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Too Much Shame, but No Shame: Controversies in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

Maxine Hong Kingston's novel/autobiography, *Woman Warrior* is an influential text in Asian American literary community. Since the text's publication, it has won the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction (1976), been distributed widely in college courses, and been included in anthologies with a multicultural slant. Yet, Kingston's and her text's fame have not been received without controversy. On the one hand, most Asian American and poststructural feminist readings turn to Kingston's *Woman Warrior* as a critique of sexism. On the other hand, critics with a nationalist reading argue that the text feminizes Asian American literature and masculinity. One of Kingston's most notorious critics, Frank Chin, argue that representations in *Woman Warrior* are shameful, that the text stereotypes Asian men and victimizes Asian women. In defenses made by Kingston's supporters, shame is an active mechanism that deconstructs the narrative of the victim woman. Both arguments take an extreme stance on the issue of whether Kingston's book is qualified to represent Asian American literature.

Woman Warrior is a collection of stories that follow a second-generation Chinese American girl growing up in California as she attempts to reconcile with her identity. The text consists a total of five chapters, interweaving elements of fiction with nonfiction, from Chinese folklore to Kingston's revision of myths, and stories about ghosts.

A novelist, playwright, and (at times considered an) Asian (American) nationalist, Frank Chin openly repudiates the canonicity of *Woman Warrior* in Asian American literature. Chin goes so far as to call Kingston a "white racist" ("Frank Chin Blog" 5) and deems that the text has

brought shame upon Chinese Americans, particularly to Chinese (American) men. What is so shameful about *Woman Warrior*, and what are the counter arguments in Kingston's defense? In the following, I trace one of the stories in *Woman Warrior*, "At the Western Palace," and illuminate how shame is used to carry out the narrative. I argue that while Frank Chin sees shame as a tool that stereotypes Asian men and victimizes Asian women, supporters of Kingston's text claim that the use of shame is essential in interrogating systems of class, gender, and language.

"At the Western Palace" opens with the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, and the family at the airport, waiting for Moon Orchid. Moon Orchid's husband has immigrated to the United States for years and still has not sent for his family. While Brave Orchid is adamant that her sister should confront the husband, Moon Orchid is less convinced. As Moon Orchid's stay with the family is prolonged, we see that the narrator's aunt slowly deteriorates in her mental health. When Moon Orchid's husband rejects his former family over his new "American" wife, Moon Orchid breaks down; she sees ghosts, feels anxious whenever someone leaves the house, and claims she is being spied on. In the end, Moon Orchid is sent to a mental health hospital, and she claims she is happy with the other women.

Representation of characters like Moon Orchid is exactly the kind of reason Frank Chin attacks *Woman Warrior*. Throughout "At the Western Palace," Moon Orchid is ashamed that she is in the United States, with a family that does not want her, while the husband has conducted an act of shame in remarrying and abandoning his wife. Since Moon Orchid's arrival, she has been nothing but curious, and even nosy, about the family's whereabouts. But the moment Brave Orchid brings up the idea of confronting her husband, Moon Orchid feels nervous. Her comments of, "I don't know. Do we have to do something [about her husband]?" (Kingston 114), illustrates that Moon Orchid is hesitant and afraid of consequences. Moon Orchid is a

needy and passive woman, dependent on her husband's financial support and her sister's emotional encouragement. Even at her sister's support, however, Moon Orchid backs down. When Brave Orchid pushes her to find her husband, Moon Orchid's "eyes got big like a child's" (Kingston 124), as she adds, "I shouldn't be here" (Kingston 124). In this sense, Moon Orchid's passivity and fear is read as a form of victimization against women.

The image of the woman as victim is reinforced during Moon Orchid's stay with the family. Throughout her stay, Moon Orchid has tried to put off even the possibility of meeting her husband. Her response is always, "Not today, but soon" (Kingston 142). Shame, stemmed by the idea that she is not worthy and thus should not "be here," engulfs Moon Orchid. She distracts herself through work at the family's laundromat business and claims that she has "accomplished a great deal by folding towels" (Kingston 140). Even though in truth, Moon Orchid actually slows down the family's business, she uses the act of folding towels to escape from reality. Folding towels is definitely more comforting than marching up to a husband turned stranger, whom she has not spoken with in years.

Sentiments of shame are explicitly revealed when Moon Orchid finally faces her husband. While Moon Orchid is good at evading from her "purpose" in the states, Brave Orchid is known for her single-mindedness. When Moon Orchid's daughter needs to head home, Brave Orchid took the opportunity and insists that Moon Orchid will see her husband that same day. As the group heads into the city, we see Moon Orchid's nervousness increases by the minute. She toys with the idea that she should visit her grandchildren first. And, when that fails to persuade Brave Orchid, Moon Orchid admits that she is scared. Moon Orchid says:

I'm scared. Oh, let's turn back. I don't want to see him. Suppose he throws me out? Oh, he will. He'll throw me out. And, he'll have a right to throw me out, coming here, disturbing him, not waiting for him to invite me. Don't leave me by myself. You can talk louder than I can. (Kingston 144)

Fear and shame are interchangeable here. Moon Orchid is afraid to meet her husband, but that fear is mixed with shame, of the possibility that she can be thrown out and ridiculed.

If Frank Chin finds the portrayal of Moon Orchid problematic, he also disapproves the depiction of the husband. After Brave Orchid's great scheme in tricking the husband, whom they found out is now a surgeon, to meet them outside the office, the narrator remarks on their stark contrast in appearance. Kingston writes:

The two old ladies [Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid] saw a man, authoritative in his dark western suit, start to fill the front of the car. He had black hair and no wrinkles. He looked and smelled like an American. Suddenly the two women remembered that in China families married young boys to older girls, who baby-sat their husbands their whole lives. Either that or, in this ghost country, a man could somehow keep his youth. (151-152)

The sisters are characterized as old ladies compared to the young, authoritative, and "American" husband. If we are to assert what Lisa Lowe calls a "vertical" reading of assimilation (64), the husband has fully integrated into American society. The two old ladies have not assimilated and thus, represent an old and backward China. In this sense, the husband has forgotten about Moon Orchid and China. Frank Chin's assertion about history and memory contradicts with the narrative that Kingston presents.

Chin asserts that history cannot be forgotten, nor are myths malleable ("Frank Chin Blog" 5). Chin is adamant that not only do we not forget our ancestors' history, but also it is up to us to trace that history.¹ It is a form of shame if we forget the history left by our ancestors. The husband depicted has done exactly that; he has thrown away his roots, Moon Orchid, and subscribed to an "American" culture.

¹ Review Frank Chin's blog for his account with his neighbor on how Asians in the U.S. can trace the history of their ancestors: "FRANK CHIN BLOG: Chin to China, Part 1." N.p., 6 Mar. 2007. Web. 6 Apr. 2015.

In Chin's and his supporters' effort in reclaiming Asian American masculinity, they conclude that Asian American men need to achieve white masculinity, that of the "oppressor" (Kim 101). In hindsight then, the husband has achieved white masculinity. He speaks fluent English, dresses like an American, and is an influential surgeon. So why is his masculinity considered a stereotype and a shame? I believe the husband falls under the category of what Chin calls "racist hate" (Cheung quoted in Chin and Chan, "Racist Love" 115).

Chin claims that "racist hate" juxtaposes White men with Asian men, wherein Asian men are labeled as patriarchal, misogynistic, and violent. Kingston's portrayal of the husband reinforces these stereotypes. The husband has moved up the ladder in American society, so to speak, but at the cost of abandoning his former family. He patronizes Moon Orchid and basically just wants to get rid of her. He presents a negative image of Asian men, one in which they are cruel and aggressive towards Chinese women.

The husband's demeanor further dismantles Chin's notion of the familial in Confucius philosophy. In his objection towards Kingston's revision of the Fa Mu Lan myth in "White Tigers," the second story in *Woman Warrior*, Chin notes that the original myth is a lesson about familial marriage and family reproduction² ("Come All Ye" 6). Kingston's revision of the myth has altered historical facts and misrepresented Chinese men as "sexist"³ (Chin "Come All Ye" 7). While no myths are incorporated in "At the Western Palace," Kingston's portrayal of the husband indicates a rejection of the familial. At one point in their confrontation, Brave Orchid

² For original Fa Mu Lan myth, see: Chin, Frank. "Come All Ye Asian American Writers of the Real and the Fake." *The Big Aiiieeee!*. Ed. Frank Chin et al. New York, N.Y., U.S.A.: Plume, 1991. Print.

³ In Kingston's revision, Mu Lan comes home to find a corrupted baron who took the villagers' money and women. The baron claims that the families are glad to get rid of the girls because "girls are maggots in the rice" (Kingston 43).

blatantly asks the husband, “How could you ruin her old age?” (Kingston 153), and remarks, “You made her live like a widow” (Kingston 153). The husband has violated a code of marriage and shows no remorse. Instead, he persuades Moon Orchid to believe that she is old and incompetent, unfit for America. The husband is read as a shameful representation of Asian men, and Kingston is at fault in perpetuating such representations.

While the husband is cruel and masculine, the father is benign and feminine. He is described as “the thin scholar with the hollow cheeks and the long fingers [. . .] his long hair blowing silver in twilight” (Kingston 119). These depictions not only ascribe the father with feminine attributes, but also are manifested in stereotypes about Asian men’s sexuality. The father represents a form of othering as portrayed through “racist love” (Cheung quoted in Chin and Chan, “Racist Love” 115-116). Stereotyped as docile and benign, racist love presents Asian men as non-threatening and easygoing subjects. Contrary to racist hate, racist love is an almost-acceptance of the racially othered, a two-dimensional figure presented as feminine, homosexual, or asexual. Although benign, this form of stereotyping is problematic because it stigmatizes Asian male sexuality. And for Chin, who has dedicated his life to the project of reclaiming Asian masculinity and nationalism (Kim 100), the father’s depiction is troubling.

I think it is important to review the history of Chinese American sexuality here in order to understand Chin’s adamancy in rejecting Kingston’s novel.⁴ While historically, most Chinese

⁴ I only discussed the history of Chinese American sexuality in brief here to provide some context for us to understand where Chin’s argument derives. For further readings about Chinese / Asian American sexuality in historical and literary studies, read e.g.: Lui, Mary Ting Yi. *The Chinatown Trunk Mystery: Murder, Miscegenation, and Other Dangerous Encounters in Turn-of-the-Century New York City*. New Ed edition. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007. Print; Wong, Sau-ling C., and Jeffrey J. Santa Ana. “Gender and Sexuality in Asian American Literature.” *Signs* 25.1 (1999): 171–226. Print.; Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and Their Social Context*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1984. Print.

migrant male laborers build railroads, mined gold, and cultivated plantations, they are better known to the American public as restaurant cooks, laundry workers, and waiters, jobs traditionally labeled as “women’s work” (Cheung 114). In addition, as a result of anti-miscegenation laws and exclusion acts that prevented the migration of women, many Chinese laborers formed bachelor communities in various Chinatowns. These ethnic enclaves created a sense of unity for Asian minority groups, but did not prevent forms of exclusion received from outsiders. Contrary to African American or even their Filipino American counterparts, in which masculinity is hypersexualized, Chinese men are depicted as repellent and docile.

On the other hand, Chinese American women are historically stereotyped as submissive. Stereotypes about Asian women has led to huge demands for X-rated films, the emphasis of bondage in pornographic materials, and Asian women workers in bathhouses that feature exotic themes about “the mysterious East” (Cheung quoted in Kim, “Asian American Writers” 115). Depictions of Chinese men and women create a public discourse where Asian women can only be sexual and Asian men asexual. In reclaiming an Asian identity that debunks initial stereotypes and degradations imposed by white Americans, Chin and his supporters believe there is a need to prove that Asian masculinity is just as “superior” as white masculinity.⁵

Contrary to Chin’s nationalist reading of *Woman Warrior*, poststructural feminists argue for a counter-analysis of the novel/autobiography. From psychology to feminist and literary

⁵ For more readings written by Chin on re-appropriation of Asian masculinity, see: Chin, Frank, and Jeffery Chan. *Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*. Ed. Lawson Inada. First Edition. Washington: Howard University Press, 1974. Print.

studies, scholars argue that *Woman Warrior* provides a broader lens into a critique of Asian American experience.⁶

The father in “At the Western Palace,” for example, symbolizes an alternative to Chin’s version of “heroic” masculinity (“Come All Ye” 40). Chin claims that the ideal Asian man is found through the classics; they are warriors who save their country (“Come All Ye” 40-41). But as critics of Chin point out, Chin’s version of Asian masculinity boxes in Asian sexuality and limits other forms of performance (Cheung 117). While the father’s femininity may be shameful, at least in Chin’s perspective, the father is different. His hollow cheeks and long fingers are characteristics of a scholar: “the ideal in masculine beauty” (Kingston 119). The father is definitely no warrior, but he offers an alternate portrayal of masculinity.

Contrary to the husband, the father is faithful to his wife and children. He is head of the household, but he also allows his wife, Brave Orchid, freedom of speech and agency. Brave Orchid is the most vocal character in the narrative. She runs the household, assigns tasks at the laundromat, and orders her children and husband around. She is the only person, and woman, who insist that it is in Moon Orchid’s right to seek his husband. Brave Orchid and the father’s marriage differ from Moon Orchid and the husband’s relationship in that here, we see a partnership between the couple. And it shows that notion of the family is not carried out only through a patriarchal system.

At the story’s conclusion, when Brave Orchid lectures her children about keeping an eye out on their father’s fidelity, the father replies, “I am almost seventy years old, and haven’t

⁶ See e.g.: Wong, Sau-ling Cynthia. “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour? Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* and the Chinese American Autobiography Controversy.” *Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*. Ed. Sau-ling Cynthia Wong. 1 edition. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.; Ludwig, Sami, and Nicoleta Alexoae-Zagni, eds. *On the Legacy of Maxine Hong Kingston: The Mulhouse Book*. Pap/Com edition. Zürich: LIT Verlag, 2014. Print.

taken a second wife, and don't plan to now'" (Kingston 160). The father's response implies that he has been faithful to his family and children. It debunks the myth that Chinese men abandon their wife and marry a Chinese American woman in order to integrate into American culture.

While the husband creates an unsettling and negative image of Asian men, the husband is also a critique of Asian and Asian American difference. As the husband states coldly to Moon Orchid, "[. . .] You can't belong. You don't have the hardness for this country. I have a new life" (Kingston 153). The husband shames Moon Orchid by pointing out her incompetence and stating that she is not tough enough to survive in the United States. He also states that there is a clear difference between him and the two women. He has made himself a new life; Moon Orchid has not. From his wardrobe to his demeanor, the husband does not relate to Moon Orchid, and it illustrates that perhaps, circumstances in the United States has changed his life. To use Lowe's words, a "horizontal" reading of assimilation asserts that the Asian identity is produced in relation to historical and material differences (64).

Difference between the husband and Moon Orchid is further illustrated through Moon Orchid's silence during their encounter. Despite the husband's "rude American eyes" (Kingston 153) and harsh words, Moon Orchid only cried and remained in the background. Brave Orchid is the sister who questions the husband's morals. In the end, Moon Orchid comprehends that difference with her husband boils down even to the way they communicate. Kingston writes:

Moon Orchid was so ashamed, she held her hands over her face. She wished she could also hide her dappled hands. Her husband looked like one of the ghosts passing the car windows, and she must look like a ghost from China. They had indeed entered the land of ghosts, and they had become ghosts. (153)

For the first time, Kingston uses the word "shame" to describe Moon Orchid. Kingston also highlights a clear language divide between the two counterparts. In part, the husband is correct when he says Moon Orchid does not know how to "talk" with his friends and him (Kingston

153). Logically speaking, Moon Orchid should have had a lot to say to the husband. She does not, however, have the words to vocalize her thoughts. Rather she hides behind her hands as she recognizes that the husband is indeed as foreign as he thinks of her; they have both become strangers to each other.

Moon Orchid's otherness is established early on through the sisters' class difference. At the airport, for example, Moon Orchid is described as "[. . .] a tiny, tiny lady, very thin, with little fluttering hands, [. . .] She was dressed in a gray wool suit; she wore pearls around her neck and in her earlobes. Moon Orchid *would* travel with her jewels showing" (Kingston 117). Her fluttery hands imply that she probably has not performed any physical labor; hence, she has a hard time adjusting to work at the family laundromat. The pearls around her neck and earlobes indicate status, and Moon Orchid travels with her jewels as a reminder that she is, or was, wealthy. In contrast to Brave Orchid, who is described as loud and tough, Moon Orchid is like a porcelain doll who has yet to experience the hardships of life.

It is significant that class differences between Moon Orchid and the family make themselves manifest through shaming. Although Moon Orchid tries to help Brave Orchid with various tasks, we see that Brave Orchid is more annoyed with her sister as the days go by. Kingston writes, "[. . .] all the jobs seemed hard for Moon Orchid, who was wearing stockings and dress shoes and a suit" (136). Moon Orchid's attire is not suitable for working at a laundromat; everyone knows this. But Moon Orchid, who has been living off a monthly allowance sent by her husband, does not know the first thing about laundry work. At some point, Brave Orchid begins to point out Moon Orchid's flaws. Comments such as, "Can't you go any faster than that?" (Kingston 135), "Oh, stop that with the dishes [. . .]" (Kingston 135), and "Go take a walk" (Kingston 137) are words of shame that hurt Moon Orchid's pride. Moon Orchid is

a woman who has had servants to do her dishes, but now she is expected to know how to sew, iron, and operate washing machines. Interestingly, while Moon Orchid never spoke about having to perform tasks she would attribute to working-class women, Moon Orchid's interactions with the children highlights her perceptions on class-relations.

While there is something culturally different between Moon Orchid and the children, language plays a key role in illuminating their class divide. Despite Moon Orchid's attempt to spend time with the children, she never fully understood them. She sees them as rude and accusatory (Kingston 133). As the narrator observes, "They [the children] must have many interesting things to say, raised as they'd been. They made rough movements, and their accents were not American exactly, but peasant like their mother's, as if they had come from a village deep inside China" (Kingston 133). This statement directly contrasts Moon Orchid with Brave Orchid. While Moon Orchid is from Hong Kong, the city, Brave Orchid is from southern China, the village. City and rural life raises tension within the household; here, the village is associated with peasantry. The children's "village accent" becomes a source of shame. Difference in geography and language illustrate class difference between the sisters. And just as Brave Orchid humiliates her sister's incompetence, Moon Orchid belittles the children's intelligence through their speech.

Although perceptions of class differed between the sisters, and clearly Moon Orchid believes she is from a wealthier class, Moon Orchid slowly deteriorates as circumstances make her feel out of place. After Moon Orchid's first day at the laundromat, Brave Orchid brings them into a building where women gathered for gambling. When Brave Orchid reveals her sister's situation, the women immediately advise Moon Orchid to find her husband. Moon Orchid does not take the women's encouragement well. She believes the women are "joking about her," and

she tries to “think of a joke too” (Kingston 138). It is interesting that while these women are compared to the rich women in China, with their “fans made out of silk, paper, sandalwood, and pandanus fronds,” Brave Orchid proclaims that the women can easily become homeless if they continue to gamble (Kingston 139). Once again, perceptions of class differed between the sisters. While Moon Orchid believes these women are rich because, like her, they do not have to work in order to survive, Brave Orchid sees them as people at-risk of losing everything they owned.

Moon Orchid is even more embarrassed when these women, whom she thinks she should be a part of, patronize her. As if it were not enough that Brave Orchid already pressures her to look for the husband, now an entire community of women takes part in laughing at Moon Orchid. Ostracized by her husband and now an “American” community, even though Brave Orchid claims they are the over-seas Chinese and not Americans, Moon Orchid does not know where she belongs anymore.

Moon Orchid’s shame derives from guilt, a belief that she should not be in California. For years, Moon Orchid has received money from her husband. While he has not ask Moon Orchid to immigrate with him, Moon Orchid is well off and independent in Hong Kong, even if not financially. Here in the states, not only is she dependent on her sister, but also she is obliged to seek out a husband she has not seen in years. Moon Orchid’s biggest fear is that her husband will reject her because that means she really has nowhere to go, and she has to face another round of possible humiliation. But just as Moon Orchid has feared, her “family” does not want to be involved with her. At last Moon Orchid comes to term that her husband is not a part of her life anymore. Instead, he has truly become a foreigner, another “ghost” (Kingston 153), like everything else in the states Moon Orchid does not comprehend. Moon Orchid’s turmoil and

leads her to ultimately be institutionalized in a mental hospital where she finally feels safe and understood.

“At the Western Palace” is a story about how lives change as a result of immigration. Moon Orchid’s story is one in which her life falls apart because she was not able to find a sense of belonging in a foreign place. Further, Moon Orchid’s class status interweaves with her feelings of guilt and shame. She does not know how to fit into a society that requires her to work and be aggressive like her sister or husband. Despite Chin’s arguments, supporters of the text claim that *Woman Warrior* captures elements of class, gender, and language difference.

Maxine Hong Kingston is not the only literary writer criticized by Frank Chin and critics. Chin aligns Kingston’s *Woman Warrior* along with contemporary playwright, David Henry Hwang’s *M. Butterfly*, and novelist Amy Tan’s *Joy Luck Club*, as works that falsified representations of Asian Americans. To borrow from Garrett Hongo, debate between Chin and Kingston is a form of “internalized oppression,” in which he defines as a tendency manifested in minority communities, when one group within that community oppresses another group “through the deployment of political clout and the construction of power hierarchies” (Huntley quoted in Hongo 60). Writer Cynthia Kadohata, for example, is at times ostracized in the literary world for her portrayals of history in *The Floating World* (1989). Similar to Kingston, Kadohata is accused for falsifying the history of Japanese Americans in World War II in her narrowed depictions and exclusions of any internment camps or mandatory evacuations (Huntley 60).

Frank Chin and Maxine Hong Kingston are both prominent literary figures in the Asian American community. While their critique and defense for *Woman Warrior* remains a continued debate, I argue that the use of shame and shaming is crucial in discussions around the text. Chin argues that the text has humiliated Asian masculinity in its depiction of men as violent and

passive. Defendants of the text claim that shaming is used to reveal gender difference, and class and language barriers in minority communities.

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