The Woman Warrior: The Silent Creation of a Third Space

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Keywords
Asian Americans, identity, stereotypes, cultural stereotypes
Introduction

Dr. Rana Gautam, professor of Christopher Newport University’s social work class, begins the session by raising this question: “If African Americans are stereotyped as being violent, and Hispanic Americans are stereotyped as being lazy and hyper-sexual, then what is the stereotype attached to Asian Americans?” (Gautam 2014) Even though each student
wrote his or her individual answer down, this answer was unanimous: they are viewed as smart – perhaps they can be viewed as too smart? This perspective forms the basis of the idea that Asian Americans are the “model minority,” a group that is neither seen nor heard, a people who are praised for remaining silent, for their intelligence and meekness, and for hiding away in their Chinatowns and enclave neighborhoods.

Maxine Hong Kingston is faced with this invisibility as a second generation Chinese immigrant attempting to understand the world of her parents, and how to incorporate this ancient culture into contemporary American society. This leads her towards “a sense of split-personality and juxtaposed identity,” which emphasizes the lack of her belonging in either space (Aoki 13). This cultural dichotomy as seen in The Woman Warrior forces opposing expectations onto Maxine, turning her into an “other” that must float along the boundaries of either culture. Cultural
stereotypes and her mother’s talk-stories impose silence upon Maxine, making it difficult for her to create her own balanced Asian-American identity.

By examining the story of her No Name aunt and observing the interaction between her aunt Moon Orchid and Moon Orchid’s husband, Maxine learns how others can force her to be silent, threatening to turn her into a ghost of which her mother warns her. Furthermore, by listening to the legend of Fa Mu Lan and closely watching the girl at her school who refuses to speak, Maxine finds that silence can be a tool of protection and a means of power. Maxine must battle with these two types of silence and the Chinese idea of subordinate femininity in order to create a “third space” so she can move beyond the binary of China versus America, and embody both her heritage and the influences of her current culture.

Through providing background on the history of the Chinese immigration into the U.S. and the reactions
of the white majority (including this model minority stigma), these stereotypes, in addition to the Chinese idea of how a woman should ideally behave, can be fully examined. Additionally, Homi Bhabha’s theory of a “third space,” along with its relevance to minorities and the process of self-identification, illuminates Maxine’s own creation of location. The various modes of silence Maxine experiences through her mother’s stories, and her time at school, comprise the steps and transformative moments that allowed her to achieve this identity. When Maxine finally decides to use writing as her device for communication and representation, resulting in her “third” or hybrid space, she must leave “room for paradoxes” (Kingston 29) and understand how this space acts as a “variable reality” that does not compel her to interpret the world in dichotomous terms (57).

The Asian “Other”
The story of Chinese immigration to the U.S. has been one of confusion and paradox, including both intense prejudice and also acceptance based on perceived similar values between the white majority and this Asian minority. Chinese immigrants made up the “first large-scale Asian immigration” when they settled in California during the Gold Rush in 1848 (Rangaswamy & Shah 5). Though initially welcomed as a source of cheap labor, especially as they worked on the Transcontinental Railroad, these immigrants were quickly accused of “lowering wages and increased unemployment,” a yellow peril threatening native U.S. citizens searching for jobs (5). As a result of this prejudice, these Chinese laborers were placed in horrendous conditions often without pay; the prevailing perception that the Chinese were seen as an inferior race reinforced this discrimination, leading to the restriction of their immigration (Wei). The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 sought to prevent the entrance
of Chinese into the U.S. (Rangaswamy & Shah 5). This was not the last act passed that created obstacles for these people; the Immigration Act of 1924 banned the Chinese from being eligible for U.S. citizenship, and the Magnuson Act of 1943, passed within an environment of heightened racial tension between the U.S. and Asia due to World War II, established a quota of only 105 Chinese immigrants a year, creating a society of mostly Chinese bachelors separated from their wives and children (Wei). Eventually in the period after this war, the U.S. changed its international policy and expanded its global interests, passing the 1965 Immigration and Naturalization Act that eliminated all quotas and allowed for increased immigration, bringing in a new class of Chinese professionals and entrepreneurs (Rangaswamy & Shah 6).

However, because of past discrimination, many Chinese immigrants had escaped into their own enclaves or Chinatowns (Wei), isolating themselves
and surviving on small businesses, such as the laundry Maxine’s father operates in the novel (Healey 369). These communities were often based around clan groups, or “huiguan,” that placed those from the same Chinese region together (368). Though mostly successful, prejudice and their separation from mainstream society made it virtually impossible for these immigrants to assimilate, and they were also expected to remain invisible (Wei). The second generation of Chinese immigrants, which includes Maxine, decided to make contact with the larger society by pursuing education and diverse job opportunities outside of these enclaves (Healey 369).

Viewed by the dominant majority as valuing education and able to gain a substantial income (Rangaswamy & Shah 24), the second generation was given a new stereotype termed the “model minority” (Wei). This led to the expectation that Chinese Americans like Maxine should be quiet, polite, and
high-achieving, a type of pressure she must contend with while attempting to form her own identity (Healey 380). This stereotype has been perceived as a way for the U.S. to “reaffirm the validity of the American democratic promise that other minorities of color have collectively failed to take advantage of” (Li 9). However, despite Maxine’s “good values” such as respect for authority, a strong work ethic, a willingness to conform, and maintaining a polite silence, her voice is still imprisoned, and boundaries are placed around her ability to find a way to make sense of the two cultures competing for her loyalty (Healey 393).

**Chinese versus American Femininity**

Being a member of the ‘model minority’ is not all Maxine struggles with; Chinese culture, along with her family and community’s constant reminders, tell her that her gender is of little value. Despite being born and raised in the U.S., China proves to have a
culture “whose layers of tradition govern the lives of the Chinese, even when they are far away in America” (Huntley 90). The traditional Chinese society is a “male-dominated . . . kinship system,” and the men are the basis of community networks” (Simmons 50). Since women were raised to be eventually given away to their husband’s family, where they remained subordinate, they never truly belonged to their immediate family or to their in-laws. Asian women were supposed to be “hyperfeminine,” with “passive, weak, quiet, and excessively submissive” traits (Pyke & Johnson 36). They were not granted an “individual identity apart from their family role” (38), which aligns with the Confucian moral code, and there was a lack of “control over outcomes in their lives” (Ngan-Ling Chow 294). Because of this, these women become an “internal colonized group” within the Asian-American minority that is discriminated against in the U.S. (293).

Growing up, Maxine is continually faced with
disdain when told “there is no profit in raising girls” (Kingston 45). She often “denies her gender,” which is exemplified in the scene of the novel where she tells her mother that she is not a “‘bad girl’” (Huntley 110). Through her mother’s talk-stories, Maxine feels that she must either “grow up a warrior woman” or become an enslaved wife (Kingston 20). These stories “epitomize the contradictions in the cultural messages with which a young Chinese American woman must grapple” (Huntley 77); Maxine notices that China is full of paradoxes, as she learns about a forgotten aunt who is compared to a celebrated girl warrior, as well as the worthlessness of girls in China compared to her mother becoming a respected doctor (69). Furthermore, she observes that even though she has been told Chinese women should be seen and not heard, her mother and her friends are loud and distracting in public (83). According to Pyke and Johnson, since Maxine is a member of a community that is “racially and
ethnically subordinated” within the U.S., she is faced with “conflicting gender expectations” that confuse her by requiring “different gender performances depending on the . . . context,” which can include her family in the Chinese community, or her American school and peers (34). Living in a predominantly white world, Maxine must submit to the “controlling images” that “reaffirm whiteness as normal” (Pyke & Johnson 36) and the perspective that femininity should be “authentic” rather than the “coerced” femininity she experiences from Chinese culture (43). As a subordinate to these “elite definitions” and to what is imposed upon her by her mother and the community, Maxine is denied the “power of self-identification” (36).

Maxine recalls that “we American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American feminine,” oftentimes leading to their silence, unsure what voice would be acceptable to use (Kingston 172). In the classroom she especially faces the conflict between
feeling the urge to “confirm the stereotypes” caused by the “racialized gender expectations” of silence and submissiveness in order to fit in, while her teachers and mother simultaneously encourage her to strengthen her weak voice (Pyke & Johnson 46). With all of this being said, this silence that Maxine and her Chinese peers must overcome is not completely a factor of Asian or American femininity, but a “function of identity confusion” as well (Simmons 95). Maxine has to find a way out of this contradiction that is pulling her between being the quiet and respectful Chinese girl who is able to heroically represent her family and village, without even knowing what this village is, and assimilating into the American girl who feels she must be even more quiet, all the while trying to create an individual and unique voice valued by the larger society.

**Third Space Theory**

So what does it mean for a person to exist and
survive within a society that neither recognizes or appreciates one’s ethnicity or gender, and thus does not leave one room for any potential contributions? Furthermore, what do the binding cultural ties signify when a person attempts to carve out a niche for himself or herself in a new, dominant, and oppressive culture? Homi Bhabha defines this as “deeply negating experience, oppressive and exclusionary,” which encourages one to move beyond the “polarities of power and prejudice” into a formative space (xi). Though Maxine may feel invisible as she moves along the boundary between Chinese and American cultures, Bhabha states that this boundary is where “something begins its presencing” (1) a unique place that is on the “borderline of history and language, on the limits of race and gender” where one is able to “translate the differences” between these cultures and form a solid identity (244).

This type of hybridity allows this person to
have an active presence by throwing off the chains of “discrimination and domination” (Bhabha 159). It is “antagonistic” (225), a site where the otherized individual can exert influence with an identity which, “eluding resemblance,” conveys an authority through the power this person has found in “unpicking” and dissociating from various aspects of the cultures, and then “relinking” other aspects in a specific, individual way (265). This space allows not only for the “creator of the third space to detach temporarily from already-existing parameters and examine them with newer eyes,” but it also establishes an authority that demands to be noticed apart from the categories of culture (Benson 556).

So how does one create this third space? This will depend upon the individual; for example, the various forms of silence Maxine experiences affect the construction of her third space. However, in a more general sense, Bhabha explains that this “articulation
of difference” that “seeks to authorize cultural
hybridities” is a “complex, on-going negotiation” (3).
This negotiation is mostly one that takes place not only
between the person and his or her role in opposing
cultures, but also within the person alone. This person,
like Maxine, has to be able to articulate these often
“contradictory elements” to make the hybrid space
meaningful (37). This is why it is especially important
that Maxine works through the multiple forms of silence
existing in her life in order to discover her own method
of articulation.

According to Bhabha, the process of
identification would not involve Maxine affirming
that she is fully American or fully Chinese (which
would be assuming a “pre-given identity”), but instead
would mean she would produce her own new “image
of identity,” and that creating this space would signify
her “transformation . . . in assuming that image” (64).
In Black Skin, White Masks, Frantz Fanon states that
“As soon as I desire I ask to be considered”; once a person desires to have this identity and voice, then he or she is also asking for the hybrid space to be noticed and accepted (73). Similarly, as the creator of a third space, Maxine must realize that her new identity is ever changing, fluid, and transforming.

Through having this written voice, Maxine can never draw a solid line between the “private and the public, the civil and the familial” (Bhabha 330); there will always be an ambivalence within her voice and a “tension between the influence of traditional ‘ethnicist’ identifications that coexist with contemporary, secular, modernizing aspirations” (359). Though she has been “shaped by the dominant culture,” she still feels “strongly drawn to the traditions and values” of her “parents’ ancestral culture” (Huntley 73). This should not be viewed as negative, but rather a fact to be acknowledged so she can best utilize her voice to encompass both cultures and influences. This third space Bhabha
describes is not solely ruled by the dominant culture, or by the “other” culture, but “something else besides” that is up to the person/creator to define (41). Maxine specifically faces the dichotomy between the Western culture seeking to “forget time and . . . accumulate contents” and the Chinese culture seeking to maintain “popular traditions” (81). With her written voice, she must find a way to share how these “narratives must be repeated” and how they have been relayed originally by her mother in the context of a predominantly white Americanized society (81). This “in-between space” gives Maxine the location for “elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity” (2). In this hybrid place, she can move past the binary of cultures and formulate her unique expression of both without any suppression, using a voice long kept silent.

Forced Silence: No Name Aunt
“You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you”—this is how Maxine’s story begins, a poignant statement revealing how silence is imposed upon her not only by being a minority in society, but also by her mother, Brave Orchid (Kingston 3). Brave Orchid often uses talk-stories to educate her children, specifically ghost stories, such as the first talk-story in the book about Maxine’s No Name aunt (Aoki 20). Because No Name wronged her family, stained her own honor, and disobeyed the traditions of her village by getting pregnant with a man who was not her husband, she was turned into a ghost as if she had never existed. Maxine’s mother commands her: “Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born” (Kingston 5). This warning tells Maxine that silence can be the “result of moral judgment inflicted by society” (Aoki 36), and specifically Chinese society that “requires respectful submission” at all times (Simmons 57). If she fails to behave acceptably, or commits any
sort of betrayal or dishonor similar to her aunt, she will subsequently face the same ghostliness and the ultimate “state of disgrace and weakness” (Aoki 33).

No Name was punished with forced silence by the villagers for “acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (Kingston 13). No Name’s experiences haunt Maxine as she attempts to make sense of why her aunt’s life was obliterated from history. Being an Asian-American, Maxine is already treated like a ghost by her Chinese family because of her “foreign American behavior and attitudes,” which is perhaps why she decides to offer a different story about her forgotten aunt (30). From what Maxine has been taught about women’s submissiveness being integral to traditional Chinese values, she decides that “women in the old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her [No Name] to lie with him and be his secret evil” (Kingston 6). This “other man” who impregnated No Name, according to Maxine’s version of the story,
was probably “not, after all, much different from her husband. They both gave orders: she followed” (7).

According to Maxine, maybe her aunt could not help having these dreams about the “forbidden” (Kingston 8), feeling drawn toward a man against her family’s wishes and with fear about the consequences of an attraction that “eludes control” (12). Maxine imagines No Name’s desire for individuality as perhaps not solely a fault of her own, but also a fault of the “frightened villagers, who depend on one another to maintain the real” and who are preoccupied with a “roundness” and the “circling of events” until they can no longer accept “fatalism” and “deny accidents” (13). Maxine feels that because these villagers and her mother have wiped out her aunt’s existence, and because she strives to grasp at the strings of her heritage, she must make No Name’s life into something she can understand; she claims that “unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help”
Though Maxine is told about the villagers’ silencing of her aunt, she also notices No Name’s “secret voice”: a silence she kept about the man “throughout her labor and dying; she did not accuse him that he be punished with her (Kingston 11). This could be seen as a form of “self-punishment” resulting from the punishment society has already inflicted upon her; she took on the weight of having never been born alone, and then lovingly grants her baby an escape from this pain (Aoki 36). Though giving birth to a child destined to be forgotten, she fought to stand to her feet in a pigsty so that her child would not be snatched up by the “jealous, pain-dealing gods” (Kingston 14). Carrying the baby to the well, No Name fulfills her promise to “protect this child as she had protected its father,” forcing permanent silence on the child by killing it with her, knowing it would turn into a living ghost with “no descent line” just as she has experienced from others forcing her to be
silent (15). Because No Name had her voice and future viciously stripped away from her, she realizes that she must spare her child from a similar life of existing in a cage of silence.

**Forced Silence: Moon Orchid**

When Maxine’s other aunt, Moon Orchid, arrives in the U.S. after many years of separation from her family, both her agenda and her voice are taken over by her sister Brave Orchid. Almost immediately upon Moon Orchid’s arrival, Brave Orchid inserts herself into her sister’s business by asking, “‘What are we going to do about your husband?’” (Kingston 124). Though Brave Orchid may initially believe what she is doing for her sister is for her own good, it quickly transforms into Moon Orchid’s insanity, and her “identity collapses” (Simmons 89); Moon Orchid’s “abundance of silent obedience” in regard to her sister creates a “ghost-like existence” within her (Aoki 31). As soon as Brave
Orchid brings up the topic of her sister’s estranged husband, Moon Orchid shows her fear, incited by the prospect of seeing him again and regret for coming to the U.S, by saying “I shouldn’t be here” (Kingston 124) and “I want to go back to Hong Kong” (125). Brave Orchid refuses to give in to her sister, who believes she “mustn’t bother him”; instead, Brave Orchid continually pushes Moon Orchid, expressing her own frustration and excitement about surprising the husband, and outrage over how he would marry a new wife (125).

Soon, however, Moon Orchid asks her sister what to say when she sees her husband and multiple questions about how to treat the other wife, revealing how an unfamiliar situation in an unfamiliar place has granted Brave Orchid the power to usurp the voice and actions of her sister. Brave Orchid even mentions that she could “think of hundreds of things” to say for her sister, and that she would love to be in this position that Moon Orchid is dreading because of her uncertainty
and anxiety (Kingston 126). Eventually Moon Orchid begins to play along, joking that the new wife can “comb my hair and keep house” (130), failing to comprehend that Brave Orchid is not simply “talking-story,” but is actually serious in her desire to act and speak for Moon Orchid (131). Even in Chinatown, the community women attempt to influence Moon Orchid’s actions; it seems that they are familiar with this reclaiming of a husband, while Moon Orchid only stands in the background as these women speak for her (138). Because of her fear, she succumbs to the idea of Brave Orchid speaking for her, saying “you can talk louder than I can,” thus accepting the silencing of her own voice (144).

When the two sisters finally come face to face with the husband, his accusatory and “rude American eyes” (Kingston 153) described as “looking for lies” (152) shock Moon Orchid’s voice out of use immediately; she can only “open and shut her mouth
without any words coming out” and “whimper,” while Brave Orchid can “not keep silent” (152). She attempts to justify why Moon Orchid is with her in the U.S., but the husband states that Moon Orchid “can’t belong” and would never be able to “fit into an American household” (153). “You can barely talk to me,” he says, and Moon Orchid can only hide her face with her hands in response, feeling that she is merely a ghost (153). He reinforces her ghostliness by stating how she has become a character in a book to him, and that he has even silenced her existence by never telling his new wife about her (155).

This encounter causes Moon Orchid’s sanity and sense of self to vanish; “even the image of herself as the banished wife, who could at least live in the reflected light of her husband, has been forfeited and order has been broken down completely” (Simmons 89). Not only is she a ghost because of the silence demanded by her husband and the foreignness of this new culture, but
also because she has a “lack of comprehensible speech” (Aoki 20), and is only able to “speak nonsensically and non-rationally” (32). According to Brave Orchid, her sister, who can only obsess over being watched and followed by Mexicans, is insane because she has “only one story” that she constantly repeats (Kingston 159). The only people Moon Orchid ends up being able to communicate with in a meaningful way are the other women in the asylum to which she has been admitted. She eventually fades “entirely away” one morning, having partially regained her voice, but ultimately living her final years trapped in an insanity caused by an overwhelming silence imposed by her husband (160).

So what significance does this story about her aunt have for Maxine? The book mentions that Brave Orchid’s daughters, after hearing about Moon Orchid’s husband, “decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them,” and majored in “science or mathematics” so they could become strong
and independent without having to rely on a husband (Kingston 160). Maxine may view this story about this aunt as similar to the story about her other aunt, No Name, who both felt the burden of silence caused by family members and were left without the power of spoken thought and free action. Looking at the ghosts of her aunts, Maxine may be able to see how critical expressing herself is in preventing a life of floating along the boundaries of belonging and sanity, and how necessary the formation of her own voice is in carving out a solidified place on the boundaries of culture she faces. Rather than having society or her mother create her voice for her, which seems to lead to madness or complete obliteration, Maxine finds some strength in these talk-stories to begin seeking out a way to survive as both a female and second-generation immigrant living between two cultures that she does not fully understand.
Silence as Protection and Power: Fa Mu Lan

Maxine not only hears about these women who are either pushed to their deaths or to insanity because of their loss of voice; she also learns of a warrior woman who uses silence as a means of survival and power. Fa Mu Lan is the legendary female warrior who bravely avenges her village after years of training in the mountains. Maxine retells this story within the novel as if she was this famous Chinese heroine. “The first thing you have to learn,” according to the elderly couple training Fa Mu Lan, “is how to be quiet”; in this way, she heightens her awareness of her surroundings and each move that her body makes (Kingston 23). By exercising her focus, she is becoming level-headed and calm, while learning bravery and survival skills through solitude spent on a mountain top.

After passing her lessons learned from the ways of the tiger, such as carefully watching and stalking prey, the couple teaches her to how to see an entire dragon
by helping her to “make her mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes” (Kingston 29). With a few more years of training on the mountain, during which she “talked to no one except the two old people,” Fa Mu Lan is able to return to her village and take the place of her father to fight for her people (33). Using her body as a message, she agrees to kneel silently before her parents, who use a knife to “carve revenge” into her back; with these permanent scars, even her dead body can become a silent but powerful “weapon” for the people to observe and then carry out those oaths (34). As she begins to gather her army, however, a unique voice emerges from her that is influenced by her years of solitary training to connect with nature and the surrounding world: “I inspired my army . . . At night I sang to them glorious songs that came out of the sky and out of my head” (37). Once she has gained millions of followers from the entire nation, Fa Mu Lan faces the emperor and makes demands of him with this powerful
new voice, and delivers final justice with the strength built up in her body from the silence and awareness she found while on the mountain. Ultimately, Fa Mu Lan is not only remembered for her warrior success, but for her “perfect filiality” shown through her submissiveness and respect for her parents, and the fulfillment of the words on her back for the village (45).

In light of this story, Maxine struggles with the knowledge that she does not have a specific village to represent, and sees silence as a way to “survive in racist America” and not disappoint her family (Aoki 38). She recognizes the limitations regarding the idea of a woman warrior like Fa Mu Lan in the context of the U.S.: in this country, Maxine faces overwhelming challenges, knowing that even though Fa Mu Lan was able to return and live in peace with her village, Maxine’s “life will never really return to normal” (Simmons 92). By having a “lonely-quiet space,” Maxine is sheltered from the “harsh reality of clashing cultural practices,
sexist Chinese thought, and racist American attitudes” (Aoki 53).

However, as she transforms and seeks out her own form of expression, it is clear that Maxine views this talk-story in a different way with different lessons than before. The dragon, which for Fa Mu Lan symbolized the “vastness of the universe compared to the minute existence of humans,” becomes this “multi-cultural world” where Maxine exists, “replete with seeming contradictions” that she must come to terms with and use in order to create a third space that combines aspects of two cultures (Aoki 83). Maxine recognizes that “the swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar”; though both spend years in silence, hiding from the outside world, eventually this time becomes the root of their strength (Kingston 53). For Maxine, “the reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words” (53). Her written voice is what provides the vengeance for names the white
majority has called her, and for the many moments her mother belittled and doubted her.

**Silence as Protection and Power: The Quiet Girl**

Before finding her way with words, Maxine remembers that her “silence was thickest – total – during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint” (Kingston 165). She thought of the black paint as curtains, ready to move aside at any moment she chose to reveal what was underneath, believing that she was the “keeper of something precious and significant” (Huntley 7). She viewed this silence as “misery” when she began having to speak up in the classroom, not understanding why her voice and the voices of the other Chinese girls were barely audible (Kingston 166). Reading aloud, she identifies an “individuality and self-identity of which she is not yet confident” (Aoki 60), causing her voice to sound like “bones rubbing jagged against one another” (Kingston
“To speak up would be to claim an authority” Maxine does not feel she owns, especially as a minority young woman living in a white world (Huntley 101). She knows that as an Asian-American, she is different and set apart, and she is confused overall about which culture she should cling to; silence acts as a neutral area in which she does not have to choose between her Chinese heritage and an incomprehensible American society.

When Maxine notices the quiet girl in school, she also notices a reflection of herself, feeling her own “fragility” in this girl who also does not swing at the baseball and is the last one chosen when it is time to play (Kingston 176). Maxine quickly becomes fed up with this girl’s complete silence, which she views as a weakness she herself suffers from. When she corners the quiet girl in a bathroom, Maxine taunts and pleads with her to utter a single word, trying to “scare the words out of her” (178) and “undo her own silence
by forcing the girl to speak, by taking over her voice” (Simmons 97). Afraid of never discovering her own escape from silence, Maxine pulls on the girl’s hair and skin, begging her to “let people know you have a personality and a brain” (Kingston 180) and showing that she “wants to give the girl what she sees as power by forcing her to speak” (Parrott 383).

Yet perhaps Maxine does not realize that this girl’s silence is her actual *choice*; rather than the girl attempting to avoid finding her place within society and an identity, her lack of speech defines her sense of self. This silence becomes a “shelter of power” (Parrott 383), an internal world that the girl can maintain apart from the brutality of humanity, and a way she can keep her “gentleness and tenderness . . . intact” (Simmons 50). What Maxine does not know until she unearths her own voice is that she and the quiet girl both have an authority and power by being able to control how they express themselves. Maybe the quiet girl remains
steadfast in her silence so that only her actions can be seen, rather than words that others can construe and “capture . . . for their own use” (Kingston 169). Maxine, for her part, chooses to reveal her potent and weighty thoughts through writing, because she can no longer keep them simmering under the surface and has formed her own space in society in which she feels comfortable expressing her conflicted self.

Conclusion

Maxine truly begins to use her voice when she admits to having a “list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat” (Kingston 197). By admitting these things, Maxine hopes that her mother and the world “would become more like me, and I would never be alone again” (198). However, Maxine realizes that her mother is annoyed with her whispering “madness” when she tries to go
through this list with her. This leaves Maxine with an even greater need to speak (200). The result is an emotional outburst directed toward her mother, when Maxine claims that she won’t be a wife or a slave, that she is intelligent, that she wants to be a lumberjack and reporter to rid herself of feminine stereotypes, and that she does not “need anybody to pronounce English words for me” (202). Maxine also complains to her mother about her confusing talk-stories, upset that she is not able to know “what’s real and what you make up” (202).

However, as is evident in this book Maxine later writes, she “reshapes and modifies the stories” as an “act of self-creation,” joining what she knows about her Chinese heritage with her experience growing up in the U.S. (Huntley 94). Throughout the novel, Maxine is faced with having to “translate culture as well as words, and must do this despite the fact that she might not completely understand the Chinese
customs herself” (Aoki 43). Her own experiences and emotions transformed into words comprise her unique translation of both Asian and American cultures; she is able to “challenge the idea that the spoken . . . word . . . is the only or the best way to communicate” (Parrot 376). Despite the “profound insecurity” (Huntley 89) she felt as a child, which she describes as having “felt I had no place of my own and had to hide” (Simmons 7), *The Woman Warrior* is an example of Maxine using language that overcomes both “Chinese patriarchy and American racism” and allows her to express her true self within her own created space (101).

Though Maxine portrays courageous Chinese women in the novel, as well as the numerous obstacles and inner turmoil Asian Americans faced as they were given the choice to assimilate into a new culture, her purpose for this written voice is summed up in this quote: “Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself?” (Li 53). With the final story at the conclusion of the book focusing on the brave poetess Ts’ai Yen, who
was kidnapped by a barbarian tribe in ancient China, Maxine reimagines a woman who, like herself, “faces, communicates, and even creates beauty out of the pain and loss that results from being of two opposing worlds” (Simmons 102). As Ts’ai Yen sings about her home in the wilderness, and then returns home with songs “from the savage lands,” she is able to communicate beyond language barriers and tie these two separate worlds together (Kingston 209). There is grief and sorrow in her music, yet she is still able to recognize the reality of “the world in which she finds herself and the humanity of those who inhabit it” (Simmons 106). Maxine’s hybrid location, her “third space,” encompasses aspects of both cultures and allows her to make meaning out of her experiences. This reality, as large as the dragon in Fa Mu Lan’s story, will always include paradoxes and contradictions that can be made beautiful and poignant with language.
Works Cited


Healey, Joseph F. “Asian Americans: ‘Model Minorities’?” *Race, Ethnicity, Gender, and Class*:


