"Talking-Story' in The Woman Warrior:
An Analysis of the Use of Folklore"
Carol Mitchell

In the following essay, Mitchell delineates Kingston's integration of oral storytelling into her written narrative in The Woman Warrior.

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts, by Maxine Hong Kingston, is one of a number of novels that have explored various aspects of the immigrant experience in the United States. The novel is autobiographical and focuses not on those who themselves immigrated to the U.S. from China, but rather on the first generation born in this country. Through her stories the narrator draws us into her problems of growing up in an immigrant community and her struggle with various aspects of her Chinese heritage: her fear of being sold as a slave if she should return to China, her fear of ghosts, her fear of insanity, and her continual fear of being worthless just because she was born female.

Although the author was brought up in Stockton, California, the narrator never mentions the name of her hometown; it is only clear that the town is in California and probably close to San Francisco. What is important is that the narrator grew up in a Chinese community surrounded by a larger American community. Many, if not most, of the people in the community came from New Society Village in China, a peasant village seemingly rather isolated from the mainstream of Chinese culture and speaking one of the more obscure dialects of the Chinese language. Since the narrator's parents, as well as many of the other immigrants, assume that they will return to China when they have made enough money, the parents and the community are attempting to teach the children the traditional village values. Ties with the village are still continued through the exchanges of letters with relatives, and the children are sent to Chinese school as well as to the American school.

There are, of course, pressures that are antithetical to the continuance of village traditions, for instance, the American schools that the children are required to attend where they must speak English and where they learn to question many of the old beliefs. The secretiveness of the Chinese parents themselves also plays a part in this loss of tradition. Some of the secrecy is because of the immigration authorities and the fear of deportation, but not all of it is for that reason.

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They 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. The Chinese I know hide their names; sojourners take new names when their lives change and guard their real names with silence.

How can Chinese keep any traditions at all? They don't even make you pay attention, slipping in a ceremony and clearing the table before the children notice specialness. The adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask. You get no warning that you shouldn't wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chop-sticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it's during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly.
With the Chinese peasants as with many other peasant groups there is a reticence about speaking of certain subjects for fear of making the gods jealous or for fear that mentioning a subject may make it happen. And although it is not mentioned in the novel, another probable reason for the parents' reticence in speaking of some traditional customs is the embarrassment the immigrant parents feel if their Americanized children laugh at them for continuing old customs that the children believe to be unimportant and silly in America.

The children too may be uninterested in learning the old ways. As the narrator says: "I think that if you don't figure it out, it's all right. Then you can grow up bothered by neither ghosts nor deities. Gods you avoid won't hurt you. I don't see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years." However, the narrator is not really able to dismiss the old traditions so easily, and the novel itself becomes a way of integrating Chinese and American traditions, attitudes and experiences.

It is on the author's integration of oral story telling into the written story telling of the novel that I will focus, for the author uses the oral stories to structure the novel as well as to show the character of the narrator. During the narrator's childhood her mother "talks-story," telling the children myths, legends, family narratives and other memorate from China. Just as those narratives were used to help structure and explain life experiences, so the novel is talking-story in order to explain the past. The narrator interweaves her mother's traditional legends and family narratives with her own additions and interpretations in an attempt to understand herself, her mother and her other female relatives, and Chinese and Chinese-American women in general.

The novel does not follow the life of the narrator chronologically, but rather our understanding of the narrator gradually becomes clearer as we learn about her reactions to the stories she heard in her youth. Each of the five sections of the novel tells the story of a woman with whom the narrator has identified herself either because she fears becoming like the woman or because the woman gives her hope for her future self. During the course of the novel the narrator moves closer to her material as fewer and fewer fictional distancing techniques are used to interpret her past, and it is only in the last section of the novel that the narrator talks-story about herself.

In the first three sections of the novel the narrator retells oral stories that her mother had told to her during childhood. These oral stories contribute to the fictional distance the author has from her material, but in the last two sections the narrator tells the story primarily from her own experience which means that most of the fictional distance has been removed. Basically the progression from fictional distance to immediacy is as follows:

Section I tells the story of a third person which was told by a second person to the narrator who then tells the story as a narrative in the third person.

Section II also tells the story of a third person which was told by a second person to the narrator, but this time the story is told as a first person narrative.

Section III tells the story of a second person which was told by that person to the narrator who then tells the story in the third person with many first person quotations.

Section IV tells a second person's story as it was seen and participated in by the narrator.

Section V tells the narrator's own story.

The first section, "No Name Woman," tells the story the narrator has heard from her mother, of a young aunt whose husband left China to find work. More than a year after he had left she became pregnant. The villagers raided the house on the night the baby was to be born. After the raid the
aunt gave birth to the baby in the pigsty and then drowned herself and the baby in the well, and the family from then on acted as if the woman had never been born.

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on & Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born.

The story was briefly told by the mother and focused on the horrors of the raid and the condemnation to oblivion without giving any details about the kind of woman the aunt was or what her motivations might have been. However, the narrator feels haunted by the ghost of this forgotten aunt, and she feels the need to better understand the aunt. Since the aunt has officially been forgotten she cannot ask her parents for more information about her, so she speculates: "Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help." The narrator imagines the aunt to be somewhat similar to herself but placed in the misogynic and superstition ridden peasant Chinese village.

The story's impact on the narrator is primarily two-fold. First, her speculations about the aunt's desire to be attractive and its disastrous consequences lead her to fear being attractive to boys, so even though she would like to go on dates she decides that being sisterly makes more sense. Perhaps more important is that she realizes that the real punishment for the aunt was being forgotten, for since she receives no offerings from her living relatives her ghost is condemned to wander hungry and alone forever. The support of the family is necessary not only in life but in death as well.

The aunt's story is a part of the narrator's invisible or ghost world that she must come to terms with during the course of the novel: "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fit in solid America." The narrator must deal with the question of whether such a thing could happen to her or not, even in America. Her aunt's marriage was arranged; will hers be? The villagers raided the aunt's family for the aunt's wrong doing; might the villagers in America do the same kind of thing to her family? If the narrator steps outside the traditional Chinese woman's role and acts like an American woman, will she hex her family here in America? Just which ones of the Chinese customs pertain to American life? It is also in this short section that the narrator first discusses arranged marriages, foot binding and the importance of a woman bearing male children--customs that show the secondary importance of women in Chinese society and that make the narrator fear returning to China.

The second section of the novel, "White Tigers," tells the legend of a famous woman warrior, Mu Lan: "She (the narrator's mother) said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman." This legend, along with other legends of Chinese women warriors, showed an exciting and glamorous role for women. Mu Lan became a woman warrior in order to save her elderly father from conscription and in order to right the wrongs that had been done in her village. Because she did her deeds out of filial respect, not just for personal glorification, she is an acceptable role model for a woman. Mu Lan's story is told at greater length than the story of the no name aunt. The narrator, imagining herself as the warrior woman, tells the legend in the first person. The title of the novel, The Woman Warrior, comes from this legend, for the narrator needs this heroic role model to help her feel a sense of her own worth in a culture that frequently emphasizes the worthlessness of girls. It is in this section of the novel that the narrator juxtaposes the heroic swordswoman with the folk sayings she continually heard about women.
'Girls are maggots in the rice.' 'It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.'

'When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls.'

The sayings hurt her feelings and made her angry, but the woman warrior gave her hope that she too could be valuable to the family.

She also felt ambiguous about the woman warrior. How could a little girl be heroic if no magic birds showed her the way to gurus as they had shown Mu Lan the way? So she worked hard at school:

\[ \text{I got straight A's Mama.} \]

\[ \text{'Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village.'} \]

\[ \text{I could not figure out what was my village and it was important that I do something big and fine, or else my parents would sell me when we made our way back to China. In China there were solutions for what to do with little girls who ate up food and threw tantrums. You can't eat straight A's.} \]

Success for a girl was not considered as something that brought credit to her own family since in China a girl would marry and go to live with her husband's family; thus, her successes were considered as minor when compared with her brothers' successes which did bring credit to the family since when brothers married they stayed with the family.

The woman warrior who is independent contrasts with the ideal wife who is passive, obedient and dependent, and since the narrator cannot be both, she feels caught in another trap.

\[ \text{Marriage and child birth strength the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc. No husband of mine will say 'I could have been a drummer but I had to think about the wife and kids. You know how it is.' Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure. Then I get bitter: no one supports me; I am not loved enough to be supported. That I am not a burden has to compensate for the sad envy when I look at women loved enough to be supported.} \]

Thus even her attempt to be heroic is not entirely satisfactory. Her American successes are some comfort: "I am worthy of eating the food." Also, she can believe that fundamentally her parents love her, but the constant repetition by her parents and other villagers of proverbial sayings which emphasize the worthlessness of girls force her to constantly prove to herself and others that she has some value.

The third section, "Shaman," focuses on Brave Orchid, the narrator's mother, during her years in medical school and during the time she practiced medicine in China before coming to the United States. The narrator learned these stories, along with the stories of the no name aunt and the woman warrior, from her mother's talking-story, and the narrator has mixed feelings concerning the stories about her mother as well as the other stories. On the one hand, her mother has been able to be an active--even heroic, at least in her ghost fighting--and independent woman; on the other hand, her mother accepted the slavery of girls and bought a slave, and her mother wants to return to China, where the narrator feels she might be sold as a slave. In addition, the narrator needs to understand her mother better than she has in the past, so the talking-story of the novel is an attempt to make her
mother's personality and life intelligible.

Probably because Brave Orchid's husband had been gone from China for some years. Brave Orchid was able to go to a two year school of mid-wifery. Thus even prior to her emigration she was actively making her own living rather than helplessly remaining at home being waited on. Additionally her mother was a ghost fighter both at the school and in the countryside where she sometimes was waylaid by ghosts as she went to visit patients. Brave Orchid was a very practical woman with much common sense who was able to combine the folk medicine and magic which her patients demanded with the Western medicine she learned at the school. She refused to treat patients she could tell were dying so that she would be untainted by death and her reputation would be that of a doctor whose patients only got well. While she believed to a certain extent in the reality of ghosts, she believed a strong mind could fight against them.

Her mother's ability to fight ghosts and to call people's spirits back when they had been frightened by ghosts is some consolation to her daughter, for America is full of ghosts. There are Garbage Man Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Social Worker Ghosts; in fact, all non-Chinese are ghosts since the Chinese believed that there were no real humans but themselves and maybe the Japanese who were about half human. Fortunately, the American Ghosts are not quite as bad as the ghosts in China, for at least American Ghosts have familiar shapes while ghosts in China come in all sorts of frightening shapes--from hairy blobs that expand and contract to pillars of smoke like whirlwinds. Thus while the subtitle of the novel, A Girlhood Among Ghosts, refers to the ghosts of women ancestors and legendary women, it also refers to the American Ghosts among whom she grew up.

But her mother's talents in China are not necessarily talents the daughter wants in a mother in America. Ghost Fighters in China were big eaters and could eat anything, but the daughter finds repulsive some of the items her mother serves to her family. She is horrified by her mother's talking-story about eating monkey brains from a living monkey--supposedly a great delicacy.

The story of her mother's slave girl also bothers her, first, because it is frightening to think that girls were frequently sold as slaves, and, second, because she feels that her mother may have valued her slave more than she does her daughter. The slave knew how to bargain; the daughter not only did not know how to bargain but was also embarrassed when she had to translate her mother's bargaining in American stores. Even though her mother assured her that she paid more to the hospital when her daughter was born than she paid for the slave in China, the daughter suspects that her mother resents it.

The fourth and fifth sections of the novel focus on first hand experiences of the narrator rather than on stories that were told to her, so the following discussion of these two sections is much briefer than the discussion of the other sections since the integration of these two women's stories into the narrator's is more direct.

The fourth section of the novel, "At the Western Palace," tells the story of Brave Orchid's sister Moon Orchid who arrived in the U.S. when she was about 65 years of age and was unable to adjust to this new world and became insane. Again, the focus is on arranged marriages and helpless dependency, for Moon Orchid was married without her consent to a man considerably younger than she. For years she had lived alone in China after he emigrated. He sent her money, and she could afford to be taken care of in the traditional style of the upper class Chinese woman. But this was no preparation for moving to a new country; here she becomes paranoid, believing that Mexican Ghosts are after her, and she is only happy when she is placed in a mental asylum where she feels the other women are like her and where she feels protected.
In Moon Orchid's story the narrator tells of what she has herself seen and participated in unlike the previous women's stories which had been told to her by her mother. However, the author still keeps a considerable fictional distance in the story by using the omniscient author voice because the fictional distance corresponds with the emotional distance that the narrator needs to keep from her aunt. The narrator must come to terms with her aunt's insanity and her own fear of insanity: "I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at our house? Probably me." There had been the crazy woman in the village in China who was stoned to death that her mother talked story about, and there were several crazy women all in village families who lived close to her. Was this the result of Chinese attitudes toward women, or the result of the pressures caused by the conflict between American and Chinese attitudes toward women, or just the pressures of poverty? The narrator cannot answer the question except by showing all of these pressures as they impinge upon the life of the narrator, and the narrator's way of coming to terms with the pressures is to externalize the pressures by writing about them in the novel.

In the last section of the novel, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," the narrator talks-story about her childhood, her problems of adjusting in the American school, her fears that a marriage is being arranged for her, her guilt over her breaches of only partially understood Chinese customs, her embarrassments over her mother's Chinese behavior in the American community, and her inability to tell the difference between "true stories" and "just stories" when her mother talks-story. It is this last problem that has been explored all through the novel as the narrator remembers all of the stories about various women that her mother told. Finally it makes no difference whether the name aunt was really her aunt or whether Mu Lan was real, for they had a real impact upon her development as a woman.

The narrator ends with the legend of Ts'ai Yen, a Chinese woman who was abducted by barbarians and lived with them for some years. While she was there she heard the music of their flutes and composed a sad and angry song which she took back to China with her, and the song was handed down among her Han descendants. In many ways the narrator feels like Ts'ai Yen, living among barbarians and composing her sad and angry song, although whether the barbarians are the Americans or the Chinese immigrants is not so clear.

However, the narrator is also Mu Lan, and her novel is the revenge of the Woman Warrior since it is not longer practical to go around beheading people. For Mu Lan too used words which were carved in her back counting the injustices that she was to avenge: "The ideographs for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families.' The reporting is the vengeance." Her revenge is on those who feel women are worthless, those who restrict women and especially on those who teach women to see themselves as helpless and worthless.

**SOURCE:**