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## From the Writer

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My writing process always begins with prewriting. For me, this step is as simple as taking a piece of paper and writing notes about the exhibit text. Brainstorming helps me generate ideas and stay on topic. Then, I use my notes to formulate the skeleton of my thesis. In this essay, forming a thesis was the most challenging step. Since my writing class focused on works that are (ambiguously) autobiographical, I decided to argue about whether or not my exhibit text was autobiographical. Forming a thesis was difficult for me because I suddenly decided to switch viewpoints; rather than arguing that the exhibit text should be regarded as fiction, I decided to support its value as autobiography. I changed my mind because research for my original thesis was difficult and because I was unable to find any sources to disagree with me. After switching my topic, I was able to use my formerly supportive sources as counterargument material. Also, I knew that my thesis was genuinely debatable since I myself had debated with it.

Next, through research, I uncovered numerous secondary sources relating to the autobiographical nature of my exhibit text—sources that both agreed and disagreed with me. My research helped me to further refine my argument by providing me with forms of motive and counterargument. With both a strong thesis and many valuable secondary sources in hand, I wrote my first draft and then attended office hours to hear my professor's suggestions. I find feedback, from a professor or from my peers, to be extremely beneficial because it alerts me of flaws that I may have overlooked and provides helpful suggestions to correct these flaws. Then, I revise according to feedback. The use of brainstorming, a strong thesis, research for secondary sources, feedback, and careful revision helps me to produce a successful essay.

—Jenessa Job

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## THE WOMAN WARRIOR: A QUESTION OF GENRE

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In 1975, Maxine Hong Kingston published her critically acclaimed autobiography, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, which describes her experiences and struggles while growing up as a Chinese-American girl in California. The actual genre of *The Woman Warrior*, however, has been widely disputed among critics. In fact, epitomizing the genre debate, the book itself is labeled “Fiction/Literature” on the back cover, while the front cover proclaims the novel’s acquisition of the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction. Critic Patricia Blinde refers to *The Woman Warrior* as “a collage of genres” and describes the book thus: “It is at once a novel, an autobiography, a series of essays and poems. But while the work capitalizes on the conventions of various genres, it also evades the limitations of any one genre” (qtd. in Lightfoot 58).

In her article “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese-American Autobiographical Controversy,” Sau-ling Cynthia Wong collects and discusses criticism from numerous scholars who dismiss *The Woman Warrior* as a work of fiction clumsily disguised as autobiography. For instance, Benjamin Tong describes *The Woman Warrior* as “fiction passing for autobiography” (qtd. in Wong 249), and Jeffery Chan accuses Kingston of “distributing an obvious fiction for fact” (qtd. in Wong 249). One of Kingston’s especially vocal critics, Frank Chin, objects to what is possibly the most noticeable fictionalization in *The Woman Warrior*: Kingston’s distortion of the Chinese folk story of Fa Mu Lan. Chin accuses Kingston of twisting the Fa Mu Lan story to suit her own stereotypes, and he states that the distortion “is simply a device for destroying history and literature” (3).

In “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?,” Wong writes that, “On the most obvious formal level, [*The Woman Warrior*] violates the popular perception of autobiography as an ordered shaping of life events anchored in the so-called external world” (250). Admittedly, *The Woman Warrior* does not follow the template of traditional autobiography. Even Kingston herself admitted in an interview that, regarding genre, she finds the normal boundaries too confining and prefers to take an unconventional approach:

I think that in every one of my books I had to create a new way of telling what I had to say. And I feel that I break through pigeonholes of what’s fiction and what’s nonfiction, of what an autobiography is. My next thought is trying to figure out a way to integrate fiction and nonfiction. (qtd. in Fishkin 791)

It is also interesting to note that it was not Kingston who decided to label *The Woman Warrior* as nonfiction. The decision was actually made by her publisher, who “needed to define a category for *The Woman Warrior*, and suggested that nonfiction was more marketable” (Huntley 24). Kingston only agreed to this when her publisher pointed out that even poetry is categorized as nonfiction (Huntley 24). Despite this, Kingston deliberately placed the word “memoir” directly in the title of her book, which indicates that even though she acknowledges that *The Woman Warrior* is not purely nonfiction, she still considers it autobiographical.

Therefore, even though the critics who argue that *The Woman Warrior* should not be labeled as autobiography do see the elements of fictionalization which Kingston indeed added to the book, they—especially Chin—fail to grasp the reason behind these fabrications: Kingston’s exaggerations serve to create an accurate depiction of her thoughts, her feelings, and her experience as a Chinese-American child. Upon examining *The Woman Warrior* and comparing the book to two theories of autobiography, it is clear that although Kingston’s work contains numerous elements of fictionalization, at the core it remains an autobiography. Kingston uses embellishments of fiction as mere devices to accurately portray her personality and her confusion during her coming-of-age. Kingston’s unusual yet unique strategy and style combine to create an artful whole that beautifully

embodies Maxine's coming-of-age and her childhood struggle to find balance and voice.<sup>1</sup>

The theories presented in the leading chapter of Roy Pascal's *Design and Truth in Autobiography* offer strong support for *The Woman Warrior's* status as an autobiographical work. First of all, Pascal repeatedly emphasizes that, regardless of the factual accuracy of the details, "The value of an autobiography depends ultimately on the spirit of the writer" (19). In other words, if the autobiography lacks a defined personality behind the words, then it is valueless. In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine's personality is consistently present: she is imaginative, perceptive, and confused. In the first chapter of the book, Kingston illustrates the imaginative side of Maxine's personality as Maxine speculates about No-Name Woman, the aunt who was obliterated entirely from the memory of her family for committing adultery and subsequently becoming pregnant. Maxine muses:

Fear at the enormities of the forbidden kept her desires delicate, wire and bone. She looked at a man because she liked the way the hair was tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip. For warm eyes or a soft voice or a slow walk—that's all—a few hairs, a line, a brightness, a sound, a pace, she gave up family. (Kingston 8)

Although Maxine's mother, Brave Orchid, tells her only the basic details of No-Name Woman's story, Maxine uses them as springboard to imagine her aunt into existence. Likewise, the manner in which Maxine responds to Brave Orchid and Brave Orchid's "talk-story"—verbally relayed stories based upon Chinese myth and fact—shows Maxine's perceptivity. For example, Brave Orchid tells Maxine of a helpful slave girl she bought in China for only fifty American dollars, and she complains that she had to pay two hundred American dollars to the hospital for the birth of Maxine. "My mother's enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl" (82), Maxine comments. "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. . . . You can't eat straight A's" (46). Yet by adding that straight A's can't be eaten, Maxine admits that as long as she is a girl, her accomplishments, no matter how big or how fine, will never satisfy her parents. Maxine's inability to please her Chinese parents and simultaneously achieve

American success parallels the conflict she faces as China and America play tug-of-war with her cultural identity. She must learn to balance the two extremes, to settle this confused side of her personality.

The above examples show that Kingston indeed weaves personality into all aspects of the book—a critical characteristic of autobiography, according to Pascal. Moreover, Pascal characterizes autobiography as something that “offer[s] an unparalleled insight into the mode of consciousness of other men” (1). *The Woman Warrior* definitely accomplishes this, though perhaps in a way that does not correspond to the typical autobiography. Instead of relaying the events of her life, interpreting them, and explaining their significance, Kingston tells her story in an episodic manner, often jumping from one event to another without overtly clarifying the connection. She also does not always state her thoughts directly. Nevertheless, Kingston’s unusual mixing of fact with fantasy and talk-story reveals Maxine’s experience rather than obscures it. The reader must sort through the conglomeration of stories and separate fact from fiction, just as Maxine must grapple with the difference between the real and the fake:

Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things you are in 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? (Kingston 5)

Kingston leaves many questions unanswered to paint Maxine’s confusion so vividly that the reader, forced to experience uncertainty alongside Maxine, cannot ignore it. In this way, Kingston unwaveringly exposes the reader to her “mode of consciousness.”

Although Pascal’s characteristics of autobiography support *The Woman Warrior*’s status as an autobiographical work, they alone are not sufficient to refute the critics who consider the book fictional. This is because Pascal’s criteria—a defined personality, insight into “mode of consciousness”—are broad enough to apply to many works of fiction, particularly novels. What, then, distinguishes *The Woman Warrior* from a novel?

If the theories from H. Porter Abbott's article, "Autobiography, Autography, Fiction," are also applied to *The Woman Warrior*, then the book's status as autobiography becomes clearer. One major facet of Abbott's theory states that "autobiography will always lack in its protagonist the kind of crisp identity one finds in characters belonging to the well-made plot. . . . The identity it seeks to express is always blurred" (609). This concept coincides well with *The Woman Warrior*; it reflects Maxine's identity confusion. Less obviously, it explains Kingston's autobiographical strategy. Kingston does not describe her life as a linear progression from birth to adulthood. Instead, she begins with the story of No-Name Woman, continues with a fantasy of herself as the fabled Chinese woman warrior Fa Mu Lan, describes the life of her mother and the advent of Brave Orchid's sister in America, and closes the book with a chapter that is, finally, specifically about herself. Only the last chapter is entirely and exclusively about the life of Maxine. However, all of the chapters relate to her indirectly. In "Hunting the Dragon in Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*," Marjorie Lightfoot explains the arrangement of Kingston's chapters:

Kingston presents discrete reminiscences that do not focus directly on her own immediate experience, except in one case. But all the stories have affected her life, necessitating analytical and imaginative responses to a variety of events. (59)

For example, although most of the events in "Shaman" revolve around Brave Orchid and even take place before Maxine's birth, it is appropriate that Brave Orchid have a prominent presence in *The Woman Warrior* because of her enormous influence in Maxine's life:

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

Maxine's head is "stuffed" with Brave Orchid's talk-stories. During the daytime, she banishes Brave Orchid's tales from her mind. Yet at night, these stories—stories of boxes of ashes next to the birth bed lest the newborn baby is a girl, stories of babies born with defects abandoned in an

outhouse to die—haunt Maxine’s dreams. Under Brave Orchid’s influence, Maxine carries her suitcase full of Chinese “impossible stories” with her in America; her mother, and China, are always present. Similarly, “At the Western Palace” tells the story of Maxine’s aunt, Moon Orchid, and her arrival in America to live with Maxine’s family. Not only is Maxine absent during the major confrontation of this chapter, but she also is not even narrating. She slips into a third-person role, shifting the focus from herself to Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid, and the cultural clash which the chapter represents. “At the Western Palace” describes the collision of two extremes: China, in the form of Moon Orchid, and America, represented by Brave Orchid’s children. Brave Orchid acts as the mediator between the two, attempting to harmoniously balance the two poles—just as Maxine must learn to do.

Furthermore, in “Autobiography, Autography, Fiction,” Abbott stresses that the primary difference between autobiography and fiction is the presence of a distinct ending—or lack thereof: “Standing analytically apart from his narrated self, [the author] is aware that insofar as his narrative is about himself it can have no conclusion to give it final shape” (609). This lack of “final shape,” according to Abbott, also explains why the protagonist in an autobiography cannot have an identity as “crisp” as the protagonist in a fictional story. A comparison of the ending of *The Woman Warrior* to Abbott’s theory defends an autobiographical reading of the book. Kingston ends the last chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” with talk-story: “Here is a story my mother told me,” she writes, “not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk-story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (Kingston 206). Talk-story as a conclusion is indefinite simply because talk-story itself is indefinite. Yet, it is an appropriate ending for *The Woman Warrior*, not only because talk-story is a mixture of fact and fiction like the book as a whole, but also because this particular talk-story is partially Brave Orchid’s and partially Maxine’s. This symbolizes the balance established at the end of the book, as Maxine learns to come to terms with her Chinese-American identity.

Additionally, Kingston’s falsification of the Fa Mu Lan story does not disqualify *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiography. Abbott declares, “Historical truth or falsity are important only insofar as they express the



identity of the author” (613). Chin, however, clearly thinks differently and protests strongly to Kingston’s alterations to the story:

Kingston takes a childhood chant, “The Ballad of Mulan,” which is as popular today as “London Bridge Is Falling Down,” and rewrites the heroine, Fa Mulan, to the specs of the stereotype of the Chinese woman as a pathological white supremacist victimized and trapped in a hideous Chinese civilization. (3)

Undoubtedly, Kingston does embellish the Fa Mu Lan story. She takes the foundation of the ballad and transforms it into a radically different, much more complex story in which Fa Mu Lan spends years learning to become a warrior, has a child, keeps the baby with her during battle in a sling beneath her armor, and allows her parents to physically carve Chinese ideographs into the skin of her back as symbols of revenge. However, according to Abbott, since Kingston’s modifications to the story do not obscure her identity, they are tolerable. Contrary to “destroying history and literature” as Chin claims (3), Kingston’s version of Fa Mu Lan is highly symbolic, and the “White Tigers” chapter contributes greatly to the overall themes of the book. Rather than appreciating the emblematic success of Kingston’s version of Fa Mu Lan, though, Chin misinterprets this rendition, especially the tattooing of Fa Mu Lan, as “ethical male domination or misogynistic cruelty being inflicted on Mulan” (6). This interpretation is flawed: the tattooing is not performed simply because Fa Mu Lan is a woman. Fa Mu Lan’s parents say, “We are going to carve revenge on your back. We’ll write out oaths and names. . . . Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice” (Kingston 34). Misogyny is entirely absent from this scene. Rather, the carvings represent revenge—as explicitly stated by the parents in the book—in the form of words:

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 on our backs. . . . And I have so many words—“chink” words and “gook” words too—that they do not fit on my skin. (53)

This quote is Maxine’s comparison of herself to Fa Mu Lan. Maxine acknowledges that she has the potential to express the words on her skin—an appropriate metaphor because as Maxine struggles to find her



cultural balance throughout *The Woman Warrior*, she also learns to find her voice. Maxine's likening of herself to Fa Mu Lan foreshadows events in the closing chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," when Maxine fights against her own silence. This conflict culminates with an explosive confrontation between Maxine and her mother, in which Maxine finally verbalizes the frustration she feels with Brave Orchid's talk-stories and constant cutting remarks about Maxine's appearance, intelligence, and future. To be able to put her thoughts into words at last is a drastic step which represents the discovery of Maxine's voice—the voice that will strengthen and mature to become Kingston, author of *The Woman Warrior*. By dismissing Fa Mu Lan's words as misogyny, Chin overlooks the symbolic nature of Kingston's version of Fa Mu Lan and its relation to the rest of the book; his interpretation is invalid because he does not realize that Kingston's Fa Mu Lan fantasy actually shows Maxine's desperate desire to break the mold of the typical woman, just as Fa Mu Lan does, and the potential words Maxine carries with her during her silent childhood.

Maxine's potential words eventually become *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's autobiography. Critics have indeed debated about *The Woman Warrior's* genre for years, claiming that the book's fictionalizations disqualify it as autobiography. Nevertheless, careful comparisons of Kingston's style, strategy, and passages from the book to the theories of Abbott and Pascal demonstrate that beneath the outer shell of exaggerations and embellishments, *The Woman Warrior* is autobiographical. Kingston's fictionalizations simply serve to strengthen an already powerful tale, transforming a life story into a work of autobiographical art.

## NOTES

1. In this essay, the name “Maxine” will relate to the protagonist who narrates the story, while the name “Kingston” will refer to the author writing the story.

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