"-biography really begins; but Kingston's technique shows us that her voice--both as a child and as an adult--is a combined product of those of the women who have preceded her.
There are several implied sources of her voice trouble, all of which stem from the conflict between the demands of two cultures whose vocal customs and taboos are nearly opposite, thus rendering the Chinese American, especially the female Chinese American, frustrated, confused, and speechless. One of the sources is the fact that in Chinese, the ideograph for the female “I” also means “slave”; the terms are interchangeable: “There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is ‘slave.’ Break the women with their own tongues!” (47). To say “I” is a powerful rebellion against the sexist notions of women as “maggots in the rice” (43). The narrator herself says that she “could not understand I’” (166). Like Virginia Woolf in A Room of One’s Own, Kingston sees “I” as male territory, albeit territory that women need to invade, appropriate, and inhabit for themselves. In her work, Woolf recalls sitting down to read a male novelist’s new work and,

[A]fter reading a chapter or two, a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I.’ ...One began to be tired of ‘I.’ ...[I]n the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist. Is that a tree? No, it is a woman. ...[W]hy was I bored? Partly because of the dominance of the letter ‘I’ and the aridity, like the giant beech tree, it casts within its shade. Nothing will grow there. (103-4)
The shadow of the “I” lies across the narrator’s life as well, preventing speech: “I stared at that middle line and waited so long for its black center to resolve into tight strokes and dots that I forgot to pronounce it” (167). Not until the final chapter does she get up the nerve to use “I,” to tell her own story.
But the fear of "I" is not strictly a "female" problem. Chinese of both sexes rarely refer to themselves in the first person, but rather in the third person, thus reinforcing the cultural prioritizing of family rather than the individual. Li illustrates the almost unfathomable contrast between the Chinese "I" and the American "I," saying, "The Chinese have . . . the Confucian stress on the communal worth of self . . . . Contrarily, however, we have in the American cultural heritage the Emersonian divinity in man and the Whitmanian celebration of the absolute individual that eventuate in the 'I' being bigger than anything else" (504). To speak the American "I" is bold, defiant; thus it is no wonder the child narrator did not speak. To do so would be to violate cultural and family norms, abandon family and heritage for a ghostly culture she is not sure she wants to accept.

Another reason for the narrator's voice problem is her family's sometimes indecipherable speech rules--the book is littered with instances of family members telling one another, "Don't tell. Don't tell." To speak is to betray. "The Chinese say 'a ready tongue is an evil'" (164), the narrator tells us, as a way of explaining why her mother supposedly cut her tongue when she was a baby. But when she asks her mother about it, she gets a different explanation:

"Why did you do that to me, mother?"

'I told you.'

'Tell me again.'

'I 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. Your frenum looked too tight to
do those things, so I cut it.'

'But isn't 'a ready tongue an evil'?'

'Things are different in this ghost country.' (164)

This exchange aptly demonstrates the confusion of messages—one _not_ to
speak, and the other _to_ speak—and to speak all things in all languages. This
ambiguity, this shadow, is another factor in the narrator’s voice problem, for,
as we hear over and over throughout the book, “Chinese like to say the
opposite”; yet, as Brave Orchid points out, speech is different in this ghost
country. People are expected to speak; those who don’t are “nothings,”
“plants.” “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality” (180), the narrator
tells us; for to speak means to assert one’s individuality. To not have a voice
is to not be a person.

The narrator, deeply frustrated by these rules, takes her anger at herself
out on another voiceless Chinese girl, who is the book’s most obvious mirror
for the narrator. Like Maxine, she has trouble speaking; but her affliction is
more severe: she cannot, and does not speak at all, not even in Chinese
school, when most of the voiceless Chinese children find the freedom not
only to speak, but to shout and laugh. The girl’s situation makes the narrator
feel powerful, calms her voice. On the afternoon she decides to force the girl
to speak, she says her voice is “steady and normal, as it is when talking to the
familiar, the weak, and the small” (175). Finally, Maxine can be the barbarian,
and the other girl the ghost; she can force her to adapt. Yet all the things she
despises about the ghost-girl are the things she despises about herself: “I
hated fragility. . . . I hated her weak neck . . . I wanted a stout neck” (176).
The narrator proceeds to brutalize the silent girl, pinching her cheek and pulling her hair, demanding that she talk. In an all-telling moment, she says that “If she had had little bound feet, the toes twisted under the balls, I would have jumped up and landed on them--crunch!--stomped on them with my iron shoes” (178), thus demonstrating that the confrontation is not merely with this one silent girl, but with a whole culture, a culture which demands that women be voiceless. The hatred she expresses toward the silent girl is moreover a hatred of herself--her own silence--and a hatred of the sexism she is continually fed at home.

Significantly, the girl never does speak; she cries, producing “sobs, chokes, noises that were almost words” (178); yet the narrator’s threats fail to produce words. Instead, they make her cry, too, and force her to confront what she perceives to be the ultimate consequences of voicelessness: “Don’t you ever want to be a cheerleader? Or a pompon girl? . . . You’re not the type that gets dates, let alone gets married. Nobody’s going to notice you. You’re so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?” (180-1). Here, at the end of her attack, the narrator seems to realize that this violence has really been directed at herself. And significantly, she says, “Don’t you dare tell anyone I’ve been bad to you. Talk. Please talk” (181)--repeating and reinforcing the cultural norm against speech, and also sending out the same “speak/don’t speak” mixed message that she has learned from her family.

The section is a brutal one, powerful because in this speech act, the narrator betrays herself. “Telling” on her No-Name aunt becomes an insignificant violation in comparison; here she is telling on herself, offering herself up for judgment. Yet just as the telling made her ghost aunt human,
so does this telling make the ghost narrator human. It is an exorcism of the 
ghosts that have strangled her voice throughout her childhood. But the 
exorcism exhausts her, leaves her powerless; for as the narrator tells us, "The 
world is sometimes just, and I spent the next eighteen months in bed with a 
mysterious illness" (181-2).

The timing of her illness is significant: she is just about to enter junior 
high school, a time when children begin to become adults, begin to break 
away from their families and become independent human beings. Wang 
notes this, calling the period "a pause from external activities [that] reveals an 
inner unity; the loss of contact with the outer world is like a baptism, an 
immersion into the harmony of the spiritual realm, the space between the 
old and the new selves" (29). While the pause does not seem to have 
spiritual implications, it certainly has psychological ones. Wang correctly 
oberves that the illness marks a transition from an old self to a new one; 
however, the illness seem to function more as a desired obstacle between the 
security of childhood and the more adult-like autonomy of adolescence. The 
ilness allows the narrator to stay in her latent, voiceless stage a while longer. 
Interestingly, the narrator says it "was the best year and a half of my life. 
Nothing happened" (183). It is as if the confrontation with this "other"—who 
is herself—has left her desiring a return to infancy, a time before conscious 
knowing.

The narrator's "voice problem" may have been partially resolved 
through this confrontation and subsequent illness, but it never really goes 
away, as the references to her present life indicate. It is no wonder, then, that 
the "weak" women with whom the narrator identifies with in the book are
those with no voices: the silent classmate; the “No-Name” aunt whose silence about her illegitimate pregnancy not only led to her death, but also leads Kingston, years later, to “devote pages of paper to her,” surmising what the real story might have been; and Moon Orchid, the narrator’s living aunt who is effectively rendered “dead” in America by knowing no English.

In the first chapter, one senses that Kingston feels it is her responsibility as a writer to invent a story for the “No-Name” aunt who was silenced in her own lifetime, and who has been silenced for eternity by her mother’s interdiction that “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you” (3). To tell her aunt’s story, and to elaborate on it, signifies an act of tremendous rebellion: against her family, against her culture, against her word. It is a powerful breaking of silence, a transformational one, and one that suggests that more silence-breaking, more empowering “talk-story” is to come.

In this aunt, the narrator finds embodied all that she cannot swallow about her heritage, namely, its tremendous repression. “No one talked sex, ever,” she says (7). Silence equals respect for one’s ancestors and one’s heritage. There is a price, though: “The work of preservation demands that the feelings playing about in one’s guts not be turned into action” (8); and the narrator knows that this repression of feeling and experience that killed her aunt threatens to “kill” her voice, too. Thus she begins the book with a violation--a violation that restores her aunt’s voice and strengthens her own.

Though she suspects that her aunt was raped, being a dutiful woman who “always did as she was told” (6), Kingston quickly drops this storyline because it is too depressing: “I want her fear to have lasted just as long as rape lasted so the fear could have been contained. . . . The fear did not stop but
permeated everywhere. She told the man, 'I think I'm pregnant.' He organized the raid against her" (7). Thus, Kingston the writer steps in to construct an alternate story, one with which she can identify, because "unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help" (8). She prefers to think that her aunt, like herself, was a rebel, a "wild woman," perhaps, who chose to fall in love with the man who impregnated her, whom Kingston hopes "wasn't just a tits-and-ass man" (9). In carrying on this illicit affair, a clear violation of cultural norms, her aunt "used a secret voice" (11). So not only did her aunt have a voice, despite her "ghost" status, it was a secret one, and therefore all the more powerful and radical. Thus, Kingston manages to turn the ostracized aunt into a heroine and a role model rather than a classic female victim. The suicide is her aunt's final act of rebellion. In China, where emphasis is firmly rooted in the family and not the individual, suicide is regarded as a supremely selfish act, an intolerable assertion of individuality. And just as her aunt's rebelliousness created an unforgettable identity out of silence and namelessness, so too does the narrator set out to create/write her own identity out of the noisy silence of her childhood.

A female Stephen Dedalus, perhaps, "forge[ing] in the smithy of [her] soul the uncreated conscience of [her] race"? Despite her direct appeal to her kinspeople ("Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese . . ."), Kingston's goal seems far more personal. By retelling her aunt's story--as she retells her mother's story of the woman warrior, writing herself into the title role--the narrator pioneers the murky territory between her hazy past and her incomprehensible present, trying to make some transcendent sense of both.
Kingston also “rewrites” the story of her aunt Moon Orchid’s coming to live in America—her pseudo-comical confrontation with her husband, the Los Angeles brain surgeon who has remarried and wants nothing to do with her, and her subsequent breakdown and institutionalization. Moon Orchid speaks no English, and it is this inability to communicate that seems to drive her mad, ultimately killing her. Interestingly, the narrator explores the language barrier between Moon Orchid and her American-born nieces and nephews from both Moon Orchid’s perspective and the children’s, a technique that clearly delineates the huge gap—linguistic, cultural, and emotional—between China and America. Moon Orchid is as baffled by the children as they are by her; they seem to live in parallel universes, existing simultaneously but not together, not experiencing things the same way. The children sit at the dinner table and speak English and they are not violating the Chinese rule against talking during meals—"the children spoke English, which their parents didn’t seem to hear" (123). In a similar way, the aunt follows the children around the house “narrating” their every move as if the children were characters in some strange science fiction movie:

Now she is taking a machine off the shelf. She attaches two metal spiders to it. She plugs in the cord. She cracks an egg against the rim and pours the yolk and white out of the shell into the bowl. She presses a button, and the spiders spin the eggs . . . (140)

Moon Orchid calls the children “barbarians,” “savages,” “furry animals,” “cat-headed birds,” “Indians”—they have been raised “in the wilderness...away from civilization” (133-4). Her complete and utter inability
to adapt to America, speak the language, renders her completely powerless there, and she knows this: when her sister, Brave Orchid, tells her it is time to confront her estranged husband, she puts her off as long as possible, knowing that literally and figuratively, she has nothing to say to the man. And indeed, when he finally appears, demanding to know why she has come, all she can do is “open and shut her mouth without any words coming out” (152). The myth that her sister created for her, and which she never really believed anyway—that she, being first wife, Empress of the East, could appear and reclaim her primary power, dethrone the Empress of the West and restore proper order—crumbles around her. She is lost: “Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts” (153). Her husband confirms this when he says, “You became people in a book I had read a long time ago” (154).

Reduced to ghost status, Moon Orchid quickly goes mad; only a week later, Brave Orchid receives a letter from her niece telling her that Moon Orchid has become paranoid, convinced that Mexicans were planning to kill her. Her madness is brought on by silence. Because she cannot use her voice in America, it turns in on her: she hears voice in her head instead. Brave Orchid brings her back to live with them, but it is of no use; her madness progresses.

Interestingly, it is through stories that Brave Orchid finally realizes and accepts the fact that her sister is lost: “The difference between mad people and sane people . . . is that sane people have variety when they talk story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (159). Gripped and
tortured by the strange language of this new world, Moon Orchid has latched onto the one story that can explain her painful victimization here. Unfortunately, the story she invents offers her no comfort and she must be institutionalized to provide her that comfort. Curiously, though, in the safety of the mental hospital—where "no one ever leaves. Isn't that wonderful?" (160)—Moon Orchid finds a common language with the other inmates. She tells her sister, "We understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them" (160). Madness somehow creates a common language, or renders spoken language obsolete, inadequate. In a way, this ending to Moon Orchid's story is, while sad, not tragic or devastating, because one has the sense that in her madness she has transcended language, overcome America's largest obstacle and found a way to survive and be happy in this ghost land. Kingston the writer redeems her aunt by making her voicelessness an asset, a defiant refusal to learn savage, ghostly American words and ways. By so doing, she makes this apparently weak woman strong, turning her into another rebel, like the No-Name aunt.

However, Kingston does not tell us that the story she presents may not be the one that actually happened until the following chapter. At that point, she says, "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" (163). The contrast between this kind of throwaway admission and her frank confession that she created No-Name's story is a measure of how the narrator's confidence as a storyteller has increased through the book; she no longer feels the need to tell
her readers that she has stretched or altered the truth--instead, she recognizes the truth of her fictions, realizes that while her version of Moon Orchid's story may be more complicated than her brother's first hand account, the story she chooses to tell is still valid, and perhaps even better than the true one. For immediately after her "confession," the narrator explains:

    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 knotmaker. (163)

    Just as the book begins with a violation of the taboo against speech, so it ends here in the final chapter. Only now the sense of guilt and family betrayal is gone. It seems that in the course of the writing, she has come to understand why "Chinese...like to say the opposite" (203), why her mother told her stories in which she couldn't tell "what's real and what you make up" (202); she has seen the power in that kind of subversiveness, the power in the indecipherable twists of those knotted stories, and has appropriated those skills for her own writing. Thus, at the book's end, Kingston has found a way--through writing--to chart and explore the territory between her two cultural identities. Her Chinese sense of storytelling makes it possible for her to rebel both against China and America, and in so doing, to create an identity that is both Chinese and American, and yet neither, simultaneously. Rather than feeling like a victimized "orphan"--trapped between two worlds and belonging to neither--she has found such non-belonging liberating, creative.
Because she has two sets of values, philosophies, and traditions to work with, she has twice as much artistic material to create with—to bend, twist, discard, and combine as she pleases, without the constraints of a culturally imposed set of expectations for her art. She alone is creator of the stories and of the expectations for those stories.

Shaman, Swashbuckler, Singer of Songs: The “Strong Mirrors”

On the other end of the spectrum are the powerful, “voiced” women that the narrator wants to emulate. The first of these is the woman warrior herself, Fa Mu Lan, the book’s unifying female figure. She is introduced in the “White Tigers” chapter as the penultimate goal of womanhood: “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). The narrator’s mother filled her head with so many swordswoman stories that “I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep” (19).

Yet she forgets the stories until, as an adult she hears the song of Fa Mu Lan again, and the myth repossesses her soul with a new power: “I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind” (20). Kingston implies here that the myth has the power to remind the narrator of the intrinsic power that can be hers, if only she reclaims the woman warrior within herself. Saying “I would have to grow up a woman warrior,” Kingston begins to use the conditional tense to imagine how this myth might begin, how she might write herself
into the woman warrior. And just as her mother’s bedtime talk-stories merged indistinguishably into dreams, so too does Kingston drop the conditional tense and begin using the present tense: “When I looked for the village, it would have vanished under the clouds. . . . The door opened, and an old man and an old woman came out” (20-21, emphasis mine). Thus the story is no longer a story, but reality.

This is what Alicia Ostriker calls revisionist mythmaking: the act of “employ[ing] a figure or story previously accepted and defined by a culture” and then appropriating that figure or story “for altered ends, the old vessel filled with new wine, initially satisfying the thirst of the individual poet but ultimately making cultural change possible” (317). It is a subversive, radical act which Ostriker likens to Prometheus’ stealing fire; but here, women writers are instead stealing language. This is precisely what Kingston does by writing herself into the Fa Mu Lan legend. Suddenly, this is not just a myth, it is her myth. And all the enlightenment, truth, and transcendent power that myth traditionally carries is no longer “public,” cultural property, but is her property alone. Or, as Ostriker puts it, she “deconstructs a prior ‘myth’ or ‘story’ and constructs a new one which includes, instead of excluding, herself” (316). Li, referring to Ostriker’s work, says Kingston’s revisioned Fa Mu Lan myth functions to “create a rebel whose fight for justice is also a process of affirming her identity” (506).

In the course of the Fa Mu Lan myth, the narrator imagines herself learning the “tiger” ways and the “dragon ways” of fighting, and she goes on a vision quest in which she discovers a “small crack in the mystery . . . opened . . . by hunger,” in which she watches “the centuries pass in moments, because
suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star” (27). During the years she spends in training with the old couple, she learns “how to survive bare-handed” (24), and how “to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so there is room for paradoxes” (29). This is perhaps the most valuable skill she learns in her training, not only for the narrator as Fa Mu Lan, but for the narrator as Maxine Hong Kingston. For the revisioned myth “opens the crack in the mystery” to reveal to her how alike she and the woman warrior are—though separated by time and space—and how, by appropriating the woman warrior’s cultural status and strength, she can revision her Chinese-female identity.

But Fa Mu Lan is a “paradoxical” heroine, because in order to become the woman warrior on earth, she must assume the identity of a man: “I put on my men’s clothes and armor and tied my hair in a man’s fashion. ‘How beautiful you look,’ the people said” (36). Even her soldiers do not know she is a woman, because “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). Although she becomes pregnant and gives birth during her crusade, she does it all clandestinely, hiding her pregnancy, and then the baby itself, under a larger suit of armor. Furthermore, she gives birth to a son, not a daughter, and after she saves her village, she returns to kneel at her in-laws’ feet, offering herself as the perfect, dutiful daughter, wife, and mother, and promising to bear more sons.

Cheung examines the problematic nature of the Fa Mu Lan myth and ultimately rejects it as a model:
While the warrior legend opens Maxine to an unconventional way of asserting herself--both fighting and writing being traditionally male occupations--it still sanctions patriarchal values. As with the female writer who must assume a male pseudonym to be taken seriously, the woman warrior can exercise her power only when she is disguised as a man; regaining her true identity she must once more be subservient, kowtowing to her parents-in-law and resuming her son-bearing function. (166)

This is not to say that the myth portrays femaleness as inherently weak; in fact, there are several instances when womanliness is shown as powerful. For example, when she first menstruates, she says she “bled and thought about the people to be killed; [she] bled and thought about the people to be born” (33), thus tying herself powerfully and for all time into the life cycle of the universe, realizing herself as a part of all times (just as she learned on the vision quest). Too, she refers to “the iron smell of blood” (34), thus endowing the supposedly “weak” substance with powerful, almost weapon-like strength. And when she gives birth, she and her husband celebrate it as though they had achieved a stunning military victory, flying the child’s umbilical cord with a red flag from the camp’s flagpole. However, the birth of her child distracts her into following and picking wildflowers in the woods, where she is ambushed and robbed of her magic beads—the implication being that motherhood disempowers women.

As if to counter the reader’s disappointment with this turn of events, Kingston turns Fa Mu Lan’s pivotal confrontation with the evil robber-baron
into a personal battle against cultural sexism: When she tells him, "I am a female avenger," he laughs and reminds her that "girls are maggots in the rice." And just before she slices his head off, she rips off her shirt to reveal her breasts and her "textualized" back, which "startle[s]" him. In this sense, the myth seems to celebrate the surprise of a powerful woman, implying that women are perhaps more powerful because they are not expected to be. But there is something unnerving about this fact, too.

Despite the success of this ultimate confrontation, though, it does not seem to be a victory for the village or for Chinese womanhood. As she is citing the robber-baron’s numerous crimes to him, the last—and presumably the worst—is that he "took away [her] childhood" (43). It is as though the woman warrior resents the knowledge and strength she has acquired through her training—as though she wishes she could have lived as a normal Chinese female. And the ultimate reward for her victory is that she gets to return to her village to do exactly that. In the end, the myth—even as the narrator has revisioned it for herself—is dissatisfying; it does not speak to Kingston’s particular predicament. As the narrator herself tells us, it "wraps double binds around my feet," telling her, paradoxically, that while she can be a woman warrior, she must also, and ultimately, be wife or slave. Finally, she realizes that the power of the myth is in its telling, in the words themselves:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading,
not the gutting, but the words. (53)

As Cixous observes in “Castration or Decapitation,” the female equivalent of male castration anxiety is decapitation—losing one’s head, one’s ability to think, to speak, to report, to tell. In revisioning both the woman warrior myth and No-Name aunt’s story, the narrator restores heads, voices, and power back to voiceless women—including herself as a voiceless child.

Though the revisioning of the woman warrior myth is the most powerful such instance in the book, it is by no means the only one. The entire book, really, is an act of revisioning; in this sense, autobiography could be redefined as the revisioning of one’s own life and the myths of one’s own life. Kingston not only revises the Fa Mu Lan myth to include herself, but she does the same with her No-Name aunt, whose story she must retell so that her life will “branch into mine” (8). The narrator also does this with the story of Moon Orchid’s fateful trip to Los Angeles, which, as noted before, was told to her by her sister, who was told by her brother, who was not even present when the crucial events occurred.

A further instance of revisioning is the narrator’s telling of her mother’s life story in the “Shaman” chapter. Significantly, this directly follows the “White Tigers” chapter, as if, having found the revisioning of her mother’s stories dissatisfying, she will instead revision her mother’s life. Miller astutely notes that the mother’s story is the “central chapter” of Kingston’s book (143), thus implying that her mother occupies a central place in the narrator’s identity as well. However, the narrator gives us a fictionalized account of how she imagines her mother’s life to have been, constructed more from the narrator’s own desires than from her mother’s
actual accounts of the way things happened. This is her mother’s story told through modern, Western eyes: for example, her mother would probably not describe herself and her classmates at the To Keung School of Midwifery “new women, scientists who changed the rituals” (75). The vision is also a skeptical one, tainted by Western insistence on reason and proof. One senses that the narrator wants to believe that there was a Sitting Ghost that her mother exorcised from her school dormitory, but the ghost is a part of China, not America. As her mother tells her, “You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America” (77). Stripped of their cultural context, her mother’s achievements have no meaning, just as the narrator’s American achievements—straight A’s—have no meaning to her mother. But simply telling her mother’s story is somehow a legitimization of her achievements. Furthermore, the narrator chooses to call her a “shaman”—not only a healer, but a visionary.

What is this extrasensory “seeing” power with which she endows her mother? In one sense, her mother, like Tiresias, is a “blind seer”—not being part of American culture, she is “blind” to it, yet can see right through it, analyze and name it far better than anyone enmeshed in it. In another sense, she is the narrator’s “medium” to another world, a past life: China. Her mother’s life begins to bridge the gulf between that world and this one. The narrator recognizes that her mother was and is an extraordinary woman, both in China and in the United States: she was a doctor, a slaveowner, an exorcist, and a healer; she raised two Chinese children while her husband was establishing himself in America, and after these children died, she went on to medical school in Canton; and once in America, she gave birth to and raised
five children after the age of forty-five. The narrator also recognizes how lucky her mother was to have the opportunity to study at the Midwifery School, to have an education and a career: "Not many women got to live out the daydream of women--to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself" (61). Clearly Kingston is referring here to Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own, and in so doing, she not only ennobles her mother, but casts her in a literary light, since Woolf’s premise was that women who wished to write fiction required rooms of their own. This characterization is apt, because her mother’s most extraordinary gift is her gift of storytelling, her gift of language. Her “powers” are those of a writer; she is able to exorcise the dormitory’s Sitting Ghost through words, is able to bring “lost” people back (Moon Orchid), and possess that supremely important female power to name: “She was good at naming--Wall Ghost, Frog Spirit . . . Eating Partner” (65).

These are precisely the gifts that her daughter has inherited, and it is through the course of revisioning her mother’s story that the narrator comes to recognize this, to see how her mother’s life and hers do actually branch together. Though her mother may not understand her daughter’s desire to write, it seems to be enough that the daughter--the narrator--realizes that the distance between her mother and herself is not that great, and that it is bridged by their shared gift of storytelling.

Interestingly, both mother and daughter use their verbal gifts most effectively to exorcise ghosts--the mother literally and the daughter figuratively. Awaiting the Sitting Ghost in the haunted room, she reads her textbook aloud, “the ideographs lifted their feet, stretched out their wings, and
flew like blackbirds," and she does not know "whether her voice would evoke [the ghost] or disperse it" (68). Her fear increases when she realizes that everyone in the dorm is asleep, a fact she notes because there is no talking, the "conversations had ceased." Without words in the air, reality is suspended; "the souls [of her classmates] had gone traveling." And in this wordless world, the ghost becomes all-powerful.

Her first attempt to rid the ghost through violence is futile; as she reaches for a knife to stab it, the ghost, "as if feeding on her very thoughts, ...spread[s] itself over her arm" (69). It is only through language that she is able to defeat it, telling it, "Yes, people have lived to tell about you. You kill babies, you cowards. You have no power over a strong woman" (70). In fact, the next night she rounds up a whole posse of strong women and together they chant the ghost away, dispel it through language:

'I told you, ghost,' my mother chanted, 'that we would come after you.' 'We told you, ghost, that we would come after you,' sang the women. 'Daylight has come yellow and red,' sang my mother, 'and we are winning. Run, Ghost, run from this school. Only good medical people belong here. Go back, dark creature, to your native country. Go home. Go home. Go home.' 'Go home,' sang the women. (75)

While "telling" and naming have the power to make something not real—to destroy—telling and naming also have the power to make real and to create. Before Brave Orchid goes to confront the ghost, she tells her classmates, "If I am very afraid when you find me, don't forget to tweak my ears. Call my name and tell me how to get home." She told them her
personal name” (68). This personal name assumes the power of a mantra, a mystical key or tool that can restore and relocate one’s soul. Brave Orchid tries this technique on Moon Orchid when she begins losing her sanity, too; but in America it doesn’t work—the words don’t translate. “Brave Orchid tweaked her sister’s ears for hours, chanting her new address for her, telling her how much she loved her. . . . [But] Moon Orchid had misplaced herself, her spirit . . scattered all over the world. . . . I’ll help your spirit find the place to come back to. I’ll call it for you” (156-57). Of course, it does not work, as Moon Orchid ends up in the state mental hospital. In America, the “cure” seems pathetic, simple, just as so many American habits and ways of thinking seem simple and incomprehensible to Brave Orchid. The stories do not translate properly; in the cultural gap, the significance and power is completely wasted. Yet by merely telling her mother’s story, the narrator restores its credibility and attempts to reconstruct some of its power. And where Americans fall short of understanding, the narrator tries to draw analogies between her mother’s “Chinese” gifts and her “American” gifts in a seeming attempt to contextualize the “foreign” stories and revision the myths.

So not only is Kingston revising classical myths like that of Fa Mu Lan, she is simultaneously revising and creating new myths from her own life that will “branch into” her own life. Why? Ostriker notes that since 1960, much of women’s poetry has been an attempt to make sense of the fragmented nature of their lives, which is precisely what Kingston is doing by telling and revising these stories that both compose and fragment her being. Yet Ostriker also notes that the ultimate purpose of such revisioning is not to reunify the fragments, but instead to appreciate their disparity, to embrace the
space between them. Many revisioned myths, she says, “challenge the
validity of the ‘I’” and invite women to discover that “she is a ‘we’”; the
heroines of revisionist mythology “are more often fluid than solid” (331).
Chodorow supports this, saying that the female “experience of self contains
more flexible or permeable ego boundaries” (169). And through its very form,
The Woman Warrior demonstrates this fluidity and permeability. It is,
technically, “autobiography”; yet four-fifths of the text is devoted to telling
other women’s stories. The narrator’s own childhood is not revealed until
the final chapter, and even then, she is revealed only in relation to a double.
Despite her seeming lack of centrality, the narrator remains the locus of the
story; in fact, by the end we feel we know her better for knowing the other
women in her life. Unlike male autobiography, where the “I” dominates,
“casting shadows across the page,” there are many central figures in The
Woman Warrior that both compose and challenge the “I.”

Which brings us to the book’s penultimate “strong” mirror, the poetess
Ts’ai Yen, whose story ends this autobiography. If the narrator’s quest
throughout this “auto”biography has been to negotiate the territory between
herself and her mother in an attempt to better understand and validate
herself as a woman and as a writer, Ts’ai Yen is the pioneer of that territory,
the link between the narrator and her mother, the narrator and China, and
the narrator and her storytelling gift. She, not the woman warrior of the
“White Tigers” chapter, emerges as the unifying figure in the book, for her
story is far more satisfying. The woman warrior ultimately, and willingly,
submitted to the culturally prescribed gender norms for women. All her
years of training and her military skill resulted in the same end—she became a
dutiful daughter, wife, and mother. But Ts'ai Yen, with her more subtle (and therefore subversive) power of song, is the true victor. While the woman warrior finally learned the “language” (expectations) of her “captors” (her village), Ts'ai Yen refuses. Instead, one night,

... the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians. (209)

The barbarians come to understand her language by recognizing the emotions rather than the words. And indeed, this is what Kingston has done in the course of The Woman Warrior: she has learned the language of the “barbarians” (who, in her case, are both the Chinese and the Americans) and has translated the emotions, if not the words, of the experience of being both Chinese and American, native and barbarian.

Ts'ai Yen’s story unites all the women in the book through the common link of storytelling: they are all storytellers, some more successful than others. The No-Name Woman dies without having her significant story told, leaving it to be retold in an act of cultural violation by a niece who has never even seen China. Moon Orchid’s stories attempt to make sense of a barbaric culture, but only drive her mad. Brave Orchid’s stories attempt to teach and translate, but lose their credibility and their power in “solid
America” (5). Finally, it is up to the narrator, the author, to revision all these stories, to recognize them as facets of her own being, and to recontextualize them for herself: to carve them onto her own back, even though she, being Chinese American, has “so many words, ‘chink’ and ‘gook’ words too—that they do not fit on my skin” (53).

In so doing, she builds a bridge: not one that unites her with her mother, for, as Ostriker noted, in revisionist mythology the “I” is often a “we.” Instead of becoming one with her mother at the end, the narrator instead internalizes her, allows her to become a part—but certainly not the whole—of her being, as she does with each of the book’s other mirror-women. She uses the Ts’ai Yen story itself as an eloquent metaphor for this internalization: “‘Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine’” (206). After years of speaking in broken voices across a divide as wide as the Pacific, they are able to tell the same story, each in her own barbaric voice; two voices distinguished by language and experience, joined by emotion, response, song.
CHAPTER III
MULTIPLE GHOSTS AND MIRRORS: FRACTURED IDENTITIES IN 
THE JOY LUCK CLUB

This is how a daughter honors her mother. It is shou so deep it is in your bones. The pain of the flesh is nothing. The pain you must forget. Because sometimes that is the way to remember what is in your bones. You must peel off your skin, and that of your mother, and her mother before her. Until there is nothing. No scar, no skin, no flesh. (41)

An-mei Hsu, one of the immigrant mothers of Amy Tan’s The Joy Luck Club, ends her childhood story with this prescription for self-discovery, implying that in order to understand herself, a woman must go far beyond the boundaries of her own life, submerging herself in the lives of her maternal ancestors, women whose lives form a set of “stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way” (241). Only after such submersion is complete can a woman resurface as an independent self. This is the theme that shaped Kingston’s The Woman Warrior as well; in that work, the narrator had to identify with and tell the stories of the many women who influenced her life—her No-Name aunt, her mother, the mad aunt Moon Orchid, her silent classmate—before finally, in the last chapter of the book, she finds and uses a voice of her own. So it is in The Joy Luck Club as well. Yet Tan’s work complicates and fragments the theme by having not one narrator, but eight—four daughters, three mothers, and one dead mother who never speaks but whose ghostly presence dominates the novel. In fact, Suyuan Woo’s death seems the catalyst for all the book’s stories: tales of the
difficulties of being Chinese, Chinese American, a woman, a mother, a
daughter, and all the possible combinations of the above.

The “problem” to be resolved in the course of the novel is revealed in
the first chapter when Suyuan’s daughter June is told by the other mothers of
the Joy Luck Club (a mah-jongg club her mother started when she
immigrated to San Francisco nearly forty years before) that they have located
the twin daughters Suyuan was forced to leave behind when the Japanese
invaded China. Though June has heard the “story” of the daughters before,
she tells us that she “never thought my mother’s Kweilin story was anything
but a Chinese fairy tale” (12) that her mother repeated over and over. The
repetition made the story easy to ignore, and one that makes her mother not
American-normal, since, as the narrator’s mother in The Woman Warrior
tells her, “Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over”
(Kingston 159). The story has come back to haunt June, though, because the
mothers have arranged to pay for her flight to China to meet these half-sisters
she never believed really existed. The story has, as June says, grown “darker,
casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine” (7).

June’s mission on the trip, the other mothers tell her, is to do no less
than to bring her mother back to life for the daughters who never knew her.
The tell June that she can achieve the resurrection by telling her mother’s
stories, a task June finds impossible:

‘You must see your sisters and tell them about your mother’s
death,’ says Auntie Ying. ‘But most important, you must tell
them about her life. The mother they did not know, they must
now know.’
‘See my sisters, tell them about my mother,’ I say, nodding.
‘What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother.’
The aunties are looking at me as if I had become crazy right before their eyes.

‘Not know your own mother?’ cries Auntie An-mei with disbelief. ‘How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!’

‘Tell them stories of your family here. . . ’ offers Auntie Lin.

‘Tell them stories she told you . . . ’

I hear more choruses of ‘Tell them, tell them’ as each auntie frantically tries to think what should be passed on. (31)

This exchange succinctly incorporates the novel’s many themes. the overarching one being that of the function of storytelling, specifically the function of storytelling within the mother-daughter matrix. In general, storytelling or folklore functions to entertain, validate culture, educate, and/or maintains conformity to accepted patterns of behavior.’ The storytelling that goes on between the mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club fulfills all these functions at various moments, but also goes beyond them. Within the mother-daughter matrix, the storytelling takes on more interpersonal and emotional functions. At different times, the stories represent acts of rescuing, nurturing, self-assertion, and punishment as the daughters struggle to establish identities apart from their mothers, and as the

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1 This is a rather reductive summary of the functions that William R. Bascom elucidates in the article “Four Functions of Folklore,” which appears in Alan Dundes’ text The Study of Folklore. Bascom himself notes that such labeling is fairly arbitrary: “I have intentionally oversimplified the varied functions of folklore in order to stress certain important ones . . . . The four functions I have discussed could be classified differently” (297). My expansion on these functions is in no way a rejection of the truth of Bascom’s observations.
mothers struggle to show their daughters the value of their Chinese heritage and the hardships that have made them into women who deserve respect and attention from their often ignorant American daughters. In this way, storytelling becomes the crucial link between mothers and daughters, the ways they come to know each other, to see where their lives connect and where they separate.

As lovely as all this might sound, though, the task is not so easy; as the daughters’ childhood stories demonstrate, the daughters energetically reject their Chinese heritage and find their mothers to be embarrassing and burdensome, as do children of any culture. Of course, the possibility for understanding is further reduced by the language barrier, for as June tells us, “I talked to [my mother] in English, She answered back in Chinese” (23), “we translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less that what was said, while my mother heard more” (27). And the language barrier is minute compared to the larger cultural barrier: what is spoken can at least be translated, however badly; but much of what the mothers brought to the United States goes unspoken and cannot be spoken--what it means to be Chinese, to grow up in a country where marriages were arranged at age two, where a man could have five wives, where suicide and ghosthood are the only forms of female power. The reader feels this gap when forced to adjust to the sharp contrast between the section on the mothers’ childhoods--filled with the exotic, mystical elements one might expect--and the section on the daughters’ childhoods, filled with mundane American images that seem newly exposed and awkward. As the reviewer for The New York Times noted,
While we as readers grope to know whose mother or grandmother is getting married in an unfamiliar ceremony . . . we are ironically being reminded not just of the nightmarishness of being a woman in traditional China, but of the enormity of the confusing mental journey Chinese emigrants had to make. And, most ironic, we are also reminded by these literary disjunctions that it is precisely this mental chasm that members of the younger generation must now recross in reverse in order to resolve themselves as whole Chinese-Americans. (28)

A lot of words to say that the jarring contrasts between the mothers’ and daughters’ sections of the novel show us (in fact, make us feel) the incredible distance these women must cross to understand each other and themselves. The storytelling is the method of bridging this gap, as well as the method by which the daughters come to recognize themselves as separate, independent beings.

But before such resolution can occur, the daughters must overcome their resistance to identifying with their mothers. As June’s response to her aunts’ request indicates, it is precisely because her mother is in her bones that June does not know her; to “know” someone requires some objectivity, which it is difficult for a daughter to have about her mother. After all, the process of individuation almost requires a refusal to see the mother’s identity objectively, or even to see it at all: to do so might reaffirm a daughter’s fear that she is not separate from her mother, or might force her to confront unpleasant similarities between herself and her mother. As the poet Lynn
Sukenick said, "matriphobia" is not the fear of one’s mother, but the fear of \textit{becoming} one’s mother.\footnote{Adrienne Rich points this out in her work \textit{Of Woman Born}. Rich further expands Sukenick’s definition by saying that "the mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr. Our personalities seem dangerously to blur and overlap with our mothers’; and, in a desperate attempt to know where mother ends and daughter begins, we perform radical surgery" (Rich 194).} But as June seems to realize in this first chapter, by so distancing her own identity from her mother’s, she has failed to ever know her mother. And because her mother is dead, she cannot go back and work out those boundaries with her, as the other daughters in the book do. It is a task she must complete alone.

Just as significant as June’s claim that she cannot tell her mother’s stories because she never knew her is the aunties’ reaction to this confession. Half in horror and half in self-recognition, the aunties respond in disbelief, yet also with the painful realization that their daughters probably know as little, if not less, than June knows about Suyuan. Suddenly the width and depth of the gap between China and America, mother and daughter is fully revealed to them:

‘Imagine, a daughter not knowing her own mother!’

And then it occurs to me. They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. . . . They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation. (31)

While June’s admission disturbs the aunties, it may not surprise them. For June recalls that it was her mother who first pointed out to her how very little she knew about her: “A friend once told me that my mother and I were alike . . . When I shyly told my mother this, she seemed insulted and said,
'You don’t even know little percent of me! How can you be me?” And she’s right” (15). A similar scene occurs in a later chapter when Waverly says crab is not a Chinese food and her mother responds, “How do you know what is Chinese, what is not Chinese?” (228). Clearly the mothers feel territorial about their identities as well; the mothers are as guarded about their identities as are the daughters. This phenomenon occurs in The Woman Warrior as well, where the narrator tells us that native Chinese in America “must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways--always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable” (5). The mothers try to keep China as much an enigma for their children as the United States is enigmatic for them. But Suyuan’s death has signaled a need to expose the enigma and traverse the gap, to collapse the artificial boundaries both mother and daughter have created. The aunties ask June to do what her mother told her she could not do: “be me.” But June seems to know that to complete her grieving process, she must indeed find her mother and, in a sense, “become” her.

This is a conclusion that psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow would agree with; in her definitive work The Reproduction of Mothering, she explains that because women, unlike men, never come to see the mother as “opposite” or “other,” they never fully individuate from her. Men come to identify with the father and completely separate their identification from the mother; but for women, Chodorow explains, the task of individuation is not nearly so easy or clear:

Mothers tend to experience their daughters as more like, and continuous with, themselves. Correspondingly, girls tend to
remain part of the dyadic primary mother-daughter relationship itself... From the retention of preoedipal attachments to their mother, growing girls come to define and experience themselves as continuous with others; their experience of self contains more flexible or permeable ego boundaries. (166-69)

It is the discovery of the permeability of the boundaries between mother and daughter that gives *The Joy Luck Club* its sense of resolution and wholeness at the end.

Thus June becomes the great hope for all the mothers, the one who will restore the schism between all the mothers and daughters. Too, June’s admission here that she did not know her mother seems to be the catalyst for all the other stories: She has created a tremendous anxiety among the mothers, an urge to tell their daughters their stories before it is too late. And though we never get to see the daughters’ reactions to Suyuan’s death, one senses that they, too have been affected by it, have come to the realization that their mothers will not be around forever and thus they should do what they can to cross the boundaries they have created between their lives and their mothers’. So although we never hear Suyuan’s voice, she is nevertheless a presence throughout the novel, the figure that motivates all the stories.

Through telling their own stories, the daughters come to see how, in carving out uniquely American lives apart from their mothers, they have failed to recognize and affirm certain parts of themselves, thus beginning to reconnect with their mothers. And by telling their stories, remembering the hardships they have endured and the wisdom thus gained, the mothers rediscover their selves as well, the ones they lost in the murky attachments
of motherhood. The reader watches each woman’s “self” develop just as the mothers and daughters watch themselves and each others’ selves develop, as through a camera whose image slowly comes into focus. But by the novel’s end, the device of the camera is no longer necessary: each woman perceives the other as a reflection, a mirror.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston gives us a very literal example of “woman-as-text” in the myth of Fa Mu Lan, whose parents carve their names and oaths on her back. And figuratively, in *The Joy Luck Club*, Tan gives us four more Fa Mu Lans, daughters whose mothers have carved secret messages into their lives. And because, like Fa Mu Lan, those words are at their backs, the daughters must look behind them, in a mirror, to read them. Too, the words in the mirror are backwards, opposite, continuing the whole notion of “saying the opposite” that began in *The Woman Warrior*. The daughters must reinterpret their mothers’ meaning. This looking back, reflecting, and reinterpreting characterizes the movement of the entire novel; both mothers’ and daughters’ stories move fluidly through past and present, reintegrating and relating events to discover new meanings.

Why four mother-daughter pairs rather than just one? Presumably the novel could have just told the story of June and Suyuan Woo, since their stories are pivotal to the novel. But Tan seems intent on presenting a range of experiences. Perhaps she felt that presenting one story might imply that what she was presenting represented the experience of all Chinese American daughters. In an article written in response to critics of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston discusses her disdain for those who questioned whether her story was “typical” of Chinese Americans. She biting retorts, “I have
never before read a critic who took a look at a Jewish American spouse and said, 'There’s something wrong with that Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer. They aren’t at all like the one I’m married to.' Critics do not ask whether Vonnegut is typical of German Americans” (63). Perhaps Tan created a variety of characters both to show us the range of experiences and the universality of American childhood: most of the daughters’ stories present situations, emotions, and problems common to American children whose parents are not Chinese, as well.

The fragmented narration is--in addition to being simply "postmodern"--a reflection of the larger issues of the text. Each of these women is fragmented: part Chinese, part American, mother and daughter, separate and connected. Unfortunately, the fragmentation does become problematic. As the New York Times reviewer implies above, readers of The Joy Luck Club are hard-pressed to keep track of who's who in this novel. One remembers the stories, but not the women’s names, which may or may not have been Tan’s deliberate effect. Some of the characters are not well developed and thus become lost in the novel.3 However, most of the characters the reviewers consider undeveloped are not so much undeveloped as they are powerless. In a book with this many stories, it is easier to remember the stories that come from the outspoken women (Lindo and Waverly Jong and An-mei Hsu, for example) than the stories from the quieter, “weaker” women in the book (Ying-yIng St. Clair and Rose Hsu Jordan, for example). Yet the “voiceless” women’s stories are just as

3 The Nation reviewer, novelist Valerie Miner, points specifically to Ying-yIng St. Clair and Rose Hsu Jordan as characters in need of development. While I agree that Tan does not show us much of Rose’s life—her childhood story focuses more on her mother’s experience than her own—I find Ying-yIng one of the novel’s most marvelous characters.
victorious as those of the women who shout. They are ghosts who must learn to speak in order to become real.

**Ghost Women: An-mei and Rose Hsu, Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair**

Popular American folk belief tells us that ghosts have no reflection: even if they take a physical form, they will not show up on film or in a mirror. So it is with the ghost women in *The Joy Luck Club*: their capacity for reflecting is diminished by the fact that they have either lost or not yet found their own *chi* or spirit. The spiritlessness of the mothers' lives has permeated their daughters' lives; as the story unfolds, we discover that Rose Hsu Jordan is in the process of divorce and Lena St. Clair's marriage seems doomed to end. Both mothers realize that they must go back through the sadness of their earlier lives and reclaim the selves that they lost or gave up in their misery, because only by reclaiming their own selves will they be able to help their daughters find the selves they never had. As Ying-ying says, 

... this is what I will do. I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear ... I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter's tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. (286)

Both mothers' and daughters' childhood stories are about loss, expressing the way loss tends to rob children of innocence, drive them into silence. Among these weaker, ghost women, silence has a pernicious rather than a powerful effect. It constructs walls not only between the woman and her life, but between the woman and her *self*. In her childhood story, "Scar,"
An-mei recalls being told that her mother is a ghost, which she defines as “anything we were forbidden to talk about” (33). Her mother, like the No-Name aunt/ghost of *The Woman Warrior*, has brought shame to the family through sexual rebellion, probably the most “selfish desire” a woman can express. In the case of An-mei’s mother, she has done so by becoming the third concubine of a wealthy man after her husband’s death. And, just as the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* was told to never speak of her aunt, An-mei is told to “never say her name . . . To say her name is to spit on your father’s grave” (34). The taboo against speaking of her mother becomes a taboo against speaking of herself, since, at this young age, she is still very much connected with her ghost mother. So An-mei learns the “Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, to eat my own bitterness” (241). To ensure that the taboo against speaking is obeyed, An-mei is told that there is a ghost who takes little children away, “especially strong-willed little girls who were disobedient” (33); she is terrified into utter silence and the prohibition against female speaking is again reinforced.

When her mother reappears, An-mei is terrified; and significantly, it is her mother’s *voice* that confused [her]” (37, emphasis mine). Certainly if ghosts cannot be spoken of, they must not be able to speak, either: ghosthood implies a double silence, one that lasts an eternity. But her mother does speak, and her words and her touch have the power to bring back memories. As her mother rubs the scar on An-mei’s neck, the one she sustained during her mother’s final conflict with her family, An-mei remembers “the dream with her mother’s voice” (38). During that conflict, a pot of boiling soup spilled onto her neck, “as though everyone’s anger were pouring all over me”
(39). The injury does more than just burn her, though; it takes away her voice: "I could not speak because of this terrible choking feeling" (39). She literally chokes on her family's anger, learning to swallow it and keep it inside. And as the scar disappears, so does the memory, because "that is the way it is with a wound. The wound begins to close in on itself, to protect what is hurting so much. And once it is closed, you no longer see what is underneath, what started the pain" (40). Yet the anger is still inside, and the voice still needs to speak. Silence, like a wound, closes in on itself and forgets what it wanted to say.

Her mother's reappearance exposes her family's lie; An-mei sees that her mother is very much alive, not a ghost. An-mei releases her anger and her voice by defying her family and leaving with her mother to live in Canton. In her adult story, "Magpies," we learn how An-mei learned not only to speak, but to shout. Before they leave the family home, An-mei's mother tells her the silence rules she learned from her mother, An-mei's grandmother: "She said I could not shout, or run, or sit on the ground to catch crickets. I could not cry if I was disappointed. I had to be silent and listen to my elders. And if I did not do this, Popo said she would cut off my hair and send me to a place where Buddhist nuns live" (243). Interesting, that independent women with voices end up in nunneries in China as well, since this is where all those thwarted Western independent women--Guinevere, Ophelia--get sent as well.

And so it appears that women who choose to speak end up nuns, ghosts, or concubines; indeed, as An-mei's story bears out, the only way that women can fill their selfish desires and exercise any kind of power or control
over their lives is by faking suicide, a technique that Wu Tsing’s Second Wife has perfected. She takes just enough opium to appear as if she were dying in order to manipulate Wu Tsing into giving her whatever she wanted. Yan Chang, An-mei’s childhood servant, describes it to her this way: “[Second Wife] knew by the way [Wu Tsing’s] face paled at the sound of the wind that he was fearful of ghosts. And everybody knows that suicide is the only way a woman can escape a marriage and gain revenge, to come back as a ghost . . . .” (264). The only powerful woman is a dead woman, or one who threatens to die and come back as a ghost. In The Woman Warrior: there was no real connection between ghosthood and power; ghosts were merely those living or dead who, through shame and silence, become identity-less. Tan’s description of ghosts as powerful, revenge-seeking creatures seems more positive. Yan Chang’s definition makes ghosthood a state—possibly the only state—in which Chinese woman can assert their will, meet their “selfish desires.”

Of course, the drawback to real ghosthood (as opposed to the “living ghosthood” of women like Ying-ying St. Clair) is that you are dead, truly powerless. The myth of powerful ghosthood is only a patriarchal trick to get independent, vocal women to eliminate themselves. The promise of empowerment is thus a false one; unfortunately, An-mei’s mother does not realize this when she poisons herself. However, while her suicide does not empower her, it does empower her daughter. The fear of suffering the revenge of her ghost forces Wu Tsing to “raise . . . me as his honored child. He promised to revere [my mother] as if she had been First Wife, his only wife” (271). This is exactly what her mother planned, for just as the poison
enters her bloodstream, she whispers to An-mei that “she would rather kill her own weak spirit so she could give me a stronger one” (271), an ideal of selflessness that Ying-ying also shares when she later says she will “give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter” (286). An-mei understands the sacrifice her mother has made, the power it grants her; when she sees her mother laid in state, she throws herself on her mother’s body, and tells her “with my heart: I can see the truth, too. I am strong, too” (271). And most powerfully of all, the truth and strength found in her mother’s death gives An-mei a voice: “And on that day, I learned to shout” (272).

Her own daughter Rose’s story reveals to us, though, that this ability to shout has not always been empowering; in fact, the story, “Half and Half,” reveals the moment in An-mei’s adult life when her voice fails her and forces her to confront the true strength of her beliefs. Lena begins the story by telling us about her mother’s incredible *nengkan*, belief in her own ability to do anything. It was this *nengkan*, Rose says, that brought her mother to America in the first place. But when Lena’s youngest brother Bing drowns in the ocean one day, An-mei’s *nengkan* is put to its ultimate test.

Lena’s story describes her mother’s lengthy and passionate attempts to get the ocean to spit out her son using words, her voice. An-mei believes so strongly in the power of her own voice that she believes she can actually resurrect her son with it. In part, the title refers to the fact that An-mei uses half Christian methods and half Chinese folk methods to exorcise Bing from the water. Standing on the cliff where Bing fell into the Pacific Ocean, An-mei says a prayer: “[H]er small voice carried up by the gulls to heaven. It began with ‘Dear God’ and ended with ‘Amen,’ and in between she spoke
Chinese” (136). When prayer fails her, she begins pleading with “the Coiling Dragon who lives in the sea” (137), trying to trick him into letting go of Bing by bribing and distracting him with a sapphire ring, and trying to sweeten his temper with sugar-laden tea.

The tragedy of Rose’s story is not so much Bing’s death, but the death of her mother’s nengkan and the failure of her voice. As she watches her mother’s countless efforts to will Bing back to life fail, she also watches her mother’s faith crumble and her voice weaken. As a last resort, An-mei throws an inner tube into the ocean, firmly telling Lena, “This will go where Bing is. I will bring him back” (138, emphasis mine). But her nengkan and her words utterly fail her:

Over and over again, it dove and popped back up again, empty but still hopeful. And then, after a dozen or so times, it was sucked into the dark recess, and when it came out, it was torn and lifeless.

At that moment, not until that moment, did she give up. My mother had a look on her face that I’ll never forget. It was one of complete despair and horror, for losing Bing, for being so foolish as to think she could use faith to change fate. (139)

The inner tube is deflated and shredded as surely as An-mei’s faith is.

The confusion between “faith” and “fate” expressed in the passage above is literal as well as figurative. In prefacing the story about Bing’s drowning, Rose remembers her mother saying that “it was faith that kept all these good things coming our way, only I thought she said ‘fate,’ because she couldn’t pronounce that ‘th’ sound in ‘faith’” (128); showing how poor
translation on the part of the daughter--a failure to listen--leads to a
tremendous gap in understanding. By the chapter’s end, though--having
retold Bing’s story and finally told her mother about the divorce--Rose begins
to think the two concepts actually work in tandem: “... I think now that fate
is shaped half by expectation, half by inattention. But somehow, when you
lose something you love, faith takes over. You have to pay attention to what
you lost. You have to undo the expectation” (140). She begins to understand
how both forces have shaped her mother’s life and her own, and in the
understanding, she comes closer to a more complete understanding of her
mother, herself, and the territory between them.

At the beginning of her adult story, “Without Wood,” Rose shows us
that though her mother’s nengkan and her voice may have been diminished
by Bing’s tragedy, her mother’s words have never lost their power: “I used to
believe everything my mother said, even when I didn’t know what she
meant. . . . The power of her words was that strong” (206). Clearly a mother’s
words carry power that transcends language barriers, a power that exists even
where meaning does not. This is a power that Rose clearly did not inherit, as
her husband is divorcing her, and she is sitting back passively and letting it
happen. An-mei recognizes her failure to pass her verbal power on to her
daughter and sees the damage that Rose’s voicelessness is doing to her life.
She realizes that she will have to teach her daughter how to shout. In fact,
“Magpies” (the story about her mother’s suicide and her learning to shout) is
prompted by concern for her daughter’s present situation: “Yesterday my
daughter said to me, ‘My marriage is falling apart.’ . . . She cried, ‘No choice!
No choice!’ She doesn’t know. If she doesn’t speak, she is making a choice”
(241). An-mei realizes that she has failed to pass on this ability to her daughter, and that she must tell Rose this story so that she will understand how to speak. Yet there is a sense here that somehow, it is her daughter’s Chinese side that has created the problem. As she explains:

... I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people’s misery, to eat my own bitterness.

And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way. (241)

This passage is a crucial one in the novel, as it incorporates many of its themes about women and their voices. First, An-mei neatly summarizes the linguistic “rules” that the other mothers and the daughters describe and subscribe to throughout the novel: How it is imperative for women not to speak, because speaking shows selfish desire, and desire is the warning sign of an independent woman, one who will cause trouble and ultimately become a ghost. But as An-mei discovers here, the imperative for women’s silence may be universal rather than merely Chinese. Even though she was raised in America, land of the First Amendment, where “the squeaky wheel gets the oil,” Rose has turned into a ghost woman like her mother, implying that silence is connected to gender rather than ethnicity. The stair metaphor, while poignant, suggests entrapment—there is only one set of stairs, no alternative path.
Rose certainly seems to be trapped in her reaction to her divorce. While she is able to use her voice to tell other people what is happening to her, she cannot use her voice actively to gain power over the situation. Rose says that she “had been talking to too many people, my friends, everybody it seems, except Ted” (210), her husband. She begins to think that her mother was right when she told Rose that she was “without wood”: “My mother once told me why I was confused all the time. She said I was without wood. Born without wood so that I listened to too many people. She knew this because once she had almost become this way” (213). Not surprisingly, though, like most children, the one person whom she learns not to listen to is her mother: “I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people’s thoughts--all in English--so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw” (214). She, like the other daughters, has built a mighty fortress around her identity.

However, this crisis forces Rose to reexamine the power of her mother’s words and reconsider their truth. When her mother tells her she is hulikudu and heimongmong (“confused” and in a “dark fog,” as she translates), Lena concedes that her mother is right. “Lately I had been feeling hulihudu. And everything around me seemed to be heimongmong. . . . But really, the words mean much more than that. Maybe they can’t be easily translated because they refer to a sensation that only Chinese people have” (210), Rose says, returning to the idea that the essence of China--not only the language, but the culture and the people--cannot be translated into English. To translate it is to reduce it, to strip it of its soul.
Yet she cannot seem to take any action to reduce the *hulihudu*, to get out of the *heimongmong*. In fact, she escapes even further into it by taking one sleeping pill after another, effectively eradicating three days of her life. The passage is reminiscent of Kingston's description of the year and a half she spent in bed mysteriously ill, which she said was "the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened" (182). The "nothingness" is wonderfully soothing to Rose, just as it was to *The Woman Warrior*‘s narrator. For Rose, though, passivity is nearly addictive: "All I could remember was falling smoothly into a dark space with no feeling of dimension or direction... And every time I woke up, I took another pill and went back to this place" (215-16).

Finally she is wakened by the phone, and it is her mother on the other end. Her mother’s voice, at first ghostly, begins to sink in, and Rose finally hears the words she needs to hear:

‘Why do you not speak up for yourself?’ she finally said in her pained voice. ‘Why can you not talk to your husband?’

‘Ma... Please. Don’t tell me to save my marriage anymore. It’s hard enough as it is.’

‘I am not telling you to save your marriage. ... I only say you should speak up.’ (216)

An-mei gives Rose a voice, or at least gives her permission to use the voice she has. And when Ted shows up to retrieve the divorce papers, the "power of her mother’s words" has sunk in: Rose has decided she wants to keep the house. Her telling him this fact is the most independent act of her life, and the most empowering: "I saw what I wanted: his eyes, confused, then scared. He was *hulihudu*. The power of my words was that strong" (219). By using
the same phrase she used to describe her mother to describe herself, Rose shows us that she has assumed her power, found her own voice. More significantly, she says Ted was hulihudu, an emotion she can barely understand with her Chinese background, and which Ted, having no such background, cannot possibly begin to understand. Her words now have the power that transcends meaning, as do her mother’s. The surprise of Rose’s attack is reminiscent of the way Fa Mu Lan exposed her surprising femaleness and power to the robber baron: “When I saw his startled eyes at my breasts, I slashed him across the face and on the second stroke cut off his head” (43). Rose’s sudden assertion of her identity disarms Ted, and also returns her to power.

Earlier in the chapter, Rose noted that one of the reasons she was “without wood” was because she is Chinese American: “Chinese people had Chinese opinions. American people had American opinions. . . . There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing” (214). But by using this Chinese word to describe Ted’s reaction, Rose suggests that the power she attains is linked to her ethnicity—that she has found the secret strength in being Chinese American, has realized that having the choice of two heritages to draw upon can make one twice as strong. By the story’s end, she seems to have made peace with her heritage, navigated the narrow intersection of Chinese-ness and American-ness; and in that intersection, she has learned how to make the power of her mother’s words her own.

And, as Rose’s “powerful words” to Ted show, she is beginning to learn this liberating skill. Rose’s story ends with a dream that effectively
summarizes the evolving relationships between all the mothers and daughters in the novel. Earlier in the chapter, when her mother described what it meant to be without wood, An-mei likened it to the difference between a tree growing straight and tall and weeds running along the ground in every direction. Surveying her real garden, Ted's pride and joy, Rose notices that weeds have consumed it, and takes deep pleasure in seeing this symbol of his control destroyed by something so organic, so simple. She prefers the garden this way, set loose, allowed to exercise its own will. And after she speaks her powerful words to Ted, she has a dream in which she meets her mother in the garden, where she is tending a planter box "as if she were tending a baby" (220):

'There,' she said, beaming, 'I have just planted them this morning, some for you, some for me.'

And below the heimongmong, all along the ground, were weeds already spilling out over the edges, running wild in every direction. (220)

The garden becomes a powerful metaphor for Rose's newly liberated voice and will, and for the way her mother helped her set it free. The line "some for you, some for me" also recalls the ending of The Woman Warrior and the narrator's story about Ts'ai Yen, a story jointly created by she and her mother: "The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (Kingston 206). And so Rose's story ends with a joint mother-daughter creation that links their pasts and promises fruitful growth in the future. The plants in the box become symbols of Rose and An-mei's relationship, newly planted and full of organic potential, an infant in need of nurturing.
The destructive capability of silence emerges full force in the stories of Ying-ying and Lena St. Clair. Ying-ying opens her childhood story by telling us that she and her daughter are both ghosts, silent and invisible: "We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others" (64). Ying-ying and Lena are truly the silent women of *The Joy Luck Club*, those who have removed their own tongues to secure their fate in the world. Yet of all the mother-daughter pairs in the book, Ying-ying and Lena seem to be most understanding of each other, though it is a despairing sort of understanding: Ying-ying sees her daughter as a ghost, and Lena sees her mother as a slightly mad old lady who has the ability to predict disaster. Yet this pair also seems more willing than the others to help each other through the wall of silence that faces them both.

In her childhood story, "The Moon Lady," Ying-ying describes her "earliest recollection: telling the Moon Lady [her] secret wish" when she falls off her family's yacht and gets lost during the Moon Festival. But it is not the events of the day that she remembers as well as the lesson about silence she learned. Before going to the festival, her Amah explains its purpose to her:

'Who is the Moon Lady?'

'Chang-o. She lives on the moon and today is the only day you can see her and have a secret wish fulfilled.'

'What is a secret wish?'

'It is what you want but cannot ask,' said Amah.

'Why can't I ask?'

'This is because ... because if you ask it ... it is no longer a wish but a selfish desire,' said Amah. 'Haven't I taught you--that
it is wrong to think of your own needs? A girl can never ask, only listen.'

'Then how will the Moon Lady know my wish?'

'Ai! You ask too much already! You can ask her because she is not an ordinary person.'

Satisfied at last, I immediately said: 'Then I will tell her I don't want to wear these clothes anymore.'

'Ah! Did I not just explain?' said Amah. 'Now that you have mentioned this to me, it is not a secret wish anymore.' (68)

Clearly the message here is that to speak is to betray oneself, and also to ruin one's chances of having any goodness in life. Secrets--good and bad--are to be kept to oneself, never spoken. Speaking and asking in girls is a sign of insolence, selfishness. To speak of one's desires--indeed, to speak at all--practically ensures unhappiness.

While lost, the child Ying-ying stumbles into a performance of the Moon Lady legend, where she witnesses a graphic representation of what happens to women who speak, act independently, and follow their selfish desires. When the Moon Lady eats "the peach of everlasting life," she is "flung from this earth by [her] own wantonness" (81). It is a startling retelling of the Eve story, which ends with the summarization that "Woman is yin . . . the darkness within, where untempered passions lie. And man is yang, bright truth lighting our minds" (82), offering evidence that this view of women as "darkness" or "mystery"--and thus the downfall of man--is universal. This confuses the child Ying-ying, because she "loved [her] shadow, this dark side of [her] that had [her] same restless nature" (71).
Suddenly she sees the shame in this darkness, and the selfishness of indulging or nurturing it. She is transformed by this knowledge—it closes her mouth; and though her family finds her, she “never believed [her] family found the same girl” (83). And truly they did not: she had been silenced by the shame of her dark side, become only a ghost of her willful child-self.

Ying-ying recalls this story as an adult because she is beginning to realize the damage that such beliefs have done not only to her life, but to her daughter’s: “For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me. . . . And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others” (64). And in her childhood story, “The Voice from the Wall,” Lena reveals the similar lessons she learned about silence as a child. Two separate stories run through the chapter: in the first, Lena describes the solitary journey she takes every night through the wall next to her bed as she listens to the girl next door being beaten by her mother; in the second, Lena describes her mother’s complete inability to communicate with her family, an inability that Lena supports by deliberately mistranslating her mother’s words. Both stories echo with shame and silence.

And in both stories, Lena is trapped in some kind of a double bind: In the first story, she is trapped with her ear against the wall, where she “hadn’t been able to stop myself from listening. I wasn’t able to stop what happened” (114). She can neither say anything to help the girl who is being beaten, nor can she tell her own family what she hears. Yet she cannot control her fascination with the girl on the other side of the wall, cannot make herself
not listen, though she feels she should. This ability to listen but not speak seems to be the source of her shame, a shame that binds her mouth, rather than her feet.

Lena is also doubly bound as her mother’s translator and interpreter. Ying-ying’s husband, an American, denies her her native tongue; because he “spoke only a few canned Chinese expressions,” he “insisted that my mother learn English” (108). But Ying-ying cannot learn English, “So with him, she spoke in moods and gestures, looks and silences, and sometimes a combination of English punctuated by hesitations and Chinese frustration: ‘Shwo buchulai’—words cannot come out. So my father would put words in her mouth” (108). Clifford St. Clair decides for himself what his wife is saying, and his patronizing, degrading denial of her voice, her words, is repulsive in its 1950s sitcom simplicity: “I think she’s saying we’re the best darn family in the country!” he’d exclaim when she had cooked a wonderfully fragrant meal” (109). Whereas before Ying-ying was tongueless by choice, believing that good would come from her silence, now she is tongueless by passive restraint, someone else’s violent ignorance. “Shwo buchulai—words cannot come out” seems to speak, in some sense, for all the mothers: their frustration with America, both its language and its customs, and their frustration at raising children who do not understand them either. The words they need to bridge those gaps, quell their frustration, are mired in silence.

For Lena is just as inept as her father at translating her mother’s words. Lena explains that she “could understand the [Chinese] words perfectly, but not the meanings” (109). So she too puts words in her mother’s mouth,
thereby rendering her voiceless, unintelligible. While both she and her father mistranslate in order to protect their self-created American status quo, their motives are slightly different. Her father puts words in her mother’s mouth out of ignorance; her daughter, out of shame and embarrassment. “I often lied when I had to translate for her,” Lena tells us, “‘Shemma yisz?’—What meaning?—she asked me when a man at a grocery store yelled at her for opening up jars to smell the insides. I was so embarrassed I told her that Chinese people were not allowed to shop there” (109). Whatever her reason, though, the effect of her mistranslations is the same as her father’s: she robs her mother of her voice.

But one senses Lena also mistranslates because she wants to keep America as much of a secret to her mother as her mother keeps China a secret from her. As a child, her mother filled her with so many horror stories about the dangers that lurked around every corner, waiting to clutch her, that she “began to see terrible things. I saw these things with my Chinese eyes, the part of me I got from my mother. . . . I could see things that Caucasian girls at school did not” (106). Lena, like The Woman Warrior’s narrator, can never understand “what’s real and what you make up,” and so—out of resentment for having her vision so confused—ceases to listen to her mother’s Chinese stories, warnings about American life.

Lena’s most devastating mistranslation occurs when her mother gives birth to a stillborn baby. Ying-ying describes the birth to her in incredibly painful detail, and Lena completely fails to translate even a shred of the story’s truth:
'When the baby was ready to be born,' she murmured, 'I could already hear him screaming inside my womb. His little fingers, they were clinging to stay inside... This baby's eyes were open and his head—it was open too!... And then this baby, maybe he heard us, his large head seemed to fill with hot air and rise up from the table. The head turned to one side, then to the other. It looked right through me. I knew he could see everything inside me.' (116)

Yet when her father asks Lena for a translation, this is what she tells him: "She says we must all think very hard about having another baby. She says she hopes this baby is very happy on the other side. And she thinks we should leave now and go have dinner" (117). In this moment, Lena obliterates her mother's voice by completely denying this most important of stories. The gap between Ying-ying and her family seems to become unbridgeable at this point.

Yet paradoxically, Lena's intent in this particular translation is to protect her mother, for Lena believes that her mother has gone mad, demonstrating yet another instance of "saying the opposite" as a form of protection. Earlier An-mei told us that her grandmother often said that she and her brother had "fallen out of the bowels of a goose, two eggs that nobody wanted, not even good enough to crack over rice porridge" (33) to keep them from being stolen by ghosts, and in The Woman Warrior, the narrator explains that the No-Name aunt gave birth to her baby in a pigsty out of love for the child, not loathing. In so doing, she hoped to save the child from the gods' wrath by fooling them into thinking it was a piglet rather than a human
baby. So Lena’s modified “saying the opposite” here actually demonstrates a profound understanding of her mother’s story, an intense loyalty that demands she protect her mother from the story’s destructive potential. In a sense she becomes the mother at this point, since her mother retires permanently to her bed, and she and her father become her caretakers. Her mother becomes, in Lena’s own words, “a living ghost” (118). In this new triangle, Lena is the weak link; her father “look[s] past her, toward [her] mother,” and now calls her “[his] big girl” (118). Burdened with adult responsibilities, silenced out of deference to her mother’s weakened state, and shamed by her secret knowledge of the tortured girl on the other side of the wall, Lena, like her mother, shuts her mouth for good, disappears into the wall. To open her mouth at this point would be to let selfish desires fall out, the same lesson her mother learned as a child.

The chapter’s two disparate stories merge at the end. One night, Teresa, the beaten girl, enters Lena’s room and tells her she has been thrown out of the house. She plans to trick her mother by climbing out Lena’s bedroom window and into her own, so that when her mother starts to worry about her, Teresa will already be in bed. Later, as Lena lies in bed awaiting the ritual beating, she is surprised instead to hear laughter and crying: “You stupida girl, you almost gave me a heart attack. . . . And then I heard them laughing and crying, crying and laughing, shouting with love” (120). Lena weeps, too, sharing their joy but also feeling her own profound envy at their voices, their ability to shout and weep and love aloud, while she sits silently on the other side of the wall, voiceless and powerless to control. Yet Teresa’s reunion with her mother gives Lena hope that perhaps she can reunite with her own
mother, save her from the the silence in which she is imprisoned like a ghost. Armed with this new hope, she revisions the ending to her mother’s story:

I saw a girl complaining that the pain of not being seen was unbearable. I saw the mother lying in bed in her long flowing robes. Then the girl pulled out a sharp sword and told her mother, ‘Then you must die the death of a thousand cuts. It is the only way to save you.’

The mother accepted this and closed her eyes. The sword came down and sliced back and forth, up and down, wish! wish! And the mother screamed and shouted, cried out in terror and pain. But when she opened her eyes, she saw no blood, no shredded flesh.

The girl said, ‘Do you see now?’

The mother nodded: ‘Now I have perfect understanding. I have already experienced the worst. After this, there is no worst possible thing.’

And the daughter said, ‘Now you must come back, to the other side. Then you can see why you were wrong.’

And the girl grabbed her mother’s hand and pulled her through the wall. (120-21)

In this powerful revisioning, Lena makes herself visible again by making herself the heroine, the swordswoman in fact, who saves her mother’s life, rescues her from the land of living ghosts.

In reality, though, it is Ying-ying who rescues Lena from the prison of her silence. Lena has grown up to enter a marriage much like her mother’s,
to a man who fails to hear what she is actually saying: "Harold, I love you." And he looked in the rearview mirror, backing up the car, and said, I love you, too. Did you lock the door?" (174). Harold cannot look at her directly; instead, he sees only the smallest reflection of her in the car's mirror, even as he is looking in it for something else. Ying-ying notices Harold's unwillingness to see Lena, and realizes she must do something to prevent her daughter from suffering the same fate she did. At the beginning of her adult story, "Waiting Between the Trees," Ying-ying discovers what she must do to save her daughter:

She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is part of mine. But when she was born, she sprang away from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore. And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved. (274)

The language of Ying-ying's plan is remarkably similar to that of Lena's fantasy about how she will save her mother: both speak of cutting through or breaking down some barrier, presumably the barrier of silence. And Ying-ying realizes that her story is the most powerful tool with which to destroy the barrier.

As a child, Ying-ying tells us, she was "lihai. . . Wild and stubborn" (275). She feels pride rather than guilt about being this way, until the night of her youngest aunt's wedding, when she realizes that there may be consequences for her behavior. The man who is to become her husband puts
a watermelon on the table, and brandishing a knife/phallus, turns to her and says, "Kai gwa"—Open the watermelon" (277), at which point he pushes the knife into the fruit, laughing at her. She says her "face burned from embarrassment, because at that time I did not understand. . . . Yes, it is true I was a wild girl, but I was innocent" (277); yet when he sinks the knife into the watermelon, she begins to understand—she loses that innocence. She realizes how her wildness might be interpreted, and learns to hide it for fear of the potential consequences. But she ends up marrying him ("I was married to this man and he hissed drunkenly to me that he was ready to kai gwa" (278)) and becoming pregnant, only to discover that he has run off to live with one of his many mistresses. She aborts the baby. And now, man years later, she realizes that this is the story she must tell Lena, the one that will pull her daughter out of the danger of her own marriage: "I will tell Lena of my shame" (281), hoping that by so doing, her daughter will be able to see the "tiger lady" that she once was and realize that her mother was not always a ghost—and that Lena need not be one either.

What does it mean to be a "tiger lady"? As Ying-ying's mother told her, it means to have "... two ways. The gold side leaps with its fierce heart. The black side stands still with cunning, hiding its gold between trees, seeing and not being seen, waiting patiently for things to come. I did not learn to use my black side until after the bad man left me" (282). In other words, she does not learn the necessity or safety of silence, of hiding, until the gold side—the visible, "stubborn" side—betrays her. Retreating into her black side, she shelters herself from the world by living with her second cousin's family, not doing anything for ten years. Then she moves to the city, becomes a shopgirl,
and meets Clifford St. Clair, whom she says "was the sign that the black side of me would soon go away" (284).

Her marriage to St. Clair is one she enters willingly, knowing the sacrifices she is making to do so. He knows nothing about her past life, and she does not tell him anything about it. She marries him for no apparent reason except that he wants her to; her feelings toward him are mostly neutral, and occasionally contemptuous. It is as if the black has consumed her, taken over the gold, left her only a shadow; and what does a shadow have to do with feelings, thoughts, actions? Her marriage to St. Clair is described in terms of suicide:

I decided to let Saint marry me. . . . I spoke in a trembly voice. I became pale, ill, and more thin. I let myself become a wounded animal. I let the hunter come to me and turn me into a tiger ghost. I willingly gave up my chi, the spirit that caused me so much pain. (285)

It is a devastating passage, and one that reveals that the only mother Lena has ever known (even before the stillborn baby) has been a ghost, as well as one that suggests that Ying-ying may also have been anorexic. Yet there is a sense of hope here, that Ying-ying may still be able to recover her lost self. She can do so by helping her daughter find her own lost voice. The two of them, together, can restore each other into reality, into full voice, by exchanging the stories of shame, the long-held secrets that rendered them ghosts. Or, as Ying-ying puts it:

Now I must tell my daughter everything. That she is the daughter of a ghost. She has no chi. This is my greatest shame.
How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit?

So this is what I will do. I will gather together my past and look. I will see thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. I will hold that pain in my hand until it becomes hard and shiny, more clear. And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. . . . I will . . . give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter. (286)

Again, we see how storytelling functions to create identity, both for the listener and for the teller. By relating her life story to her daughter, Ying-ying will not only give her a voice, but she will get back her own. She will have destroyed the barrier of silence that has stood not just between the two women, but also between each of the women and her self.

It is interesting, and unique to this mother-daughter pair, that their adult stories are related in the same time frame. Ying-ying is sitting in Lena’s guest room when she remembers the story and devises her plan. And Lena’s adult story—as well as her revolutionary confrontation with her husband—is prompted by her mother’s presence, as she sits in the living room beneath her mother. Both stories end with the same event: the unsteady table in the guest room (a rather heavy-handed symbol4 for Lena and Harold’s weak marriage) collapses. Lena runs upstairs to see what has happened, and her mother waits for her to arrive.

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4 In *New York* magazine, critic Rhoda Koenig says that this symbol in particular is one of several that tended to “flatten [the stories] out” (82).
Before Lena is willing to listen to her mother, though, she has had to come to believe in her mother’s gift of prophecy. Like the mythical Cassandra, Ying-ying seems doomed to tell the truth and have it interpreted as madness. But in the revisioned myth here presented, Cassandra/Ying-ying is finally believed by her own daughter. And Lena is the most important person she needs to convince. In her childhood story, she told us that “I knew my mother made up anything to warn me, to help me avoid some unknown danger” (108); but the accuracy of her mother’s horrible predictions has made her more appreciative of her mother’s gift. As she opens her adult story, Lena says she “believe[s] [her] mother has the mysterious ability to see things before they happen” (161), and “wonder[s] what she will see” (162) when she visits her and her husband in their new home. Lena is beginning to learn that what her mother says is not madness, but truth. And she hopes that her mother’s vision will show her a way out of her miserable marriage.

Lena’s adult story, “Rice Husband,” describes how her silent childhood fears created the stagnant marital situation she is in now. When her mother told her, at age eight, that every uneaten grain of rice she left in her bowl represented a pock-mark in her future husband’s face, she stops eating rice, and eventually everything else, becoming anorexic. It seems the inevitable disease of an upbringing in which women must always bite back their tongues. After all, it was Lena’s mother who learned that “it is wrong to think of your own needs” (68), that only selfish women speak. So not eating becomes a way to submit to this standard (by denying one’s “selfish” desires for food) and, at the same time, to rebel against the rule by exercising complete control over what goes in and comes out of one’s mouth. Anorexia,
then, is the manifest disease of silence. In The Madwoman in the Attic, Gilbert and Gubar describe it as a “disease of maladjustment to the physical and social environment. . . . caused by patriarchal socialization” under which girls are “trained in renunciation” (53-54).

The running belief in the novel that one’s private thoughts can affect real events resurfaces in this chapter, too. Lena refuses to eat in hopes of killing the pock-faced boy she believes she is fated to marry. When he does die five years later, of a rare and mysterious disease, Lena is sure that he died because of her thoughts. Her greatest fear is that her mother “could see right through me and . . . knew I was the one who caused Arnold to die” (167). To punish herself, she eats a whole half-gallon of ice cream, which she spends the rest of the night vomiting, “wondering why it was that eating something good could make me feel so terrible, while vomiting something terrible could make me feel so good” (167). The pleasure is in the punishment, the denial of self; thus, anorexia becomes Lena’s attempt to starve and kill the “secret self” that causes her so much pain and shame. She wishes to become invisible so that there is nothing left for her mother to see through. Later, in fact, her mother will call her a ghost because she eats so little: “‘She become so thin now you cannot see her,’ says my mother. ‘She like a ghost, disappear’” (177). Ying-ying directs this comment toward Harold, whom, as noted before, already refuses to see Lena, already regards her as a ghost.

Lena’s compulsive desire to control the role of food in her life becomes a profession, in fact: she goes in to the field of restaurant design. Metaphorically, designing a restaurant is like creating a new personality, a new way of presenting oneself. What this leads to, though, is a feeling that
her “self,” just like the restaurant design, is only two-dimensional, a decorative facade. Her greatest fear about her marriage is that her husband, Harold,

... would tell me I smelled bad, that I had terrible bathroom habits, that my taste in music and television was appalling. I worried that Harold would someday get a new prescription for his glasses and he'd put them on one morning. Look me up and down, and say, ‘Why gosh, you’re not the girl I thought you were, are you?’

And I think that feeling of fear never left me, that I would be caught someday, exposed as a sham of a woman. (169)

Things have not changed much since she feared her mother would be able to see right through her. Clearly, she has not broken the destructive cycle of self-denial and hatred. She is still a silent woman who can only be made real by letting her selfish desires fall from her mouth.

By the end of the story she has begun to realize this. She begins to voice her complaints to Harold, and they rush out like dammed water, uncontrollable, the sound of this new voice confusing to her: “And now I don’t know what to think. What am I saying? What’s he saying?” (180). As if to answer, the marble table in the upstairs room where her visiting mother sits collapses, and Lena runs upstairs to see what happens—to find out what her mother has seen, and to begin the process of storytelling, cutting through boundaries to create new territory, new identity.

Although the stories of the novel’s silent women are tragic, revealing how much a woman loses when she gives up her voice, the relationships of
both the Hsu women and the St. Clair women offer hope for silent women. And both stories demonstrate the power of storytelling to break the silence and free the voice and the identity of both the teller and the listener.

**Powerful Mirrors: Lindo and Waverly Jong, Suyuan and June Woo**

"A little knowledge withheld is a great advantage one should store for future use. That is the power of chess. It is a game of secrets in which one must show and never tell" (96).

This quote from "Chinatown's littlest chess champion," Waverly Jong, accurately describes the function of silence among the strong women in the book. Whereas among the ghost women, silence—as Helene Cixous⁵ would say—fairly decapitates them, silence among the strong women functions to protect their independent voices, their secret selves, from the decapitating effects of a patriarchal society. As Waverly implies above, one's tongue is a powerful secret weapon that must be used strategically, judiciously. And in the stories of these two mother-daughter pairs, we see much more verbal battle, both between mother and daughter and also between the two daughters and the two mothers. Throughout the novel, Tan shows us bragging matches between the mothers, insults between the daughters, and examples of how both mother and daughter use the proverbial "silent treatment" to punish each other. Silence is an instrument of control for these

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⁵ For Cixous, decapitation is the female equivalent of castration, the most direct way to eliminate one's gender-related power. As she says in her essay "Castration or Decapitation?", "[S]ilence is the mark of hysteria. The great hysterics have lost speech... They are decapitated, their tongues are cut off and what talks isn't heard because it's the body that talks, and man doesn't hear the body" (49). Cixous further explains that such women do not speak because to speak is to want, and these women do not want. This accurately explains the silence of many of the women in Tan's novel who are silent because they have been told that they should have no desires, no "wants."
women, not a guillotine. These are women with strong voices, unafraid to speak, yet needing to realize the potential of their words to destroy.

All four are frequently associated with mirrors: both Lindo Jong and June Woo have experiences while looking at themselves in mirrors that give them powerful and secret new information about themselves. Too, in Lindo’s final story, “Double Face,” she comes to a new understanding of her relationship with her daughter while looking at their faces side-by-side in a beauty-parlor mirror. And when June steps off the plane to meet her half sisters, she looks in a mirror: all three of their faces together reflect their mother’s. This mirror symbol is intimately linked to the notion of a secret self/secret voice. Among the strong women in the book, the discovery of a secret self is a wonderfully freeing one that sets their tongues free; but among the weak women, this secret self is a source of shame and the root of silence.

The most striking “mirror epiphany” occurs in Lindo Jong’s childhood story, “The Red Candle.” The story explains how Lindo’s powerful voice and her secret-keeping ability saved her from a miserable marriage and a lifetime of servitude. As Rhoda Koenig, critic for New York magazine, puts it, Lindo’s story is “a delightful combination of feminism and fairy tale” (82). The story begins with the words, “I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents’ promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing” (42)--the story clearly directed to her daughter and intended as cautionary tale or punishment for her daughter’s misunderstanding of her mother’s life. The tale describes her engagement to be married to a selfish local boy at age two; her being forced to go live with his family at twelve; and her eventual marriage to him at sixteen. Clearly, her feet were bound by tradition; she had
no freedom, no choices as a child: “I had no choice, now or later. That was how backward families in the country were. . . . So Taiyuanese mothers continued to choose their daughters-in-law, ones who would raise proper sons, care for the old people, and faithfully sweep the family burial grounds long after the old ladies had gone to their graves” (45). Thus, at the age of two, her fate appears sealed, her life already committed to the service of others.

In The Woman Warrior, Kingston notes that “when you raise girls, you’re raising children for strangers” (Kingston 56), and so it is for Lindo. “Because I was promised to the Huangs’ son for marriage, my own family began treating me as if I belonged to someone else,” Lindo tells us; her mother even begins referring to her as “Huang Taitai’s daughter” (45). But she also notes that “my mother did not treat me this way because she didn’t love me. She would say this biting back her tongue, so she wouldn’t wish for something that was no longer hers” (45). Instead of reading this as rejection by or ostracism from her family, Lindo knows that her mother’s saying this is an indication of how attached she really is to her daughter, that the words are a chant to remind her mother that she must let go. Similarly, when Lindo finally goes to live with the Huangs, her mother—handing her “chang,” a red-jade necklace—acts “very stern, so I knew she was very sad” (48). As in Kingston’s work, the Chinese habit of “saying the opposite” comes into play here, the notion that one must look underneath what one has said or expressed to know the real meaning.

Lindo tries “saying the opposite” to fool herself into believing that she is, as her mother said, truly lucky to be living with the Huangs and engaged to
their son. Upon her arrival, she is immediately sent to the kitchen, “a place where family children didn’t usually go. This was a place for cooks and servants. So I knew my standing” (49). But through her tears, she shouts, “What a lucky girl I am. I’m going to have the best life” (50), believing, like her mother, that if she says it enough perhaps she will come to believe it.

This is, of course, not true; she does live the life of a servant with the Huangs, and eventually is nearly brainwashed into loving her servitude. But on the day of her wedding, as she sits looking at herself in the mirror, she comes to a life-altering realization:

I asked myself, What is true about a person? . . . And then I saw the curtains blowing wildly, and outside rain was falling harder, causing everyone to scurry and shout. I smiled. And then I realized it was the first time I could see the power of the wind. I couldn’t see the wind itself, but I could see it carried the water that filled the rivers and shaped the countryside. . . .

I wiped my eyes and looked in the mirror. I was surprised at what I saw. I had on a beautiful red dress, but what I saw was even more valuable. I was strong. I was pure. I had genuine thoughts inside that no one could see, that no one could ever take away from me. I was like the wind. . . .

I made a promise to myself: I would always remember my parents’ wishes, but I would never forget myself. (53)

Even her repeated use of the word “I” is radical, for as Kingston told us, she “could not understand ‘I’. . . . I forgot to pronounce it” (166-67). In this ephiphanic glance in the mirror, Lindo realizes that she is an “I”; and though
she must keep her knowledge of this secret, the secretness makes the revelation even more incendiary. Lindo begins to fill her mind with potently secret thoughts and plans she later uses to empower herself and change her life.

She releases this voice, this powerful hidden wind, when she has been confined to bed by her mother-in-law to produce a grandson. The situation, Lindo says, "was worse than a prison," and she gazes longingly at the servant girl, saying, "I envied this girl, the way she could walk out the door" (58). In "Castration or Decapitation?", Cixous observes that "woman, if you look for her, has a strong chance of always being found in one position: in bed . . . . her trajectory is from bed to bed: one bed to another" (43). In bed, woman is the subject of man, passive, not acting. We find many of The Joy Luck Club's silent women in bed: Ying-ying retires there after losing her baby; Lena passively absorbs the suffering of the girl next door in her bed; and Rose hibernates there to avoid the pain of her chaotic life. Notably, when The Woman Warrior's narrator is confined to bed during her mysterious illness, she says it was "the best year and a half of my life" (183). Having brutalized her silent classmate, the narrator regards her own retreat into silence and passivity as a welcome punishment, an act of renewal. Similarly, Lindo learns to use the time to her advantage, devising a plan to escape the bed.

At her wits' end, the mother-in-law summons the matchmaker to find out what the problem is, and the matchmaker tells her that her daughter-in-law lacks the element of metal. This lack is auspicious for conceiving boys, but the mother-in-law has replaced the missing "metal" by giving Lindo gold jewelry, thus making her "too balanced to have babies" (59). So she removes
Lindo's jewelry, and immediately Lindo feels "lighter, more free. They say this is what happens if you lack metal. You begin to think as an independent person. That day I started thinking about how I would escape this marriage without breaking my promise to my family" (59). The matchmaker's interpretation was correct: Lindo is unusually independent; but she did not need the matchmaker to confirm what she had already learned about herself in her mirror epiphany.

She makes her escape by devising a clever verbal trick, in which she tells her mother-in-law that she has dreamed that Tyan-yu's end of the two-ended marriage candle blew out, and the ancestors said that Tyan-yu would die if he stayed in the marriage. Further, she says that the servant girl (who has become pregnant out of wedlock) is Tyan-yu's true spiritual wife, and that the ancestor's planted Tyan-yu's seed in her womb to prove it. Her trick is successful: "I got my clothes, a real ticket to Peking, and enough money to go to America" (62). Yet she has saved not just one life, but two: the servant girl is married to Tyan-yu, her baby is accepted as his, and she is spared the awful consequences of illegitimate motherhood, which Kingston so dramatically illustrated in the "No-Name Woman" chapter of *The Woman Warrior*. Lindo becomes a true feminist heroine at the story's end, not unlike the mythic Fa Mu Lan; her verbal play gives her back her identity and saves the servant girl from being stripped of hers.

The daughter's childhood stories, Waverly's "Rules of the Game" and June's "Two Kinds," perhaps come closest to reflecting the rebellious, heritage-denying childhood of Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: "When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, 'Feeding girls is feeding
cowbirds,' I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn't talk” (46). Waverly and June, too, spend a lot of time shouting down Chinese tradition and the expectations of their Chinese mothers.

Notably, Waverly's childhood story, "The Rules of the Game," begins with the same admonition her mother learned as a child:

'Bite back your tongue,' scolded my mother when I cried loudly, yanking her hand toward the store that sold bags of salted plums. . . . The next week I bit back my tongue as we entered the store with the forbidden candies. When my mother finished her shopping, she quietly plucked a small bag of plums from the rack and put it on the counter with the rest of the items. (89)

Thus Waverly learns that silence is often the more powerful method of getting what one wants—a philosophy several of the other mothers and daughters share. And like her mother, Waverly learns to use verbal tricks to get what she wants. When Waverly wants to enter a local chess competition but is certain her mother will not let her, she tells her mother that she does not want to enter because "they would have American rules. If I lost, I would bring shame on my family," to which her mother replies, "Is shame you fall down nobody push you" (97-98). But not only is Waverly using words to trick, she is "saying the opposite" to trick. Between China and America, the function of saying the opposite has changed. Whereas in China, it seemed to be used to convince oneself of something's truth (like her mother's believing that if she said she was happy long enough, she would come to believe it), in America, the function of "saying the opposite" is directed outward, intended to change the thoughts of others rather than oneself. So in a sense, Waverly has co-opted this Chinese linguistic habit for her own good. She does not use
the skill in the way it was intended to be used, but rather exploits it, uses it
against her mother. While this may seem like a minor incident, it says
volumes about the communication gap between the mothers and daughters
and about the way “things Chinese” translate in America. One senses in this
passage, though, that Waverly’s mother knows what is going on, and allows
her daughter to enter the competition almost as a reward for having mastered
this linguistic trick; she seems to regard Waverly’s ability to say the opposite
as a sign that she has truly understood some aspect of Chinese culture and
character.

Waverly becomes a national chess champion by listening to the wind,
assuming its power, just as her mother had listened to the wind to find her
inner power on her wedding day. Pondering her move in her first chess
tournament, Waverly explains that “a light wind began blowing past my ears.
It whispered secrets only I could hear. ‘Blow from the south,’ it murmured.
“The wind leaves no trail.’ I saw a clear path, the traps to avoid” (98). This
the wind comes to direct Waverly’s moves just as it did her mother’s. As
“rewards” for grasping this piece of knowledge, Lindo gives Waverly her own
room and makes her brothers do her chores for her.

Yet Waverly’s wind power disappears as soon as she defies her mother,
uses words wrongly. Tired of her mother’s dragging her through the market
to show her off, Waverly turns on her and says,

    I wish you wouldn’t do that, telling everybody I’m your
daughter.’ . . .

    ‘Aiii-ya. So shame be with mother?’ She grasped my hand
even tighter as she glared down at me.
I looked down. ‘It’s not that, it’s just so obvious. It’s just so embarrassing.’

‘Embarrass you be my daughter?’ Her voice was crackling with anger.

‘That’s not what I meant. That’s not what I said.’ (101)

Throughout the novel Waverly returns to this idea of her mother twisting what she says, making her words seem more harsh than they are, altering their meaning in mid-air. Yet just as she altered Chinese meanings to suit her American goals and desires, so her mother mistranslates her words, instead reading her own Chinese—or at least maternal—meaning into them.

Significantly, after this confrontation, Waverly “fe[els] the wind rushing around [her] hot ears” (102), and she runs away. When she returns, she sees her mother in a new light, as her “opponent, two angry black slits. She wore a triumphant smile. ‘Strongest wind cannot be seen,’ she said” (103). The wind has turned on her, and in so doing, has taught Waverly a valuable lesson about its power. Whereas before Waverly assumed all the wind’s power for herself, she seems to realize here that it has an unseen, even more powerful force, which she has failed to recognize previously. By arrogantly assuming that she mastered the wind, she has unleashed its power on herself. The experience parallels her mother’s mirror epiphany, in that she comprehends the true nature of the wind for the first time. But the effect of the epiphany is exactly the opposite: whereas her mother’s understanding of the wind empowered her, gave her a secret voice, Waverly’s understanding humbles her, makes her choose words more carefully. In this moment, she relearns the lesson about “biting back her tongue,” remembers that silence
sometimes fills one’s desires.

June’s childhood story, “Two Kinds,” expresses remarkably similar themes of rebellion and the power of both mother and daughter to use words and silence to punish. In the story, June recalls her mother’s determination that she be a prodigy, and June’s equal determination to rebel against her mother’s expectations. June thinks her mother wants her to be perfect and June initially is “just as excited as my mother, maybe even more so” (142). But when she keeps failing her mother’s “prodigy tests” and her mother grows more and more disappointed, June discovers that she is not a prodigy, but an independent being, capable of independent, willful acts. In fact, she too experiences a mirror epiphany much like Lindo did, discovering a powerful secret self she did not know existed:

Before going to bed that night, I looked in the mirror above the bathroom sink and when I saw only my face staring back--and that it would always be this ordinary face--I began to cry. Such a sad, ugly girl! I made high-pitched noises like a crazed animal, trying to scratch out the face in the mirror.

And then I saw what seemed to be the prodigy side of me--because I had never seen that face before. I looked at my reflection, blinking so I could see more clearly. The girl staring back at me was angry, powerful. This girl and I were the same. I had new thoughts, willful thoughts, or rather lots of thoughts filled with lots of won’ts. I won’t let her change me, I promised myself. I won’t be what I’m not. (144)
This “mirror epiphany” marks the beginning of June’s conscious and willful distancing from her mother. More significantly, the mirror confrontation gives birth to a secret self, an independent, defiant voice that has the power to liberate her, but also to injure others. Importantly, in the showdown with her mother in which she refuses to play the piano again, the primary way June manages to hurt her mother is to express her wish not to be her daughter:

‘Only two kinds of daughters,’ she shouted in Chinese. ‘Those who are obedient and those who follow their own mind! Only one kind of daughter can live in this house. Obedient daughter!’

‘Then I wish I wasn’t your daughter. I wish you weren’t my mother,’ I shouted. As I said these things I got scared. I felt like worms and toads and slimy things were crawling out of my chest, but it also felt good, as if this awful side of me had surfaced at last. (153)

The powerful, angry girl she saw in the mirror emerges and asserts her independence from her mother, even going so far as to deny that she was ever a part of her. Though she describes this revelation in horror-movie terms of being “demon-possessed,” June readily claims these awful things as part of herself, begins the long process of individuating from her mother. But she pushes her new power too far, saying, “I wish I’d never been born! . . . I wish I were dead! Like them,” and the words devastate her mother, who “back[s] out of the room, stunned, as if she were blowing away like a small brown leaf, thin, brittle, lifeless” (153). Like Waverly, June here learns the colossal power of her words to eradicate her mother’s power. And in
recalling this story, June is trying to eradicate the guilt that came with her new power, a guilt that lingers even after her mother’s death: “All that remained unchecked, like a betrayal that was now unspeakable” (154).

On her thirtieth birthday, Suyuan gives June the piano, and after her mother’s death, she moves the piano into her own apartment and has it tuned. By so doing, June is reclaiming her mother’s hopes for her and conceding that perhaps her mother did understand her better than she ever suspected. The piano becomes, in a sense, a part of her mother that June allows into her space and her life. And when she sits down to play it again, it is almost as if she is releasing her mother’s voice. As she plays the song she botched at her recital, “Pleading Child,” she notices the piece on the other side of the page, “Perfectly Contented.” As she plays it, she discovers it “turn[s] out to be quite easy. ‘Pleading Child’ was shorter but slower; ‘Perfectly Contented’ was longer but faster. And after I had played them both a few times, I realized they were two halves of the same song” (155). Just as the narrator of The Woman Warrior realizes that the Ts’ai Yen story her mother began is also her story, so June realizes that the boundaries between these two pieces—and between her identity and her mother’s—are artificial and arbitrary. Thus at the end of June’s childhood story, one senses that she is beginning to realize that she has been hiding behind “invisible barriers” (204), preventing herself from knowing and understanding her mother.

June’s adult story, “Best Quality,” tells the story of receiving her “life’s importance”—a jade pendant with Chinese ideographs carved into it—from her mother shortly before her death. The story shows June’s increasing desire to understand her mother’s meanings and to understand what parts of her
are Chinese. The pendant is a symbol for the unfinished business left when her mother dies, the meanings that she took with her that no one else can replace; as such, the pendant is also a symbol for June’s grief: “I think the carvings mean something . . . I know I could ask Auntie Lindo, Auntie An-mei, or other Chinese friends, but I also know they would tell me a meaning that is different from what my mother intended” (221-22). Because her mother is dead, the pendant takes on a mystic quality, becoming an indecipherable code that, if deciphered, could explain her mother to her, help her understand herself and what her life holds in store for her. The pendant also becomes a symbol for the distance and detachment between first-generation Chinese Americans and their Chinese parents, for when June confronts a Chinese American bartender about the meaning of a similar pendant he is wearing, June says she “knew by the wonder in his voice that he had no idea what the pendant really meant” (222).

The pendant’s meaning is crucial, because when Suyuan gives it to her, she tells June, “See, I wore this on my skin, so when you put it on your skin, then you know my meaning” (235). June only wishes she could absorb her mother’s meaning through her skin; but she knows that she needs words, translations to really get her mother’s meaning—her identity—under her skin. The pendant becomes a constant reminder of how “foreign” her own mother was to her, and this particularly pains June now that she is trying to amass what she does know about her mother to tell her half-sisters. Recalling her mother’s words about the pendant, though, June realizes that the meaning will become clearer and stronger with time: “This is young jade. It is a very light color now, but if you wear it every day it will become more green” (235).
The pale green color also implies something newly shooting from the ground that will become greener and more lush as it grows. And though her mother is dead, June’s relationship with her mother is just beginning to grow.

“Best Quality” also demonstrates the verbal skill of all four strong women, as they argue over a New Year’s dinner at Suyuan’s house. June and Waverly engage in a terse battle about the copy-writing work June has done for Waverly’s employer, and the mothers jump in both to support and “betray” (as June puts it) their own daughters. Words again become weapons: June says, “I was so mad about what [Waverly] said about my hair that I wanted to embarrass her, to reveal in front of everybody how petty she was” (232). But Waverly again gets the best of her, much like she did after June’s recital when she told her, “You aren’t a genius like me” (151). Yet Suyuan deals the final blow, agreeing with Waverly, “True, cannot teach style. June not sophisticate like you. Must be born this way” (232). June’s plan to expose Waverly through words has blown up in her face; Waverly still has the ability to blow unexpectedly from a new direction, vanquishing her opponent’s smug confidence.

Yet Waverly is not invincible. Her adult story, “Four Directions,” returns to the idea introduced in her childhood story that her mother’s words have the power to “make [her] see black where there once was white, white where there once was black” (186). Explaining to a friend why she has not yet told her mother about her plans to marry, Waverly says she “always intend[s] to and then she says these little sneaky things, smoke bombs and little barbs” (191). She fears that her mother will use words to tear down her fiancé, saying “a word about something small, something she had noticed, and then
another word, and another, each one flung out like a piece of sand, one from this direction, another from behind, more and more, until his looks, his character, his soul would have eroded away” (191). Her mother’s words are weapons, capable of destroying Waverly’s faith in her own perception; Waverly says she is afraid to tell her mother about her love for Rich, “afraid that it would become sullied by my mother” (194). For Rich knows all of Waverly’s secrets. Contrasted with Lena’s fear that her husband Harold will discover her “secret self” and loathe her, Waverly’s revealing her “secret self” is what makes her relationship with Rich so strong. As she describes it, “He saw all those private aspects of me—and I mean not just sexual private parts, but my darker side, my meanness, my pettiness, my self-loathing—all the things I kept hidden. . . . He didn’t allow me to cover myself up” (194, emphasis mine). Waverly is the only woman in the book to cherish her “dark side.” Whereas the other women wish to disguise it out of fear and shame, Waverly has embraced it. This seems to be the goal that several of the other characters—especially Ying-ying and Lena—seem to be striving for.

But when Rich and her mother finally meet, her fears are realized. During an ill-fated dinner party, her fiance Rich walks right into all the “traps” Waverly thinks Lindo has set for him. Most embarrassingly, he misses the point of “saying the opposite”: When Lindo, in “the Chinese cook’s custom,” makes “disparaging remarks about her own cooking,” the “family’s cue to eat some and proclaim it the best she ever made” (197), Rich instead agrees and pours soy sauce all over the dish. Waverly and her mother are both horrified, but not only by his action, but by the fact that he violated a primary linguistic rule. And that night, Waverly lies in bed thinking Rich
“pathetic. So pathetic, those words! My mother was doing it again, making me see black where I once saw white” (199). She decides to confront her mother.

When she arrives at the house, her mother is asleep on the couch, and for a moment Waverly thinks she is dead. Just as Lena feared she had killed the pock-faced boy with her thoughts, so Waverly thinks she has killed her mother with her “terrible thoughts . . . . I had wished her out of my life, and she had acquiesced, floating out of her body to escape my terrible hatred” (200). When her mother wakes, worried at her daughter’s urgent crying, Waverly’s anger disappears, and she is instead “amazed by her innocence, and then frightened by her vulnerability” (200), thus demonstrating the range of emotion that her mother’s words can elicit.

In the course of their argument, they manage to wound each other with words, just as they had when Waverly was young: Waverly accuses her mother of trying to hurt her by insulting Rich, and her mother snaps back, “You think I have secret meaning. But it is you who has this meaning.’ . . . She sat straight and proud on the sofa, . . . her eyes sparkling with angry tears” (201). Suddenly Waverly is overcome with confusion; she says she “felt as if I had lost a battle, but one that I didn’t know I was fighting” (201). It is the archetypal battle to protect her own territory, to maintain an impermeable boundary between herself and her mother. In her confusion, she tells her mother, “I just don’t know what’s inside me right now” (201), and her mother, amazingly, tells her.

“Half of everything inside you is from me, your mother’s side, from the Sun clan in Taiyuan. . . . We are a smart people, very strong, tricky, and
famous for winning wars” (202)—an apt description of Waverly. And as she listens to her mother—actually listens—she begins to understand her mother’s meaning, and begins to understand what she must do to surmount her frustration and end the word-battle with her mother:

I saw what I had been fighting for: It was for me, a scared child, who had to run away a long time ago to what I had imagined as a safer place. And hiding in this place, behind my invisible barriers, I knew what lay on the other side: Her side attacks. Her secret weapons. Her uncanny ability to find my weakest spots. But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in. (203-204)

Waverly sees that the barriers she has constructed between her life and her mother’s, her identity and her mother’s, are all artificial, and—having served their purpose—are not needed any more. Having realized that she does have a “secret self” separate from her mother, she is willing to release the gates that separate them, let their identities merge and enhance each other.

Waverly has accomplished the task of learning to listen to her mother, to hear what she is actually saying, rather than ascribing “secret meanings” to her words. And in her story “Double Face,” Lindo learns to listen to, and thus let go of, her daughter. At the beginning of her story, Lindo’s tone is full of contempt for her daughter’s misunderstanding. Waverly tells her she is afraid that when she and Rich go to China for their honeymoon, she will be mistaken for a native Chinese and not allowed to return to the United States,
words that anger Lindo: How could her daughter presume she knows anything about being Chinese, much less enough to be mistaken for one? “Only her skin and her hair are Chinese,” Lindo says, “Inside--she is all American made” (289). And when Waverly tells her, “I’m my own person,” Lindo rails at her daughter’s seeming insolence, asking, “How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?” (290). Clearly, the battle Waverly began by being willing to let down the barriers is not completed, and cannot be completed until Lindo realizes that just as her daughter must be willing to accept the connection between her identity and her mother’s, she, as the mother, must be willing to accept that it is only a connection—that she is only a part of her daughter’s identity.

As the two sit looking at each other, faces side by side in a beauty-parlor mirror, they begin, together, to determine what is the same and what is different. The mirror from Lindo’s first story returns to reveal “what is true about a person”: or in this case, what is true about two people, Waverly and her mother. In front of this mirror, Lindo remembers how she came to the United States and realizes that she must tell her daughter this story so that Waverly can “understand my real circumstances, how I arrived, how I married, how I lost my Chinese face, why you are the way you are” (296).

Her story explains how she came to be an American, and what she had to lose to do so. The most significant loss was that of her village. When Lindo starts at the idea of marrying a Cantonese (she is from Peking), her fiend An-mei Hsu tells her, “Here everybody is now from the same village even if they come from different parts of China” (300). America has already blurred the boundaries of Lindo’s identity, even before she has a daughter.
And when she does, Lindo tells us, it was like looking in yet another mirror, because Waverly looked so much like her. At the story’s end, Lindo tells Waverly how she got her name, foreshadowing June’s learning of her name’s meaning in the final chapter:

I wanted everything for you to be better. I wanted you to have the best circumstances, the best character. I didn’t want you to regret anything. And that’s why I named you Waverly. It was the name of the street we lived on. And I wanted you to think, This is where I belong. But I also knew if I named you after this street, soon you would grow up, leave this place, and take a piece of me with you. (303)

In the course of explaining her daughter’s name, Lindo seems to come to realize that while she is an integral part of her daughter’s identity (if only by the fact that she named her), she is, in fact, only a piece that her daughter has taken with her. By naming her after an American street, she firmly rooted her daughter in America, this setting herself up to have an “American-made” daughter who will not understand or respect her Chinese heritage. Through the telling of this story, Lindo relinquishes the tight hold on her daughter that she clung to so dearly at the story’s beginning: “How can she be her own person? When did I give her up?”, realizing that she gave a part of her up in the very act of naming her.

The end of the story returns to the present, the two still looking in the mirror. Waverly notes that they have the same nose, saying that it makes them look devious: “What is this word, ‘devious,’ I ask. ‘It means . . . We mean what we say, but our intentions are different’” (304), Waverly explains.
With this explanation, Waverly shows that she has truly come to understand her mother, how the words she says are just words, and that she must consider carefully the meaning lest she misread the intention. She shows a willingness to actually listen to her mother without putting words in her mouth. And likewise, the mother here has come to respect her daughter as a separate, grown being; Lindo’s final line is “What did I lose? What did I get back in return? I will ask my daughter what she thinks” (305). Having shown her daughter what she contributed to her identity, she steps into the future to discover how her daughter, in turn, has contributed and can contribute to her identity and her life.

In June’s final chapter, “A Pair of Tickets,” June begins her reunion with her mother as she travels to China. She opens the chapter by saying, “I feel different... My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (306). She has crossed the boundaries between herself and her mother both literally and figuratively; and now that she is on her mother’s territory, she begins to connect with the Chinese part of her that Suyuan assured her was “in your blood, waiting to be let go” (306). Yet she also realizes how painfully ignorant she has been of her heritage, how little she has known about herself—and her mother—all her life: “... [T]oday I realize I’ve never really known what it means to be Chinese. I am thirty-six years old. My mother is dead and I am on a train, carrying with me her dreams of coming home. I am going to China” (307). June’s reflection also underscores the notion that she has become her mother; or at least, that she is carrying out the business that was unfinished when she died.
Despite these new feelings, though, June still is not sure exactly what it means to be Chinese, exactly what parts of her are Chinese. As she takes a shower in the posh hotel in Canton that makes her wonder “This is communist China?” (318), she questions her new feelings: “I think about what my mother said, about activating my genes and becoming Chinese. And I wonder what she meant” (320). June is still searching for the meaning of her mother’s words, a task that is tricky for any daughter but complicated for June by the further separations of culture, language, and death.

Interestingly, it is June’s father who clarifies the meanings for her. When June wakes in the middle of the night and overhears him telling his aunt about his half-sisters, she jumps in and asks him what their names mean:

‘Ah.’ My father draws imaginary characters on the windows.
‘One means “Spring Rain,” the other “Spring Flower,”’ he explains in English, ‘because they born in the spring, and of course rain come before flower, same order these girls are born.
Your mother like a poet, don’t you think?’ (322)

But more importantly, in this conversation with her father, June learns what her mother’s name means, and it is like she is meeting her for the first time:

‘Suyuan,’ he says, writing more invisible characters on the glass.
‘The way she write it in Chinese, it mean ‘Long-Cherished Wish.’ Quite a fancy name, not so ordinary like flower name. See this first character, it mean something like ‘Forever Never Forgotten.’ But there is another way to write ‘Suyuan.’ Sound exactly the same, but the meaning is opposite.’ (322)
So we see that in Chinese, "saying the opposite" is possible even by saying the same thing; one must be acutely aware of context to understand meaning. Once again the complexity if the Chinese language steps in to muddle Suyuan's meaning, even after her death; but now June's father is her guide, leading June into the unexplored labyrinth of her mother's identity. Having discovered meaning for her half-sisters and her mother, June only has left to discover her own meaning; and her next question to her father is, "And what about my name... what does Jing-mei mean?":

'Jing like excellent jing. Not just good, it's something pure, essential, the best quality. Jing is good leftover stuff when you take impurities out of something like gold, or rice, or salt. So what is left--just pure essence. And 'Mei,' this is common mei, as in meimei, 'younger sister.'"

I think about this. My mother's long-cherished wish. Me, the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others. I feed myself with the old grief, wondering how disappointed my mother must have been. (323)

As did Fa Mu Lan's parents, June's father has held up a mirror that allows her to read the words carved at her back. Suddenly June understands her mother's meaning; it is written in her skin, just as her mother told her it was when she gave her the pendant, her "life's importance." In a sense, June has been reborn, understanding herself and her mother for the first time. But more importantly, she finally sees the connection between the two of them, how her name and her identity reflect her mother's name and identity. The grief June feels at this point is not even so much for her mother's death as it
is for her mother’s lost meaning. The grief is for the void between them that now can never be traversed.

However, learning the names seems somehow to have made the Chinese language more accessible to June, as if—as her mother promised—her Chinese genes have been activated and she is suddenly capable of understanding. She asks her father to tell her the whole story about her mother’s flight from Kweilin, when she left the babies on the road. But this time, she asks him to “tell me in Chinese . . . Really, I can understand” (323). He does, and she understands perfectly.

Hearing the story brings June full circle. She realizes how little she knew about her mother, learns the ways in which they connect, and then immediately has to let go of her mother. “I lay awake thinking about my mother’s story, realizing how much I have never known about her. . . Finding my mother in my father’s story and saying goodbye before I have a chance to know her better” (330). What June realizes is that it is too late for her to know her mother in any other way but through stories; at the same time, though, she seems to sense that even if her mother were alive she would only come to know her through hearing her stories. She has discovered, perhaps a little late, the power of storytelling in the mother-daughter matrix, its ability to teach, soothe, instruct, cure, heal—the power of stories to cross boundaries, illuminate shared territory, link generations across time and oceans. Suyuan’s death signals the other mothers to begin telling their stories, their secrets, their lives while their stories still have the ability to transform and before they are lost forever in voiceless ghosthood.
Missing Page 102
CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION: DISTINGUISHING A PART FROM APART

"Now of course, I expected The Woman Warrior to be read from the women's lib angle and the Third World angle, the Roots angle; but it is up to the writer to transcend trendy categories. What I did not foresee was the critics measuring the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental. About two-thirds of the reviews did this."
--Maxine Hong Kingston in "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," an article responding to her reviews

"What I found myself writing was a second book based on what I thought various people wanted--something fairy-tale like, or exotic, or cerebral, or cultural, or historical, or simple, or complex. Simultaneously, I found myself writing the imagined review--that the book was cliched, sentimental, contrived . . . "

Criticism does not occur in a vacuum. As these quotes show, both Kingston and Tan are sensitive to the way their books are being received and read, and both women--though more obviously Kingston--demonstrate a concern that they not be reduced to an ethnic pigeonhole. New York Times Book Review Critic Orville Schell suggests that "out of this experience of being caught between countries and cultures . . . writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston and now Amy Tan have begun to create what is, in effect, a new genre of American fiction" (3). To some extent, this is true; however, one would have to broaden the category to include the work of other first-generation ethnic writers to avoid narrowing one's expectations so far that the writers begin to feel constricted. For as Kingston suggests, to lump together all writers of a particular ethnic group is inherently dangerous, as it
suggests that their experiences are so common, so homogeneous, that they speak as one. In fact, in the same article she lambastes those critics who questioned the “typicalness” of her Chinese American childhood, saying, “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision?” (63).

In analyzing these two works together, I hope I have managed to avoid making gross assumptions or conclusions about the two based on their shared ethnicity. While this common bond contributes to the similarities between the books and makes them easier to examine together, other commonalities account for the similarities as well: both are contemporary American women writers, in addition to being of Chinese heritage. And while the books share remarkably similar themes, forms, and characterizations, they also demonstrate vast differences.

All of the critics who made an association between The Joy Luck Club and The Woman Warrior noted the stylistic difference between Kingston’s work and Tan’s. One critic noted that while both make “exceptionally good use of short stories to present the many strands of an intricate cultural tapestry, . . . Tan’s style is less austere than Kingston’s, and her subject matter offers a more direct emotional appeal to the reader” (Rubin 13). True, Tan’s stories are easier to follow, easier to love; but Kingston’s “austere” style (whatever that might mean) has much more of an edge, more depth. Kingston’s characters, both real and imaginary, are unapologetic in their defiant acts, whereas Tan’s women give and take more. When Kingston’s cousins’ great-grandfather calls the girls maggots, the narrator says, “Yeah . . . our old man hates us too. What assholes” (191), while Tan’s character Rose
spends three days drugged and in bed to avoid her husband. Kingston’s women are warriors from the start; Tan’s become warriors only in crisis.

Kingston’s “warrior writing” influences her characterization as well; she does not seem to strive to make her characters likable. Not that Tan has no unlikable characters: Waverly proves herself to be “a disagreeable young woman” as one critic mildly phrased it (Gates 68) by cautioning June not to go to her hairdresser because “he is gay . . . He could have AIDS” (229). Yet Tan never seems to explain or justify Waverly’s disagreeableness, and it becomes a barrier to the reader’s concern for her. Kingston, on the other hand, succeeds at showing the narrator to be not only disagreeable but hateful in her cruel encounter with the silent girl she tries to torture into speaking; and yet, by this point in the book, we understand so much about the narrator that it is clear she is projecting her own “voice frustration” onto the other girl, and somehow the event becomes as tragic for the narrator as for her victim. At any rate, Kingston does not soft-pedal the experience as one senses Tan does with her characters in order to make them more likable. Kingston shows us her character’s cruelty in all its dimensions.

And while themes of silence and identity formation appear in both works, the authors approach those themes very differently. Tan’s approach is subtle; her feminist message that women need to find voices of their own is conveyed implicitly in the course of each of her stories. The same message in Kingston’s hands is dealt with more forcefully: “In China there were no solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. . . . When one of my parents or the emigrant villagers said, ‘Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds,’ I would thrash on the floor and scream so hard I couldn’t
talk. I couldn’t stop” (46). Whereas Tan’s silent women passively wait until a crisis forces them to find a voice, Kingston shows us a woman who has always fought for hers, one who has always rebelled, even violently, against the cultural and sexist norms that try to silence her. Kingston writes as the woman warrior fights: she slays the robber barons who try to steal her voice.

Furthermore, Kingston might disapprove of the easy resolution at the end of Tan’s novel. In an interview, Kingston said, “If I were a person writing even a few years from now, it would be an entirely different book. Isn’t that funny, when you think of writers striving for ‘definitive biographies’?” (Thompson 12), thus demonstrating her own disbelief in absolute resolution.

At the end of The Woman Warrior, the narrator has come to no neat conclusions about the role of her mother or the other women in her life. She still has throat pain, and her mother is still confusing her by “saying the opposite.” Only through the story of Ts’ai Yen is she able to “compartamentalize” her relationship with her mother; they remain separate entities with a large gap still between them. In the final chapter of The Joy Luck Club, though, June not only comes to understand her mother, but she is in some sense reunited with her through meeting her half-sisters. And while Kingston’s narrator remains unsure of what is Chinese, trying to sort it from what is “just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just lying” (105), June tells us that “the minute our train leaves the Hong Kong border and enters Shenzhen, China, I feel different. . . . I think, My mother was right. I am becoming Chinese” (306). Kingston would never say this, and her narrator never “becomes Chinese.” Throughout The Woman Warrior, in fact, she adamantly refuses to
romanticize China, refuses to imagine that she is Chinese rather than Chinese American. At the end of the work, she has come to accept some parts of her as Chinese, but she still questions whether other parts are.

As texts about woman’s archetypal quest for identity and separation from the mother, however, both works are powerful, despite the stylistic differences. Both Kingston and Tan present us with women who have discovered the fundamental truth of identity: that no one exists apart from others, that female identity is fundamentally composed through relationship with others. Or, as Helene Cixous describes it in “The Laugh of the Medusa,”

If there is a ‘propriety of woman,’ it is paradoxically her capacity to depropriate unselfishly: body without end, without appendage, without principal ‘parts.’ If she is a whole, it’s a whole composed of parts that are wholes, not simple partial objects but a moving, limitlessly changing ensemble, a cosmos tirelessly traversed by Eros, an immense astral space not organized around any one sun that’s any more of a star than the others. (889)

Perhaps, as Schell speculated, Kingston and Tan are creating a new genre of American literature, one that strives to explore, if not necessarily to bridge the gap of dual ethnicity. But their works also continue the long tradition of women writing their own lives, seeking themselves and their mothers through words.
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