A Chinese Woman's Response to Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior

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The Woman Warrior, a favourite book of many of my American friends, should have been a very interesting book for me, as I was a visiting professor from the People’s Republic of China.

However, it did not appeal to me when I read it for the first time, because the stories in it seemed somewhat twisted, Chinese perhaps in origin but not really Chinese any more, full of American imagination. Furthermore, some of Kingston’s remarks offended my sense of national pride as well as my idea of personal discretion.

The first chapter, “No Name Woman,” reads as if it could have been true in old China, but a Chinese writer would have told it differently without the imagined situations. In the chapter, “The White Tigers,” Kingston has actually interwoven two ancient Chinese stories: the story of Yue Fei, a very famous hero and general in the Song Dynasty, and Hua Mu Lan. These two stories are well known to every Chinese, man and woman, old and young. In addition to that, I felt that Kingston held too much bitterness against her mother and her Chinese origin, accusing the mother of telling her too many ghost stories.

In the Chinese language, the word “ghost” may imply many different concepts. Children brought up in China cannot fail to understand it. But Kingston used the word in too many places with different connotations, so that it may arouse confusion among Westerners and give them a wrong impression: that Chinese abuse the word “ghost.”

And I disagreed with Kingston on some other points in the book. For instance: “The Japanese though ‘little’ were no ghosts, the only foreigners considered not ghosts by Chinese.” This is not true; actually we Chinese did use the derogatory meaning of ghost for Japanese invaders as well.

When I read the part in which Kingston says “the Chinese are too loud” and “tell lies,” I was personally offended. This is simply not true, I thought. To me, Americans are just as loud or louder. What Kingston calls “lies” are nothing more than courteous ways of putting things. Don’t the Americans also have many hypocritical ways of saying things? When they ask, “How are you?” for example, do they really want to know? At this
point, I decided not to teach this book to my Chinese students when I returned home.

However, when Kingston’s book was studied in Professor Amy Ling’s American Ethnic Literature course at Rutgers, especially after the professor’s lecture and the discussion among the students, I completely changed my ideas. Thanks to the Chinese-American professor and the American students, I could see the book in a different light. It is, after all, an American story, not a Chinese one. Some of my assumptions were wrong from the very beginning because I am Chinese.

Kingston’s purpose is to make use of all these stories to show how a Chinese-American finds her own identity, how much she has to struggle through — the old culture as well as the new — and how she uses words and stories to rebel against the old and to contribute to the new.

Viewing the book from this perspective, I can accept her distortions of the stories which have always been so lofty and sacred in my homeland.

People from every country have their own ways of happiness and sorrow, laughter and tears. The expressions of these emotions are only or mostly understandable among the people within a given culture. Once people emigrate, they become a new people influenced by their new country; and it then becomes difficult for those from the “Old Country” to share the emotions and thoughts of the emigrants.

Chinese emigrants must have gone through tremendous difficulties, bearing the old world’s superstitions and mysteries, entering into the new world’s liberty, reason, science, and technology. What a mixture. No wonder it is hard for me, a Chinese, to share the imagination of a Chinese-American. Yet now I want to take back this story to teach. I also want to do something to add to the voice of Maxine Hong Kingston. I have things to say to both Chinese and Chinese-Americans.

In mixing ancient Chinese stories with her own imagination, Kingston has created a new woman warrior who actually challenges old and new. This warrior, Kingston herself, is bold, daring, and rebellious. She reveals what should be kept secret in the old world; at the same time, she points out how her new life in the free world seems so uninteresting, haunted by “ghosts,” news boys and garbage collectors. She must break away from both worlds, use her own words as swords to avenge wrongs, to fight, and to build.

There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls. When you raise girls, you’re raising children for strangers. Although this concept is from old China, I am ashamed to admit that negative feelings for women have not yet been completely wiped out from Chinese minds in “New China”. Disregard for women is deeply rooted in the thousands of years of feudal history. Now in New China, laws have given equal rights to women. Currently Chinese women have in many respects more
independence and freedom than ever before. Women now work for equal pay; economic independence is the most essential element in women’s emancipation. Also children at eighteen may now choose either their mother’s or father’s family names.

However, just as the British proverb says, “Old Ways Die Hard”; ideas rooted for centuries in a people’s mind are not wiped out easily, quickly, and completely either by law or even revolution. Feudalism which had dominated China for thousands of years pulses in the blood of every Chinese. Therefore, even after thirty-seven years of liberation by the Chinese Communist Party, it still casts its shadow here and there.

Nowadays, thanks to the “open door policy”, I can see a great many young men and women holding hands, embracing, or even kissing each other in the streets or on a bus. Such public displays were impossible ten years ago and even criminal in olden times. I happen to think it delightful that our young people can feel free to show their affection openly. Yet, how many people are throwing a disapproving glance at them, thinking in their small minds “what a cheap girl.” Some even voice such thoughts in an undertone. However, never does anyone say, “What a cheap boy.”

“No Name Woman” reminds me of dozens of true stories I know about — to which I would like to add at this time.

Once I lived in a Beijing compound of many courtyards. The son of a neighbour had a woman come to sleep with him every night. Mind you, this was in the late seventies, not the time of “No Name Woman”. We neighbours couldn’t say or do anything against it, but a lot of gossip arose. Actually, it was the young man who was not sincere; he used the woman for some time, grew tired of her, and started to beat her. What I heard from the neighbouring elderly ladies was again, “The girl is cheap. It serves her right”. Ergo: the fault is always the woman’s.

In my childhood, I had a wet-nurse whom I called “Mama”. Ever since I can remember, the life story of “mama” has haunted me. She was a genuinely kind woman. Whenever I felt bored, I would beg her to tell me again and again the story of my counterpart, “Little Plaits”, her daughter. She gave birth to her daughter a few days before my mother had me. Her husband, a poor idle kind of peasant, a ne’er-do-well, took to drinking and gambling and did not feed his family. Not wanting to see her first child die, “Mama” looked for a post as wet-nurse in the city so that she could earn a living for herself and pay for someone else to feed her daughter in the country. Thus, sadly, she parted with her own baby and came to care for me. Once when she told me that “Little Plaits” was having her feet bound and could not walk without pain, I cried big tears, begging to be allowed to see her and talk her out of the idea. Once a month, “Mama’s” husband came to my home to ask for money; I would run out with a stick and try to scare him away, because every time he came, I would see “Mama”
in tears. She hated him, and therefore I hated him too. She was reluctant to give him money to squander, but as he was her husband, she had to support him for all his idling, drinking and gambling at the cost of her own suffering and labour.

When I myself became a mother, I longed to see “Mama” and “Little Plaits” and wrote a letter to the address from my childhood’s memory. When finally an answering letter arrived, “Little Plaits” told me that “Mama” was dead. After her husband had died, she had continued to support the family including an elder brother of her husband. Gossip concerning her relationship with this brother-in-law grew to such an extent that she hanged herself.

In “No Name Woman”, Mrs. Kingston imagined “Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food.” That is true yet not true. In China, if anything happens or even nothing happens but just gossip, the blame usually falls on woman. Disregard for women is still in people’s minds, not in printed documents which always refer to men and women as equals. This is the stubborn, undyingly feudal influence of ancient ways, of eternal China. Yet just this influence, this intangible, invisible concept can grow in human minds to a degree sufficient to claim people’s lives.

Kingston knows people and how to tell stories. She found her voice and fought like a real warrior by telling the sad stories of her two aunts, No Name Woman and Moon Orchid. Who is going to sing the stories of our own women, thousands of Chinese women, living or dead, withering or already withered under the invisible but nevertheless smothering “moral system?”

Ever since 1949, our artists and playwrights have paid a great deal of attention to the subject of marriage. Many plays and operas deal with the problem of freedom of love, choosing lovers for oneself rather than one’s parents’ choice. Gradually, people are becoming tired of this theme. Many current writers are interested in the Cultural Revolution, in the injured generation or the current issues in China.

Few writers are interested in the plight of women. Yet women need more than the freedom to choose their own lovers, because they don’t just get married and live happily ever after. Women should have the right to live a rich and rounded life, like men. They should be treated as independent beings, not just the housekeepers or the pets of men. Their equality should become one of fact, not just of law.

Women intellectuals, for instance, love to think and reason; yet how much understanding do they receive from society? And how much support do they obtain even from other women?

In China, we badly need books about women, dealing with the subject of womanhood in some depth, not just “Xiao Er Hei Got Married” or “Niao
Nui Xu” (two operas quite popular in the ’50s and ’60s). We need books like *The Woman Warrior*. How many “No Name Women” were there in China, or Moon Orchids who never came to the United States but suffered as widows from the prime of their lives to their graves? Many, many…yet, who cares? Who has spoken for them? For there are always more ‘important’ problems to be discussed by writers.

*The Woman Warrior* is indeed a good book. I will not only teach this book to my students after my return to China, but, as Maxine Hong Kingston did, will search for my own reed pipe and sing for my own kind.