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“The beginning is hers, the ending, mine”: Cross-Cultural and -Generational Communication in *The Woman Warrior*

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Cross-Cultural and -Generational Communication in The Woman Warrior

“Before we can leave our parents, they stuff our heads like the suitcases which they jam-pack with homemade underwear” (87), writes Maxine Hong Kingston in The Woman Warrior (1975). In this work—part cultural theory, part memoir, part autobiography—Hong Kingston recounts growing up female and Chinese–American in an immigrant community in Stockton, California during the 1940s and 50s. And as the initial quote suggests, Hong Kingston’s story and sense of self are inextricably tied to her relationship with her parents, particularly her mother. What makes this narrative especially compelling is its integration of Kingston’s lived experience with her mother’s “talk-stories,” producing a kind of narrative confusion—in which her mother’s voice and her own are entwined on the page—that perhaps mirrors Kingston’s own confusion about her identity as a young girl. In this paper, I examine Hong Kingston’s relationship with her mother, Brave Orchid, and the ways in which the narrative represents the intricacies of their cross-cultural and cross-generational communication. In The Woman Warrior, to what extent is Brave Orchid portrayed as a representative of Chinese culture—is she simply a mouthpiece for, or relic of, an old way of life? Conversely, how does Brave Orchid, if at all, transgress those same cultural values she purports? And finally, in what ways does Brave Orchid influence Hong Kingston’s sense of culture and self? Importantly, this book, both in content and form, marks the influence of a mother on her daughter, and Hong Kingston’s enduring, endlessly complex connection to her Chinese heritage.

In many ways, Brave Orchid is figured as the ultimate representative of Chinese culture, simply because she acts as a gatekeeper for all cultural knowledge that is passed down to Hong Kingston and her siblings. In that role, Brave Orchid, along with other family members, reinforces many of the negative stereotypes that Chinese women, in comparison to men, are
useless. “From afar I can believe my family loves me fundamentally,” Hong Kingston reflects. “They only say, ‘When fishing treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls,’” she continues, “because that is what one says about daughters. But I watched such words come out of my mother’s and father’s mouths” (52). Here, Hong Kingston struggles to reconcile her parents’ love for her with the degrading gender stereotypes they propagate. Similarly, Hong Kingston remembers her mother’s story of buying a slave-nurse when she was in China. “My mother’s enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl” (82), Hong Kingston recounts, recalling her mother’s complaint that, “during the war, though, when you were born, many people gave older girls away for free. And here I was in the United States paying two hundred dollars for you” (83). Hong Kingston explains how girls are given monetary value, ranked according to their skills and usefulness. As a result, she doubly questions her worth as a woman and as a daughter.

Brave Orchid does not simply recount these traditional assumptions about women, but uses them as evidence of the shortcomings and un-Chineseness of her sister, Moon Orchid, and her children. For example, Hong Kingston writes, “Brave Orchid looked at her delicate sister. Her dainty sister would just have to toughen up” (127) and learn to work in the family-owned laundromat. Similarly, “Brave Orchid thought that her niece was like her mother, the lovely, useless type” (128). In contrast, she represents herself as tough, the result of hard work in the “wilderness” of America (133). And yet, even as Brave Orchid calls her Chinese family weak, she holds Chinese definitions of success and failure paramount, often judging her children by them. For example, Hong Kingston writes, “I got straight A’s, mama,”’ to which her mother responds, “Let me tell you a story about a girl who saved her village” (46). Her trivializing of Hong Kingston’s academic accomplishments represents how Brave Orchid sees worth and value
on a spectrum of Asian to American, but also how, as Hong Kingston suggests, perhaps no accomplishment will ever garner recognition from her mother.

Despite Brave Orchid’s reinforcement of negative stereotypes and standards, she also offers motherly empowerment and wisdom to Hong Kingston through her transgressive talk-stories. The memoir opens, in fact, with such an act of transgression: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself’” (3). Since her aunt, who Hong Kingston calls the No Name Woman, is punished by the “family’s deliberately forgetting [of] her” (16), the act of her mother’s story perhaps serves as both an act of remembrance to No Name Woman, and also of transgression, in her remembering and telling of this story. Her mother’s storytelling looks to Hong Kingston’s hidden family past as a source of knowledge, but also a healthy recognition of the trials Hong Kingston will, in time, also have to endure, the strength she will need to overcome such views and expectations of Chinese women. Hong Kingston reflects on her mother’s words: “She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman” (20). In this way, Brave Orchid, with “her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep” (19), uses her talk-stories to empower Hong Kingston in ways she would otherwise be culturally forbidden.

However, Brave Orchid is not the only character to use talk-stories as a form of communication. In fact, Hong Kingston includes her own talk-story in _The Woman Warrior_, where she part-imagines and part-recounts her mother’s heroism and intelligence while still in China. She details how her mother decided to attend the To Keung School of Midwifery where “she quickly built a reputation for being a brilliant, natural scholar who could glance at a book and know it” (63). However, Brave Orchid is not such a “natural scholar” and, perhaps even
more powerfully, secretly studies because “the sweat of hard work is not to be displayed” (64). According to Hong Kingston, Brave Orchid’s book-smarts and work ethic are only the tip of the iceberg, as she proves herself heroic and brave in battling the Sitting Ghost in the school’s dormitory: “‘You’re wrong if you think I’m afraid of you [Sitting Ghost]. You have no power over a strong woman’” (67). Therefore, in Hong Kingston’s talk-stories, Brave Orchid is represented as a warrior in her own right, with her talk-stories containing examples of female empowerment for Hong Kingston.

Beyond providing examples of female endurance, talk-stories are also integral to this mother-daughter, American-Chinese, multi-generational relationship in how they blur fact and fiction. For example, even though Brave Orchid admits to Hong Kingston that, in China, she had “two real Chinese babies who died” (132), she later denies it, saying, “‘No, you must have been dreaming. You must have been making up stories. You are all the children there are’” (103). As a result of the ambiguous and contradictory nature of her mother’s stories, Hong Kingston wonders, “as 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?” (5). In this way, Hong Kingston represents these stories as the very heart and essence of the “problem” of her Chinese-American identity and her own self- and cultural-understanding as dependent on deconstructing her mother’s talk-stories. That deconstruction is not always easy, especially, as Hong Kingston describes, for a child looking for answers: “She would begin telling the story, perhaps before I had a chance to protect myself. Then the monkey words would unsettle me; a curtain flapped loose inside my brain. I have wanted to say, ‘Stop it. Stop it,’ but not once did I say, ‘Stop it’” (91). Even as a teenager, when Hong Kingston confronts her mother, she cites talk-stories as the
main source of her confusion, saying, “I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up” (202). Here, Hong Kingston blames her mother’s “lies” for destabilizing her own sense of reality, when, in truth, that destabilizing is actually integral to the construction her identity; it is, as Hong Kingston later reflects, the “test[ing] our strength to establish realities” (5). In this way, Hong Kingston illustrates how having to interpret fact and fiction (rather than fiction from fact) leads to an ability to negotiate multiple realities.

Just as talk-stories are central to Brave Orchid and Hong Kingston’s mother-daughter communication and to the construction of both identity and reality, so too are other linguistic modes—not just the use of English versus Chinese, but what is not said, what exists in the silences. According to Brave Orchid, simple, cultural miscommunication is often the main issue: “Can’t you [Hong Kingston] take a joke? You can’t even tell a joke from real life. That’s what the Chinese say. We like to say the opposite” (203). Her mother’s quote suggests that the fault lies with Hong Kingston for not having an in-group understanding, for not being one of the “we” who gets the joke. Conversely, Hong Kingston suggests that language and the ability to express oneself through speech go deeper than simple miscommunications, but rather play a much deeper part in the immigrant experience, as ways to both control and to be controlled. For example, Brave Orchid explains why she cut Hong Kingston’s tongue as a child: “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 pronounce anything” (164). Interestingly, Brave Orchid claims that such an act was for the good of her daughter, to perhaps allow her to better assimilate through language. Hong Kingston argues the opposite that, “Maybe my mother was afraid that I’d say things like that out loud and so had to cut my tongue” (192). Hong Kingston later writes that her mother’s desire to control
her speech is not an isolated incident, but rather representative of all Chinese parents. Other Chinese-American children agree that “‘[y]ou can’t entrust your voice to the Chinese, either; they want to capture your voice for their own use. They want to fix up your tongue to speak for them’” (169). Interestingly, even though Brave Orchid and, the memoir suggests, many Chinese parents seek to capture and re-purpose the language of their children, it is perhaps these first generation immigrant children who begin to realize that they, too, hold the power of language and the keys to the interpretation of their reality.

As Hong Kingston describes, these immigrant children use that power of language as a way to belong in America, and to show proof of their belonging. However, “belonging” according to Hong Kingston requires cultural modification or erasure: “Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine” (172). In this way, language and speech are also a means of disassociation from Chinese gender norms and, consequently, a means of disassociation from Chinese immigrant mothers. Of course, not only how Hong Kingston and her peers speak, but also what they say, especially in English, holds meaning: “I remember telling the Hawaiian teacher, ‘We Chinese can’t sing ‘land where our fathers died.’ But how can I have that memory when I couldn’t talk? My mother says that we, like the ghosts, have no memories” (167). Hong Kingston illustrates how language can emphasize both one’s lack of belonging with one group and, in the same breath, realize an imaginative belonging to another group. When Hong Kingston cannot identify with the lyrics of “My Country, ‘Tis of Thee,” she, as a result, associates with her Chinese heritage even if, as Brave Orchid reminds her, she has no memory of the land where her fathers died.
However, because language, as Hong Kingston explains, in both her life and her immigrant community, is such an essential tool of self- and cultural-identification, when it is stripped away the results are all the more devastating. Almost counter-intuitively, Hong Kingston paints the absence of language—silence—as an extreme burden. For example, she describes all the things she cannot say to those outside of her family:

‘Hey, he wasn’t a farmer, he was a …’ He had been a gambler. My throat cut off the word—silence in front of the most understanding teacher. There were secrets never to be said in front of the ghosts, immigration secrets whose telling could get us sent back to China. Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell,’ said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know. (183)

Hong Kingston’s silence, as evidenced in this quote, is also that of her parents, and their secrets that are now hers to bear. Interestingly, though, Hong Kingston places the blame both on “the ghosts”—the Americans—for “not letting us talk” and the Chinese, for their secrecy; the passage suggests that her Chinese parents are not the only at fault, and, perhaps, are equally burdened with this silence that they perceive is necessary for their safety. This silencing is not just in the presence of others; she wryly reflects on just how little is said between Chinese parents and their children: “If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (185).

This burden of silence, tied to an unwillingness or inability to speak, is one with which that Hong Kingston continually struggles. She illustrates how this muteness physically manifests: “Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to
Perhaps Hong Kingston’s psychosomatic “pain in my throat” is tied to her theory that “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (186). Therefore, Hong Kingston’s sense of saneness is threatened not just by this inability to express the “true things about me” (197), but even more, I argue, by an inability to express these truths to her mother. She yearns, “If only I could let my mother know the list, she—and the world—would become more like me, and I would never be alone again” (198). Even though in the text her mother does not want to hear or listen—“I don’t feel like hearing your craziness” (200)—Hong Kingston still presents a powerful possibility: that language can be a connector not only between mother and daughter, a way to bridge the existential loneliness that comes from being unheard, but, more broadly, between an individual and the rest of the world even when it does not want to hear.

Examining the inter-generational and inter-cultural communications in *The Woman Warrior* begs the ultimate question of how Hong Kingston’s relationship with her parents shapes her identity, her relationship to her Chinese heritage, and her future. The author reflects on that question of inheritance, musing, “What I’ll inherit someday is a green address book full of names. I’ll send the relatives money, and they’ll write me stories about their hunger. I’ve been making money; I guess it’s my turn” (206). In this case, perhaps inheriting an address book from her parents is, for Hong Kingston, the equivalent of carrying on the family legacy, of having it be her “turn.” Like the mythical Chinese heroine, Fa Mu Lan, whose parents literally carve revenge into her back so that “people will know our sacrifice…and you’ll never forget either” (34), Hong Kingston also inherits her family’s familial burdens and responsibilities. But perhaps that is the price of being a woman warrior—never simply a lone fighter, but always engaged with a wider familial and cultural legacy. A central part of that legacy is becoming, in a sense, a co-author of
her mother’s talk-stories, where “the beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (206). More broadly, Hong Kingston’s narrative about communication within a family unit or within an immigrant community parallels how the book as a whole functions: it, too, is an attempt to create a family dialogue of sorts, to communicate, like mothers and daughters, across culture and time with readers who may not understand or empathize, in an effort to find—or create—intimate connections to each other.

Works Cited