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Autobiographical Images: Photography and Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's "The Woman Warrior" and "China Men"

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AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL IMAGES: PHOTOGRAPHY AND IDENTITY
IN MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S *THE WOMAN WARRIOR*
AND *CHINA MEN*

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English
The College of William and Mary

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

by

Nancy Allison

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APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

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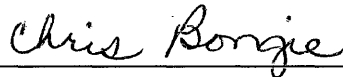


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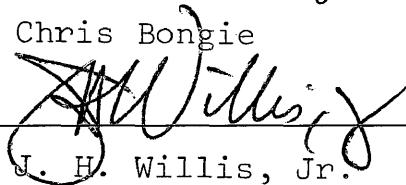
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ABSTRACT

My focus in this thesis will be Maxine Hong Kingston's use of textual photographs in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. In these two narratives of the self, Kingston parodies and expands conventional autobiographical practice: the traditional event-centered description of a life is traded for an autobiographical "I" which reverberates among the pictures of Kingston's family, the bomb, Vietnam, Shirley Temple, and a stranger in a Florida swamp.

Rather than deliver the "truth" about the photographic subject, Kingston's descriptions of photos and her subsequent stories about them encourage multiple readings and the realization that the self is not reducible to a simple snapshot, but is ever-changing in its negotiation of the people, stories and culture which surround it.

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Photographs, which cannot themselves explain anything, are inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy.

Susan Sontag

Autobiographies usually speak mainly of the self who writes, but Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiographical books, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, give clues to the self through the stories of other lives branching into her own. For Kingston, as Bobby Fong notes, "personal meaning is tied up with values embodied in the significant persons who have touched her life" (124). By questioning the primacy of the individual, Kingston parodies and expands the traditional approach to autobiography, offering in its place one that is neither linear nor directly self-revealing. Kingston's decentering tactics may be seen throughout both books in her use of story within story: her dizzying combination of tales, ballads, legend, talk-story, poems and photographs reveals what Yalom calls "an aesthetic of artifice and ambiguity"--an aesthetic most clearly seen, I believe, in Kingston's use of the photograph to tell her story (109).

Instead of a unitary exposition of the self, as most traditional autobiographers attempt, Kingston presents one that is complex and contradictory, marked by a variety of

framing narratives. Her work is full of photographs, or textual descriptions of photos rather, of those people, events and cultural icons which have influenced her life. These photos reveal Kingston's agenda more fully than any other element in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, for each is set up as a real documentation of fact, but ultimately is subject to her own interpretation.

The photograph is perfect for symbolizing Kingston's view of self as a field of possibility. As Sontag writes in the epigraph above, the very nature of photography offers multiple insights and interpretations to viewers, "inexhaustible invitations" to use one's imagination (23). Sontag's point, which she makes several times in her book on photography, is that the photo is not as reflective of "reality" as its wide use as a source of "information" tries to imply, simply because it is the viewer who ascribes a particular meaning to the photograph. She finds the value of the photo not in what it is in itself, but in the response it creates in the viewer by its presence, a response peculiar to each viewer's personality, philosophy or viewpoint. Sontag finds the ultimate wisdom of the photographic image in its open-endedness; when we look at a photo it seems to say: "'There is the surface. Now think--or rather feel, intuit--what is beyond it'" (23).

Just as Sontag argues that there is no exclusive reading of a photograph, Kingston's autobiography argues against the notion that there is one "true" inscription or reading of a

life. Kingston, who admires the oral tradition for its built-in mutability, for the fact that, as she tells Arturo Islas, the stories "change from telling to telling," regrets the stasis of the printed word (18). She would like to, but she cannot, make the words "change on the page" with every reading; instead, she uses photographs to suggest that her written stories, like photographic ones, are open to multiple interpretations (18).

I hope to show that by holding up an image before us and then contradicting her own presentation of it, Kingston invites various readings of what might easily be taken at face value. She suggests by doing so her own subjectivity and the inherent subjectivity of autobiography, and encourages the realization that the self is not reducible to a simple snapshot, but is ever-changing in its negotiation of the people, stories, and culture which surround it.

For Kingston, and those like her, born "in the first American generations," one of the most difficult things to negotiate *is* the culture (6). In *Woman Warrior*, she tries "to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (6). In the first story in that collection, Kingston examines the invisible world which has been carried over from China, mainly by her mother, and the laws which apply to her only because she is female. Thus, Kingston, "always trying to name the unspeakable," begins her first book with a forbidden story (6). Ignoring

her mother's injunction not to tell, she repeats a family secret about an aunt in China who was punished by the villagers for not keeping traditional ways, while her brothers, "now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection" (9). The aunt, whose husband long ago went "out on the road" to America, became pregnant. In retaliation, the villagers ransacked her family's house and she ran away to the fields, giving birth that night. The next morning Kingston's mother found her and the baby "plugging up the family well" (5). Kingston wants to know more about her dead aunt, but her mother tells only what is necessary to warn against having sex outside of marriage. She is interested only in teaching her daughter the consequences of going against the village mores.

Kingston, curious about the clothes her aunt wore and how she looked, turns to the photo album for help. The aunt, however, had been stricken from the family annals; her image, as well as her name, has vanished. Kingston finds instead other aunts, the old women whose photos do appear in the family album. These "deep-rooted women [who] maintain[ed] the past against the flood," who knew their places and kept them, preserved tradition and were thus preserved (9). But No Name Woman "crossed boundaries not delineated in space" and paid the price for it (9).

Kingston, who sees this aunt as her "forerunner," decides that No Name Woman's hair must be different from the constricted buns of the old women in the album: her "bob" must

be free-flowing and sexy, and she must look at a man "because she liked the way his hair tucked behind his ears, or she liked the question-mark line of a long torso curving at the shoulder and straight at the hip" (9). The aunt, who Kingston both identifies with and fears, emerges from the invisible world of her mother's talk-story, another of the mysteries Kingston explores through her imagination. Thus the value of the photo album lies not in what it reveals but in what it is missing; the aunt emerges in positive contrast to the women in the album, and Kingston's reading of her aunt's "story" is sympathetic, just the opposite of Brave Orchid's intended result.

Critics who have noted the use of photographs in Kingston's work have discussed them in regard to memory and her search for "information" about her family. Carol Neubauer finds them an unproblematic source of data used to counteract the "unreliable resources of memory" (17). Neubauer assumes that Kingston's use of photos helps her to remember in a coherent and unified way, but Kingston is neither concerned with remembering accurately nor revealing her self in a traditional manner. Although she defines herself as one of those "who are always trying to get things straight," she keeps her characters ambiguous and their stories fluid, and admits that her stories are often a result of tampering with the "truth" (6).

Timothy Dow Adams comments that the function of photos in Kingston's work resides "in what stories they suggest, not in their literal accuracy or in the photogenic qualities of their subjects" (156). For Kingston, engaged in the process of reading her past, photographs are indispensable, but they are not, as Neubauer believes, reliable reflections of reality. Kingston reads photographs imaginatively rather than literally, trusting in the power of the imagination to lead us to "what's real" (182). As she told Rabinowitz in a 1987 interview, the imagination is the key which leads one to sympathetic knowledge about a place or person: "I've begun lately to realize that if I were to know you, as my friend, the best way is for me to imagine you at life" (182).

"Imagining at life" is what Kingston does in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, using photographs as a springboard for speculation about her aunt, mother and father, brother, and grandfathers. Nowhere does she read more imaginatively than while viewing her parents' photographs. But in the "Shaman" chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, the fanciful exploration of her mother's life in China, Kingston introduces the photograph as an official document: a diploma with seals and stamps and a photo attached, attesting to her mother's graduation from the To Keung School of Midwifery in Canton. This seemingly neutral artifact, something that Kingston can feel and see for herself, is her only direct access to China, unmediated by her mother's partial and idiosyncratic stories. Via a mechanical

and chemical process, the photo has produced proof of time past, capturing her mother as she was when Kingston did not know her. However, Kingston soon reveals the unreliability of the photograph as documentary evidence. Despite its tangible officiality, the diploma itself contains false information, testifying that Brave Orchid's age is ten years younger than it actually is.

Mocking the idea of the photo as an irrefutable instrument of proof, Kingston looks, nevertheless, for something she can take away and keep: a clue, a key, a sign of some kind. The photo ultimately refuses to reveal what Kingston is looking for, a personal view of her mother's past which will tell her something about her essence. Instead, Kingston looks at her in relation to her classmates and decides what her mother is not: "My mother is not soft; the girl with the small nose and dimpled underlip is soft. My mother is not humorous, not like the girl at the end who lifts her mocking chin to pose like Girl Graduate" (69). Kingston identifies Brave Orchid simply as "Chinese" as she notes her mother's unsmiling lips and comments: "Chinese do not smile for photographs" (69).

With this comment, Kingston allows us to see what she herself identifies as qualities of a Chinese person; she finds them in her mother, who is serious, "powered by Necessity" (6). Nevertheless, Kingston attempts to believe in a mystical kind of connection with her mother via the photograph: Brave

Orchid stares out at Kingston, "as if she could see me," but of course she cannot; the photo is a one-way mirror (69). Instead, her mother stares "past me to her grandchildren and grandchildren's grandchildren"; Brave Orchid makes a connection to future generations because in Kingston's view that is what Chinese photographs are for: "Their faces command relatives in foreign lands--'Send money'--and posterity forever--'Put food in front of this picture'" (68,9). There are no casual photographs of Brave Orchid for Kingston to read. This, the only photo of her mother which Kingston describes, identifies Brave Orchid with Chinese culture.

If Brave Orchid's photo is symbolic of her Chineseness, Kingston means for her father's photographs to represent his "Americanness." Taken during his bachelor days in New York, Ed's photographs are of a happy and carefree man, impeccably dressed and smiling for the camera as he poses with his buddies. Emphasizing the difference between her mother and father, Kingston tells us, just after describing Ed's smiling photos: "My mother does not understand Chinese-American snapshots. 'What are you laughing at?' she asks" (69). While Ed's photos are informal testimony that he and his friends are enjoying life "out on the road," Brave Orchid's photo is a formal object of proof. In *The Woman Warrior* it is identified with her success as a student and her life as a respected doctor. It initiates the "Shaman" chapter, which represents Brave Orchid as a free and powerful woman, emphasizing her

intelligence and her difference from most other Chinese women, who, without skills or money, were tied to their husbands, children, community and tradition.

But in *China Men* Kingston tells us a different story about this picture. Here the graduation photo becomes Brave Orchid's ticket both to reclaim her husband and to enter America. Why does Kingston change Brave Orchid's character in *China Men*? This view of Brave Orchid as a wife and a slave to her husband's wishes is radically different from her identification with Fa Mu Lan, the fearless crusader, in *Woman Warrior*. In *China Men* Ed writes to say he will not be returning to China, and to prepare to join him: "I will bring you to America on one condition, and that is, you get a Western education" (69). Instead of ending his American life he would "show her how to live one" (68). But first she would have to prepare herself, for "he did not want an ignorant villager for his American wife" (69).

In *China Men* Brave Orchid is not a brilliant scholar who impresses her classmates and scares ghosts, but an unwilling student who writes to her husband about giving up when the work is too difficult for her, and who only completes the degree because he threatens to leave her in China if she does not. In *The Woman Warrior* Kingston tells us that Brave Orchid is unconcerned with her appearance, but in *China Men*, she allows Ed to make her over in the image of a movie star (68). Just as her graduation photo has proven her intellectual

fitness to become Ed's American wife, once she arrives in America she must improve her attractiveness. She is to transform herself into an icon of stylish Western sexuality: a hatted, gloved, cosmetized, "star" vision of American womanhood. Ed takes her shopping and buys her "a black crepe dress with a bodice of white lace ruffles and buttons of rhinestones and silver" (71). It is not until she has put on the female American costume of dress and high heels, silk stockings, black kid gloves, black coat with a fur collar and a picture hat, that Ed tells her "You look very pretty," but he has reservations about her fitness as an American wife until she has disguised her origins (71).

Ed gives Brave Orchid tips on how to do this: "'Pierced ears look a little primitive in this country'" and "'American people don't like oily faces. So you ought to use some powder....Also buy some rouge. These foreigners dislike yellow skin'" (71-2). Brave Orchid evidently falls in with her husband's desire to change her image: "she washed, ironed and wrapped her silk pants and dresses and never wore them again," putting away her traditional clothes as easily as she puts an end to her medical career (72). However, Brave Orchid's adoption of Western dress does not threaten her Chinese identity, for she is diligent about passing on stories of China to her children, reminding them of their roots with Chinese talk-story and ritual. Ed, on the other hand, is silent about his past.

While Brave Orchid is connected both to the past and the future, to her parents and her children, Ed (who gave up using his Chinese name to call himself after his American hero, Thomas Edison) is intent on enjoying the present. His photos connect him with friends, possessions, and adventure, and they have been taken for pleasure, not to command his children or honor his ancestry:

He and his friends took pictures of one another in bathing suits at Coney Island beach, the salt wind from the Atlantic blowing their hair. He's the one in the middle with his arms about the necks of his buddies. They pose in the cockpit of a biplane, on a motorcycle, and on a lawn beside the 'Keep off the Grass' sign. They are always laughing. (70)

In contrast to her mother, who fills her ears with stories of China, Kingston's father tells nothing about his past. In *China Men* Kingston challenges him to tell his stories: "I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you're thinking when you say nothing, and why when you do talk, you talk differently from Mother" (18). Kingston's stories are mostly creations, which she freely admits: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (18). Kingston has more than silences and a few words to go on, however. She uses her father's photos to initiate a story about Ed's life in New York.

As Kingston tells it, her father's story is one of great contradiction, where the free and happy photographs with his

arms around his buddies, hair flying in the salt air, comprise only a few moments in a life actually spent washing other people's clothes. Although he was a poet-scholar in China, the only poems Ed writes in America are those he copies and hangs over the laundry tables to cheer his friends while they work in the sweltering heat; the only book he writes is his photo album, which is a fiction about free China men pursuing the American dream. Posing with their motorbikes, cars and airplanes, potent symbols of masculine power and adventure, Ed and his friends create images of themselves as free and lucky Americans. To document this fantasy, with his first hard-earned money Ed buys an expensive leather photo album and makes his own book filled with photos of himself and his friends.

The photo album is as much a symbol of Ed's dream of freedom as the picture which he pastes in at the beginning is symbolic of the myth of a free America: a post card of the Statue of Liberty. He tells himself that "[t]he Gold Mountain [i]s indeed free: no manners, no traditions, no wives" (62). These photos, taken before Ed sends for his wife, are a collection of what Fichtelberg identifies as "counterfeit images" symbolizing American life as exciting and liberated (172). Brave Orchid tells her daughter what she remembers of those early years: "He got paid almost nothing. He was a slave" (237).

But on Saturdays the four friends go to tearooms to dance with white women (preferably blondes) at 10 cents a dance. As paying customers the China men are granted a freedom they would not have been allowed on the street or in polite company (cutting in on white men and handling their women) but they have entered into a place where fantasy prevails. Taking on the personae of their favorite film stars, Ed and his friends practice their new images. Worldster, who "had a thick moustache and tried to act like Clark Gable," cut in on a white man and asked his blonde "'What's your name, sweetheart?' like in the movies" (63,66). Ed, gliding across the floor in "his new leather shoes" sees himself and his blonde "date" in the mirrors, where in their finery, "they looked like the movies" (66). The Hollywood dream is quickly appropriated by Ed and his friends as they try and negotiate the foreign culture, but watching movies, or imagining themselves movie stars, is the closest they will ever come to actually experiencing life as they see it on screen.

Still, Ed models himself on Astaire, and has his friend take a photo of him dancing down the steps of the New York Public Library like the legendary dancer. Sophisticated, debonair and charming, Astaire is an especially attractive icon. According to Richard Dyer, Astaire is admired because "[he] get[s] the manners right," he "perform[s] in the world precisely, with poise and correctness" (14). His apparent naturalness and ease gives the impression of his full "mas-

ter[y] of the public world" (14). Kingston notes how difficult mastering the public world was for her father, how even though he was a scholar in China, in America he was swindled by his landlord and "twice tricked by gypsies," and without the language skills to defend himself (7).

One way in which Ed tries to fit into his new role is to dress correctly. Kingston makes many allusions to the fine cut of his suits, his fur-lined gloves and expensive shoes (65,9). She describes a man who is interested in achieving an image: "Ed wore his best dress shirt, a silk tie, grey silk socks, good leather shoes with pointed toes, and a straw hat" (65). In the best of shops he tries on the most expensive suit he can find, hoping to resemble his role model: "In the three-way mirror," Ed imagines, "he looked like Fred Astaire" (65). If one dresses the part, even Chinese men can become their heroes, Ed believes, if only for a few moments in their imaginations. But this feat involves looking American, which is really to say looking white. This desire of Ed's, Kingston suggests, affects the whole family, and makes Ed a stranger to them.

Kingston comments on his estrangement in the first story in *China Men*, which depicts Kingston and her siblings running up to a man on the street. Certain he is their father, they climb on him and check his pockets for candy. Kingston recalls only his facade: "Tall and thin, he was wearing our father's two hundred dollar suit that fit him just right. He

was walking fast in his good leather shoes with the wingtips" (11). Ed's unfathomability and distance from his own children makes him symbolic. As Barthes has said of the photographic subject, whose expression shows knowledge of the camera's objectification, Ed has become unable to signify except by assuming a mask. While Barthes addresses the expression of the subject, Kingston writes about a man whose desire to impress his "readers" has made him as impenetrable as a mask.

Kingston places the story in the chapter called "The American Father" and it is Ed's American packaging which reduces him in this instance to a one-dimensional portrait. A moment after the mistaken father has passed, Kingston writes, "our own father came striding toward us, the one finger touching his hat to salute us. We ran again to meet him" (11). Kingston seems to be saying that it doesn't really matter which man the children run to: both are unknown to them. His costume of Western regalia, the wingtips, hat and expensive suit, is one that Ed wears to hide his inadequacy, his foreignness, and to perform in the American world precisely. His silent gesture of greeting, epitomizing his inability to be forthcoming with his children, makes him into a cardboard man, like a photograph of himself.

Ed's desire to fit in, his seeming rejection of Chinese for American culture, causes Kingston some discomfort. She mistrusts his American snapshots and regrets she can find no portraits of him on Chinese soil: "You only look and talk

Chinese. There are no photographs of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes. Did you cut your pigtail to show your support for the Republic? Or have you always been American?" (18). Ed even derives his new American name from a film, calling himself after Edison once he sees the biopic starring Mickey Rooney, hoping perhaps to emulate the "cunning resourceful successful inventor" in his own life (72).

After watching *Young Tom Edison* with his wife and explaining the origin of his American name to her she responds by translating the name through her native tongue: "I see. Eh-Da-Son. 'Son' as in *sage* or *immortal* or *saint*" (72). While Ed clearly values American icons, Brave Orchid prefers China: "When do you think we'll go back [to China]?" she asks soon after arriving (72). Contrasting her father's preference for America with her mother's choice to remember and pass on Chinese traditions reveals Kingston's position between the two cultures.

Kingston says in *China Men* that "Usually my father took us to American movies, my mother to Chinese movies" (257). In the theater, father and daughter share the same mystification, though for the opposite culture. Kingston's question, to those also born in America to emigrants: "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" illustrates her confusion and her ambivalence toward cinema as a reflection of reality (6). For Ed, however, America is the movies, and he learns how to negotiate the foreign culture by attaching himself to

movie myths, like Clark Gable and Fred Astaire. Just as Kingston empowers herself by becoming a warrior woman, hopping over imaginary swords and beheading foes as heroes in kung fu movies do, Ed gains self-esteem by seeing himself as Fred Astaire.

Like Kingston's, however, Ed's empowerment is short-lived. Like her, he could say "my American life has been such a disappointment," for in reality he must find his place within the confines of the role ascribed to him (and to so many Chinese immigrants) as a laundryman for whites, just as she must admit that she cannot "storm across China" to take back the farm the Communists stole, or "rage across the United States" to demand her father's share in his New York laundry (54, 58). Kingston, in sharing both her father's dreams and his disappointment, tries to account for his curses and nightmares and silence.

Kingston's description of her father corresponds to her view of male sojourners as initiators of new myths who leave tradition behind, as opposed to the women, who were keepers of tradition. The male sojourners were, as she says in interview with Paula Rabinowitz, "making a new myth" (180). Adjusting to America is a distinctly different experience for the men and women in *China Men*. Kingston explains to Rabinowitz: "I wrote the characters so that the women have memories and the men don't...They don't remember anything" (180). Neither do they tell anything: while her mother is a champion talker,

making herself known to Kingston through story, her father is silent and unknown to her. And while Brave Orchid's talk-story encourages Kingston to become another Fa Mu Lan, Ed makes clear his preferences for the trappings of America.

Kingston alludes to these preferences in a story set sometime during the war years, when Ed cut out a photo of "a golden girl" with shining blonde hair and pinned it to the wall: "'You look like this,' he said, or 'This girl looks like you.'" (257). Since the girl, Kingston is told, also looks like Shirley Temple, Kingston is confused. She looks nothing like the golden-haired caucasian. Your father likes blondes, Brave Orchid tells her, but "It couldn't have been the blonde curls that made her look like me, so it must have been the round face with the fat cheeks," she decides (258).

To say that Maxine looks like Shirley Temple is much like Ed's imagining that he looks like Fred Astaire: iconic admiration gone too far. Ringletted, blonde little Shirley, who sang and danced and pouted like a miniature bombshell, is Ed's idea of child-beauty. But messy duck-voiced Maxine, who isn't blonde or white, can't measure up to this ideal, just as she can't afford the beautiful suit she wants to buy her father to make him happy. If Ed's silence feels like rejection, even more so does one of the few things she remembers him saying to her: that she looks like a photo of a white girl.

Photographs seem to reinforce the link Kingston makes between her father's love of America and his rejection of her. When Ed's mother wrote from China to ask for money he refused to send any without first receiving a photograph to prove her existence. Kingston notes, "He did not say 'I miss her'" (242). Ed leads Kingston to believe he lacks the proper feelings of love for his mother and identifies it with her theory "that males feel no pain" (245). Ed's inability and/or refusal to talk about his past leads Kingston to suspect a lack of love for herself and to create a story that supports her suspicions: "We invented the terrible things you were thinking: That your mother had done you some unspeakable wrong, and so you left China forever. That you hate daughters. That you hate China" (17).

While Ed believes in the image as truth, Kingston is more wary. When the aunts send a new photograph of Ah Po as proof of her existence, Kingston can compare it, not to memory, but to the other photos of her: "She looked like the same woman, all right, like the pictures we already had but aged" (242). Satisfied, Ed sends the money. But Kingston learned early that photos are not to be trusted as replicas of reality. Not only do they allow invention, but they can tell lies: "'Maybe she's dead and propped up,'" Kingston conjectures, when she sees the photo of Ah Po lying down on her side (242).

Kingston often reminds her readers not to trust the photograph. In "Swamp Man" she recalls a newspaper photograph

from 1975, which initiates a story about a Chinese man who was purported to be a "wild man" by residents on the edge of Green Swamp, Florida. The man, who made "strange" sounds and ran away when anyone approached him, was hunted down and captured by the US authorities. The man was detained while arrangements were made to deport him, and when a translator was called in the wild man was found to be intelligible after all.

The wild man "talked a lot" and said that to support his family he had shipped out on a Liberian freighter, but while aboard had become so homesick he asked to leave the ship and return home (217). The officers and the men on board the freighter "decided there was something wrong with his mind" and when they landed arranged his passport and a ticket back to China (217). Upon arriving at the airport the swamp man became hysterical and would not board the plane, so a doctor was called in and sent him to the hospital for the insane. The man escaped and fled to the swamp, where the Border Patrol "brought him down in a tackle" according to the newspapers (217). But before they could send him back to China he hanged himself in his cell.

The swamp man defines the risk which immigrants in America expose themselves to, and Kingston, warrior against racism, reports a crime with this photo/story. As we know from the Fa Mu Lan story in *Woman Warrior*: "The idioms for revenge are 'report a crime' and 'report to five families'" (63). Kingston does not see a wild man in the newspaper

photo, but a frightened trapped individual, a docile Chinese man with his clean t-shirt and trimmed hair who is caught by the quintessential American (cowboy hatted men) for being an alien. Kingston reads this newspaper photo much differently than a resident of Green Swamp might read it:

he did not look very wild, being led by the posse out of the swamp. He did not look dirty, either. He wore a checkered shirt unbuttoned at the neck, where his white undershirt showed; his shirt was tucked into his pants; his hair was short. He was surrounded by men in cowboy hats. His fingers stretching open, his wrists pulling apart to the extent of the handcuffs, he lifted his head, his eyes screwed shut, and cried out. (218)

Although it is an unposed and probably unknowingly-taken frame, a supposedly "truthful" depiction of reality, Kingston's is a sympathetic reading. She feels compassion for the suicide victim, just as she did for No Name Woman. With this story Kingston reminds us of the sexism in village China which caused her aunt to kill herself, explicitly showing similarities between the Chinese whose culture will not allow difference and the Chinese who cannot negotiate American culture. The swamp man's strangeness in a world he can't negotiate ultimately serves, as it does No Name Woman, to make him a stranger to himself. His suicide is reminiscent of the suicide of the Kingston's aunt, who, as Fichtelberg writes "confront[s] the enormous force of an alien culture and succumb[s], with only a mute, impotent protest" (179).

Kingston's protest, however, is neither impotent nor mute. She wants "her people" to know she is like the woman

warrior, avenging wrong with her words. She addresses the pain of being "outside" throughout her books, portraying the "raw pain of separation" which racism and/or sexism causes in its victims (16). Kingston, who was born in the middle of World War II, grew up dreaming of war, of a sky "covered from horizon to horizon with rows of airplanes, dirigibles, rocket ships, flying bombs" (113). She lived in fear of planes as a child, expecting them to drop bombs on her: "From earliest awareness, my mother's stories always timely, I watched for three airplanes parting" (113). Kingston's racial difference made her feel vulnerable, as subject to punishment as her Japanese American neighbors who were interned during the War.

As if expecting an atomic attack, she becomes anxious when she sees aircraft overhead: "A big grey bomb slowly covered the skies between houses, but it was only a Navy blimp. Airplanes flew over, but their bomb hatches stayed shut" (260). Kingston wonders when the time will come "for us Chinese to be the ones in camp" (267). She describes a photo she was given at the cinema of an atomic bomb explosion as "a souvenir to celebrate the bombing of Japan" (266). The photo itself seems a "powerful evil" to Kingston: knowing that the bomb was dropped on Japan, Kingston fears similar reprisals for China, and she feels she must protect her siblings "against the fear" of it by hiding the photo away (266).

Because she knows the story behind the photo, Kingston looks for evidence of its destruction but sees only shafts and

billows of light: "At the base of the explosion, where the people would have been, the specks didn't resolve into bodies" (266). Her point, that the image of something rarely gives an insight into its reality, is reinforced by descriptions of war photos of her young soldier cousins in Europe. Their poses give no hint of the horror or tedium of war or their efforts to evade it. One of the cousins who had been the most enthusiastic about maiming himself in order to avoid the war "had posed for a studio portrait of himself" to send home (265). Another cousin, an officer, looks "sideways into the camera to show off the bars on his collar" (265).

Photographs of soldiers posing patriotically for the folks back home belie the fear and trepidation they must really feel. Perhaps that is why the brother, whose only mission is to neither kill nor be killed, has no photo taken. The brother knows about the duplicity of the photographic image: it emerges in the stack of slides his ex-student sends from Vietnam to the classmates he left behind. The brother does not comment on the slides as he shows them; he feels it is "more fair to let the students draw their own conclusions seeing actual pictures of Vietnam taken by somebody they knew" (275). Artillery fire, tanks, helicopters, the American soldier and his prisoner, the American soldier with his arm around his Vietnamese girlfriend, the limbless children and old women rummaging in US garbage cans, bring no response from the brother's students.

But on the fourth showing the photographs bring an unexpected response from the brother himself, who had shown the slides to silently convince his students to abhor the war, to see its horror. Educating them so that they would not sign up to fight, the brother himself is fooled by the images he sees: the posing soldiers with their arms around each other's shoulders suggests an enticing intimacy of friendship; the ex-student and his Vietnamese girlfriend look like a honeymoon couple on a tropical island. The slides eventually seem "very happy, very attractive" to him, although he knows how hideous war really is, even off the battlefield (275). When he is offered a position as a language expert he turns it down, knowing this will lead to being an interrogator, and his government would assign him "to gouge Vietcong eyes, cattle-prod their genitals" in order to make them speak (292).

Kingston's brother, born in Stockton California, has no illusions about America: he is a teacher who decides to join the Navy during the Vietnam war, not because he believes in the war but because he knows that the infrastructure of American society supports war with consumer goods: "we couldn't live day-to-day American lives without adding to the war," he says (277). He also assumes he will eventually be drafted and does not want to go to Canada to dodge the draft: "He did not want to live the rest of his life a fugitive and an exile. The United States was the only country he had ever lived in. He would not be driven out" (277). Because of his

race, however, even the American uniform does not make him acceptable or unquestionably American, for his drill sergeant repeatedly demands he name his home town, as if his racial identity might make him forget his proper allegiance once he gets to Vietnam.

The brother is read by his sergeant as if he were a photo: his identity is wedded to his appearance, as if he would revert back to some innate orientalness that would circumscribe his fitness as an American Soldier once he is surrounded by people of his own race. But the brother's secret fear does not involve letting down his uniform, it emerges instead in genocidal dreams of "cut[ting] up" his own relatives ("Chinese faces, Chinese eyes, noses and cheek-bones") when he "hacks into the enemy, slicing them" (284). Shirley Geok-lin Lim, who discovers this anxiety in many works by Asian American writers, claims that "the hidden psychological wound [suffered by the outsider] finds overt expression in the threatening themes of emasculation of self and resulting impotence" (64).

Because of such stories, Kingston's work has been claimed by critics such as Blinde, Lim and Wong as an example of culturally-centered autobiography. Smith, Juhasz and Hunt, on the other hand, believe it is an example of feminist self-narrative. While Amy Ling calls *The Woman Warrior* "a brilliantly developed exposition of the between-world condition," Juhasz finds it to be descriptive of "a self formed at the

source by gender experience" (174). Mary Mason claimed that in opposition to males, who define themselves in terms of their own individual characters, women define themselves in relation to others. This other-centered definition of self, the development of identity through connection, is "the most pervasive character of the female autobiography" according to Mason (8). Recently however, critics such as Jeanne Costello have questioned the privileging of gender "as the primary constitutive category of identity" (127). Such broad generalizations as Mason's give little real insight into the variety of women's experience or the writings resulting from it. Kingston, who rejects all narrow definitions of her writing, tells interviewer Islas that "one has to have an even larger vision" when he asks if *The Woman Warrior* is a feminist book (16).

I believe that larger vision is Kingston's postmodern sensibility, and is what allows *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to be both feminist and culturally identified works. The irony, fragmentation and ambiguity in her books puts Kingston in command of an aesthetic which problematizes rather than resolves issues, in what Yalom cites as the postmodern tendency toward "indeterminacies" (108). If we think of autobiography in terms of self-portraiture, and consider Kingston's use of photos within narrative, we see the possibilities that her stories within stories suggest.

The idea that photos can be manipulated by interpretation no less than narrative can be compounded by the fact that Kingston "reads" photos which she then describes to readers, who further interpret them through their own framework. If, as Sontag says, "the presence and proliferation of all photos contributes to the erosion of the very notion of meaning," Kingston repeatedly shows how that is possible: those things, whether photographs or autobiographies, which we depend upon for information/authority/truth, can be made to lie (106). If we expect and desire one meaning only, photos and autobiographies cannot help but lie.

In a statement prefacing a book on teaching her work Kingston makes reference to her autobiographical "I" saying: "'I' am nothing but who 'I' am in relation to other people" (23). Kingston, speaking as critic of her two books, self-consciously puts *I* in quotations, meaning the "*I*" who *I* say *I* am, who I adopt as my persona in my stories, not the "*I*" who *I* am. In writing her autobiography, Kingston is like the subject who, posing in front of the camera, as Barthes says, "transforms [her]self in advance into an image" (10). But Kingston is more like the photographer than the subject: she is both the agent and the arbiter of her own image. She never uses a photo of herself to make her point, but all of her photos are self-portraits just the same. Just as the photographer, who in choosing which moment to press the shutter, what subjects to snap, in what order to exhibit his/her work

is present in the photos taken, Kingston, in deciding which story/photos to tell and how to tell them, obliquely offers herself. Kingston, then, self-conscious manipulator of images, is both photographer and subject, self as reader and read; her photos are instruments neither of memory nor fact but a replacement for both.

Kingston commented in a recent interview with Marilyn Chin that her life as a writer has been "a long struggle with pronouns" (58). Which pronoun to use is perhaps the most important early decision a writer makes when beginning a book: who will tell the story? will the pronoun be "I" or "she"? Kingston calls the stories of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* her "I" stories, yet her struggle with pronouns stems from her concept of the self as a constantly changing entity, a shifting ambiguous "I" informed by its interaction with other lives, stories and myths. Rather than close in on a vision of the self that is linear, coherent and unified, Kingston's view opens out to play on traditional mechanisms of framing a self. Kingston does not tell one story chronologically, but is a teller of multiple stories in a jumble of time frames. In *The Woman Warrior* she retells the stories of her female relatives, imaginatively entering her mother's stories as she rewrites myth and relocates the dead; in *China Men* she fictionally investigates her father's life and enters and redeems her forefather's past. Kingston's insight into the complexity of the self results in an autobiography which mixes fiction and

biography, personal history and fact, poetry, mythology and her own brand of "photography," to deliver a richer, more varied picture of a life than a conventional autobiography attempts or delivers.

In the "White Palace" chapter of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston expands on a few words that she hears third-hand to "recount" the tragicomic trip Brave Orchid and her sister make to Los Angeles to reclaim Moon Orchid's husband. Kingston allows that her story is, rather than the bare-bones truth, more like the complicated knots made from string into buttons and frogs in long-ago China. One knot was supposedly so complex and difficult that it caused blindness in the maker and was outlawed. Kingston, in a rare offering of information about herself, admits that had she been in China, "I would have been an outlaw knot-maker" (190).

In both *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* Kingston has acted the part of a figurative knotmaker, by consistently "writing in" ambiguity and encouraging an ongoing dynamic redefinition of the self, challenging the concepts of authorship and selfhood in autobiography. Kingston commented in a 1983 interview with Phyllis Hoge Thompson: "I can see that if I were a person writing even a few years from now, [*China Men*] would be an entirely different book" (12). Kingston's work encourages us to look at what surrounds the self in trying to understand the complicated, and in many ways still mysterious, construction of subjectivity. Her fascination is with stories

that change, and photographs are the perfect vehicle for suggesting that possibility.

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