

# explorations



Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

## **Between Solid America and Fragile Chinatown in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior***

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.21.9.6

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**Abstract.** The article traces mixed affiliations of the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), permanently split between the world of Chinatown and broader American society outside Chinatown, both places crucial for the narrator in the on-going process of subjectivity construction. While both of these worlds constantly interpellate her, each of them entails a fair measure of hindrance and empowerment. The article undermines the criticism leveled at Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* by a section of the Chinese American community represented primarily by Frank Chin. Chin accused Kingston of pandering to white tastes and white readers' expectations of Chinese American authors. That, according to Chin, was achieved through the estrangement of Chinatown and its inhabitants as well as the criticism of the Chinese American community. I illustrate in the article that the narrator's pronouncements on Chinatown or broader America outside Chinatown are neither equivocal nor arrived at without tension, internal struggle or misgiving at choosing one world and at least partly leaving the other one behind.

**Key words:** Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*, Chinatown, America, Chinese American immigrants, white people

The article traces mixed affiliations of the narrator of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976), permanently split between the world of Chinatown and broader American society outside Chinatown, both places crucial for the narrator in the on-going process of subjectivity construction. While both of these worlds constantly interpellate her, each of them entails a fair measure of hindrance and empowerment. Saturated with an air of magic and mystery, Chinatown fertilizes the young narrator's imagination, fuelling her creative impulses of a future author. On the other hand, Chinatown is also the place of "mystery" in a negative sense of the term: marginalization, family secrets, the lack of security, a sense of loss and puzzlement for the immature narrator, who does not always find reassurance from her Chinese American parents. Initially associated with

*Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, 9 (2021), pp. 55-63

noise, clatter and uncertainty, the world outside Chinatown does not offer an acceptable alternative to the immature narrator, who comes to perceive it as such only with the flow of years and only after establishing a firmer foothold in the environment, which initially strikes her as alien, strange and suffocating. The article undermines the criticism leveled at Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* by a section of the Chinese American community represented primarily by Frank Chin. Chin accused Kingston of pandering to white tastes and white readers' expectations of Chinese American authors. That, according to Chin, was achieved through the estrangement of Chinatown and its inhabitants as well as the criticism of the Chinese American community. I illustrate in the article that the narrator's pronouncements on Chinatown or broader America outside Chinatown are neither equivocal nor arrived at without tension, internal struggle or misgiving at choosing one world and at least partly leaving the other one behind.

While the immature narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is overwhelmed by some aspects of the American lifestyle, for example pervasive mechanization associated with white people in the eyes of the immature narrator ("America has been full of machines of ghosts" (Kingston 1977, 113) ), the mature narrator embraces the lifestyle, which in the past impressed her as alienating and synthetic. As a mature person, she starts to appreciate the American lifestyle for its concreteness and simplicity. The mature narrator contrasts the mystery riddled atmosphere of Chinatown with the lucidity, tangibility and simplicity of the life outside Chinatown:

I had to leave home in order to see the world logically, logic the new way of seeing. I learned to think that mysteries are for explanation. I enjoy the simplicity. Concrete pours out of my mouth to cover the forests with freeways and sidewalks. Give me plastics, periodical tables, TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts. (Kingston 1977, 237)

In the context of the passage "ghosts" signify mysteries and unrevealed secrets haunting the narrator during her Chinatown childhood. The immature narrator's and her siblings' questions addressed to their parents often remain unanswered. Brave Orchid (the narrator's mother) frequently speaks in riddles, leaving the narrator guessing at the interpretation of some of her stories. Concrete pouring out of the narrator's mouth to fill the impenetrable of the forests with freeways and sidewalks symbolizes the narrator's personal Manifest Destiny, representing the world outside Chinatown, the world which the narrator chooses to present in terms of ever-expanding technology. Floodlights beaming into dark corners stand for the narrator's striving for the illumination of secrets, silences and mysteries saturating her Chinatown childhood. A foreshadowing of the mature narrator's embrace of "logic" as "the new way of seeing" comes during the family dinner when the maturing narrator blurts out all her long harbored misgivings. Drawing a positive contrast between Chinatown and her school world outside Chinatown, the narrator claims that "Things follow in lines at school" (234). Unlike the stories told at school, her mother's stories "have no logic," according to the immature narrator (235): "They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference ... I can't tell what's real and what you make up" (235). The desire to establish clear boundaries between the real and the false, to follow a straight line of logic and to develop stories

unfolding according to straight lines of logic contradicts the narrator's declaration that she is a chief knot maker, twisting her stories into designs. Her disenchantment with Brave Orchid's dilution of the boundary between the real and the fake contravenes her own proclivity to subvert the definitions of the real and the fake in her own storytelling.

Contrasting her own Chinatown childhood with her adult life outside Chinatown, the narrator proclaims appreciation for a compact, simple lifestyle popular in the 1960s: "Give me plastics, periodical tables, TV dinners with vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots. Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts" (237). "Vegetables no more complex than peas mixed with diced carrots" stand in sharp contrast to Brave Orchid's bizarre, extraordinary dishes which the immature narrator finds nauseating. An anticipation of the narrator's espousal of the "plastic" lifestyle comes after she recounts her revulsion at the food served by her mother. Confronted with Brave Orchid's culinary specialties, the narrator avers: "I would live on plastic" (108). The narrator's minimalistic lifestyle resembles that of the character created by Bharati Mukherjee in her short story "Orbiting" – Rindy, a descendant of a first generation Calabrian American woman and a third generation Italian American man. Unlike the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, Rindy does not adopt the minimalistic lifestyle of plastic plates and no chairs in order to create an antithesis to the intricacies of her childhood. She minimizes her material needs to devote more time to forging spiritual bonds with other people, in particular immigrants. Depicting her "native" childhood community, Rindy displays more distance than the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, who is emphatic about her love hate relationship with Chinatown.

The narrator's ambivalent attitude to Chinatown becomes conspicuous upon her reunion visits to Chinatown because the atmosphere of the Chinatown of her family house bears down on her, conjuring up the memories of the ghosts of the past. The quilts piled up on top of the narrator by Brave Orchid visualize her sense of being suffocated and overwhelmed by Chinatown. The narrator blames her annual childhood hospital internment on the suffocating atmosphere of Chinatown. A sense of insecurity accompanies the narrator whenever she stays overnight in the family house, to the extent of compelling her to listen for unidentified noises emerging from darkness, to double-check the locks and look out for potential movements in the dark outside (126-127). Brave Orchid shrugs off the narrator's concerns, claiming that unidentified noises probably originate from "Wino Ghosts" and "Hobo Ghosts" (127), to which the narrator retorts that she has "found places in this country that are ghost-free" (127). "Ghosts" signify in this context unwanted intrusions, remnants of the past, the hidden, the unknown, the unexplained, the understated, the invisible forces to be guessed at rather than seen in sharp light. Claiming that she dreams of a "Chinatown bigger than the ones here" (127), the narrator wants to extricate herself from the confining space of Chinatown and transcend what Ruth Frankenberg terms as the representation of minority racial and ethnic groups as "bounded" (Frankenberg 1994, 64).

There is also another side of Chinatown, for which the narrator clearly longs for, which she at least partly lost after leaving Chinatown and which she finds difficult to recapture upon her return. This is the magical, dream-like air of Chinatown palpable to the narrator when she was a child. Revisiting Chinatown, the narrator remembers how sleeping in her room as a child, she imagines its former tenants – old Chinese men. There is a tangible sense of loss and longing when the narrator notes that she has stopped only for a brief visit and she will have to leave Chinatown again, also leaving behind "ghosts

of neat little old men” (118). At this point ghosts signify the narrator’s birthright, her lineage, a beneficial link with tradition and the past of Chinese Americans in the United States. Liberating as an act of leaving Chinatown is, it also partly draws her away from part of her heritage accumulated in the space of Chinatown. The definition of ghosts in the above cited passage concurs with the definition of ghosts proposed by Fei Xiaotong, anthropologist visiting the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Fei perceives ghosts as a representation of the link with the past and Chinese attachment to the past. Fei Xiaotong calls the United States a “land without ghosts,” that is, “without strong traditions or bonds with the past” (Fei paraphrased in Arkush and Lee 1989, 11). According to Fei, Americans are constantly on the move, which is why they are permanently uprooted. That is also why they have no ghosts, according to Fei Xiaotong: “Always being on the move dilutes the ties between people and dissolves the ghosts” (Fei’s article “A World Without Ghosts” in Arkush and Lee 1989, 179-180).

Some of the ghosts whom the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* imagined in childhood dissolve as well after she reaches maturity and leaves Chinatown. The passage depicting her impressions of the world after leaving Chinatown indicates a clear sense of loss. She may have gratified her longing for simplicity, but she partly lost her link with the magic dreamlike world. The narrator may be able to “shine floodlights into dark corners,” but she partly lost her access to the celestial light:<sup>1</sup>

Now colors are gentler and fewer; smells are antiseptic. Now when I peek in the basement window where the villagers say they see a girl dancing like a bottle imp, I can no longer see a spirit in a skirt made of light, but a voiceless girl dancing when she thought no one was looking. (238-239)

Traumatic as in some ways the narrator’s Chinatown childhood was, it was characterized by a more variegated gamut of colors. The world outside Chinatown is marked by muted colors and antiseptic smells, conjuring up white hospital antisepticity. An air of indistinctness hovers over the world outside Chinatown. The mature narrator’s impressions of the outside world parallel her childhood perception of white people as insipid and indistinct. Verbs signifying sight recur in the above cited passage: “peek,” “see,” “looking” (238-239). Interweaving predominantly visual imagery with olfactory and auditory imagery, the narrator reaches for synesthesia to speak of her sight.

A change in perception concerns not only different impressions of colors and smells, but also a different content of images perceived by the narrator. A voiceless girl dancing surreptitiously replaces a spirit clad in a light braided skirt. An air of dreamlike magic vanishes from the mature narrator’s vision. The narrator is not sure if the transformation

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term “celestial light” strategically, implying a link to William Wordsworth’s “Ode: Intimations of Immortality.” The process observed by the I-speaker of the ode and the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* shows some parallels. In both cases what is at stake is a partial loss of perception. Still, if in Wordsworth’s poem the change occurs solely on account of growing up, in *The Woman Warrior* the change of perception is brought about not only by maturation, but also by the narrator’s departure from Chinatown. The connections between *The Woman Warrior* and canonical American and British literature works are also observed by Sàmi Ludwig (2002), who notes intertextual references to such works as: T.S. Eliot’s “Waste Land,” Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*, William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain*, Emily Dickinson’s poems and Ralph Waldo Emerson’s essays.

of her vision is connected to her departure from Chinatown or to her maturation: "Perhaps ... what I once had was not Chinese-sight at all but child-sight that would have disappeared eventually without such struggle" (239). Contrary to the narrator's claims, her second sight<sup>2</sup> does not disappear, but is transformed. If her second sight disappeared, she would not be able to say: "From the fairytales, I've learned exactly who the enemy are. I easily recognize them" (57). Still, "without such struggle" casts a shadow of doubt on the usefulness of her second sight. Instead of being a cherished gift of prescience, the narrator's (as Fa Mu Lan) ability to see behind her like a bat or use a visionary water gourd, the second sight gains the semblance of a burden, especially because it becomes a call to action. Seeing more entails responsibility to act. Seen this way, second sight is as much a challenge as it is a gift. Seeing is also a call to speak out. Speaking out was achieved by the immature narrator only through the utmost effort. An urge to speak out is no less intense for the mature narrator: "The throat pain always returns, though, unless I tell what I really think, whether or not I lose my job, or spit out gaucheries all over a party" (239). The narrator's second sight may have lost part of its dream-like, magic gleam, but only now can she put the events around her into a broader perspective. The broader perspective allows the narrator to recognize and confront diverse faces of oppression.

A sense of loss accompanying the narrator's departure from Chinatown creates an air of fragility around Chinatown, giving it a verisimilitude of the world which disappears. The solidity of broader America contrasts sharply with the fragility of Chinatown, the fragility assuming diverse forms, one of them being the tearing down of the narrator's family laundry in order to clear space for a parking lot. The tearing down of the laundry exposes the instability of the Chinatown landscape and very limited agency of its inhabitants in confrontation with bulldozing external forces. The clearing of the laundry also exposes a very tenuous foothold of Chinese Americans on the American land. Cramping Chinese Americans to ever tighter space, the real estate development of the 1960s replicated the practices aimed at confining racial minorities. The limiting of Chinese American access to space also inscribes itself in the policies reaching back to the second half of the 19th century and the introduction of Exclusion Acts designed to ban Chinese American travel to the United States of America altogether or at least significantly restrict it. Documenting the containment of Chinese Americans in photography, caricature, public exhibition spaces, theatre and literature of the second half of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, James Moy calls Chinatown the "site of containment," noting that "control at this site of containment was absolutely essential" (67). The "control" in question concerns a careful choreographing of Chinatown and its inhabitants in the images purveyed to the broader American public, for example in Arnold Genthe's photographs embellished with Will Irwin's commentary. Genthe and Irwin manipulated a collection of Chinatown photographs in such a way as to cast Chinese Americans as "exotic" (Moy 1993, 73) and "forever foreign" (Moy 1993,

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<sup>2</sup> Originally, an African American sociologist, activist and fiction writer, W.E.B. Du Bois, used the term "second sight" in his double consciousness formula in order to characterize black people's incisive sight counterbalancing the alienating power of the "veil" standing primarily for the color line: "the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world" (Du Bois 1989, 5).

71).<sup>3</sup> Genthe's control over the Chinatown "site of containment" consisted in tampering with images of Chinatown space and its inhabitants. The control exercised over Chinatown by external forces in *The Woman Warrior* takes the form of a direct intervention in the landscape proper and the lives of its residents rather than only the Chinatown imagery. Apart from exposing the fragility of the Chinatown landscape, the tearing down of the laundry illustrates contradictory policies towards the residents of Chinatown. Efforts to contain Chinese Americans within Chinatown and in some cases push them further inside Chinatown contradicted the attempts to assimilate them and to present them as an already assimilated model minority group. As a result of the tearing down of the laundry, the narrator's parents are deprived of their business, the source of their livelihood: hence they retrench further into their positions of Chinatown citizens cut off from contacts with people from outside Chinatown. Most of their contacts with white people ("white ghosts"<sup>4</sup>) occur in the laundry which they lose. The flipside of the laundry dispossession is that the parents receive the "moving money" to start their business elsewhere, which brings up the ensuing question where they are supposed to move their business. If one assumes that most Chinatowns already had their laundries, then presumably outside Chinatown. It is highly doubtful that the white apparatus of power intends to integrate them. Brave Orchid comments on the impracticability of their

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<sup>3</sup> Considering Robert G. Lee's distinction between "foreign" and "alien," the term "alien" would be more appropriate here because, according to Lee, "foreign" is distant, while "alien" is close at hand, but in general perception aliens do not belong to the place of their residence (Lee 1999, 3). Lee compares foreigners to tourists and aliens to immigrants. While the word "foreign" is rather neutral, "alien" often brings up negative connotations. However, it is worth emphasizing that the coloring of "alien" also depends on the context and on who bears the label, or consciously assumes it. Some people, especially the privileged, associate "alien" with positive alienation from the values of conventional society. White Sting may proudly declare in one of his songs the status of an illegal alien, but no third world immigrant is likely to brag about being an "alien."

The word "alien" keeps evolving, assuming various shades of meaning. It almost began to appear in the collocation "legal alien." In January 2004 President Bush proposed legislation that would transform "illegal aliens" into "legal aliens." The condition was that they had an employer. They would still have no citizenship, but they would no longer stay in the United States illegally. Proponents of the legislation claimed that "illegal aliens" would "earn their right to legality through their work." President Bush most probably came up with the initiative in the hope of securing the votes of Hispanic Americans, since they were most likely to benefit from the legislative change. The President himself claimed that he wanted to help the American economy. He argued that the employers apparently needed those workers if they kept hiring them. The proposal was announced one week before the American Summit, during which President Bush met the Mexican President Vicente Fox.

Proposed legislation encountered fierce opposition from a number of Republicans, who maintained that it would reward illegal immigration. Reacting to this opposition, President Bush replaced the "legal alien legislation" with a guest worker program, which boiled down to the same thing under a different name. The opposition from the far right wing of the Republican Party did not subside, but gained in strength. In 2006 some Republicans proposed intensifying the battle against illegal immigration by turning all illegal aliens into felons. Congressman Steven King went as far as to claim that anyone who supported the guest worker program "was branded with scarlet letter A, A for amnesty for illegal immigrants."

<sup>4</sup> While Kingston reaches for the term "ghost" to refer to white people in *The Woman Warrior*, she opts for "demon" in *China Men* (1986). Gayle K. Fujita Sato accounts for the difference in the translation of the Chinese term "Kuei" by invoking gender (Sato 1991, 141). Since *The Woman Warrior* is woven around the stories of Chinese American and Chinese women, the translation of "Kuei" as "ghost" reflects Chinese American women's vision of reality, whereas *China Men*, woven around the stories of Chinese American men, reflects the male vision. Hence the translation reflecting more raw and austere associations. Convincing as Sato's explanation is, I would also like to argue that the term "Kuei" was translated as "demon" in *China Men* because whiteness carries a much more demonic charge in *China Men* than it does in *The Woman Warrior*. The 19th century Chinese American workers featuring in *China Men* sample white brutality and exploitation first hand.

relocation, citing their age, declining strength and energy as well as the time necessary to attract new customers.

The outflow of second generation Chinese Americans educated in the United States adds to an air of fragility around Chinatown, reinforcing its marginality and alienness. Remembering her Chinatown childhood, the narrator claims that the children of Chinese immigrants had to negotiate between Chinatown and the world outside Chinatown: "Those of us in the first American generations have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America" (6). The "invisible world" represents the world of Chinese American stories, to which the narrator is exposed in her childhood. The ethereal of Chinatown contrasts sharply with the solidity of America, giving Chinatown a semblance of the world aside from America. In the preceding lines "solid America" appears as the world of harsh immigrant reality: "Those in the emigrant generations who could not reassert brute survival died young and far from home" (5-6). The passage corresponds to an excerpt of Chang-rae Lee's *Native Speaker*, in which the narrator depicts the life of an American immigrant without any embroidery, but he still frames a possible failure in subtler terms: "You must make yourself belong or else you must go" (42). In *The Woman Warrior* opting out is not an option. An alternative to "brute survival" is death. The solidity of America manifesting itself among others through the austerity of American immigrant reality is visible in Brave Orchid's transformation which she undergoes in the United States, bringing out her vast resources of sturdiness and transforming her into a woman with big muscles (122) and "eyes like boulders" (70). "Solid America" invites parallel associations in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*. For the narrator's grandfather, Ah Goong, drilling the Sierra Nevada railway tunnels, the rock is real (*China Men* 131-132). Testing the limits of human physical and mental endurance, the rock, a desensitized object, may represent austere living and working conditions of Chinese immigrants in the second half of the 19th century. The "immovability of the earth" (132), its resistance to change parallels Chinese immigrants' suspense, their very limited agency, and the intransigence of hostile anti-immigrant forces in the United States.

As a second generation immigrant, the maturing narrator of *The Woman Warrior* is free of the tribulations confronting the generation of her parents, but life outside Chinatown is also constant uphill struggle. Each success in one field is accompanied by a looming challenge in another. Celebrating a victory over her silence, she does not predict future trials: "that year I was arrogant with talk, not knowing there were going to be high school dances and college seminars to set me back" (202). The passage stands in a sharp contrast to the narrator's bragging that she can win scholarships and get better grades than "ghosts" can. The passage also contrasts with the excerpt in which she appreciates the logic and simplicity of life outside Chinatown, registering lifestyle differences between both worlds: "The stalls were open and the toilets had no lids, by which we knew that ghosts have no sense of shame or privacy" (203). The narrator's distance from white people and their ways is even more visible when she remembers hating them back in her school days for fanning Chinese American children's fear of speaking out in public (213) and holding them back at sports (201). Treasuring her success outside Chinatown ("I wrap my American success around me like a private shawl" (62)), she still grapples with recurrent inhibition, for example when she is about to speak to a stranger:

A dumbness – a shame – still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say ‘hello’ casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver. I stand frozen, or I hold up the line with the complete, grammatical sentence that comes squeaking out at impossible length ... A telephone call makes my throat bleed and takes up the day’s courage ... I’m getting better, though. Recently I asked the postman for special-issue stamps; I’ve waited since childhood for postman to give me some of their own accord. I am making progress, a little every day. (191-192)

In her childhood the narrator usually had articulation problems outside Chinatown, at English school and other places outside Chinatown. A speech inhibition did not occur at Chinese school or elsewhere inside Chinatown. Silence outside Chinatown is a direct result of the immature narrator’s anxiety characterizing her contacts with people outside Chinatown. Successful as the mature narrator is outside Chinatown, she is still revisited by unease reminiscent of her immature years. Both Chinatown and broader American reality are a source of misgivings for the narrator. I do not equate Maxine Hong Kingston with the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, but it is worth mentioning at this point that Kingston herself left Chinatown as well as the continental United States, settling for the liminal space of Hawaii, only to return with her husband to California after their child was already mature, Kingston’s intention being to bring up the biracial son in the space where people of color were the majority, not the minority.

The article traces the narrator’s complex, ambivalent relationship with the spaces of Chinatown and broader America outside. As illustrated above, while the American reality outside Chinatown offers wider opportunities seemingly unavailable inside Chinatown, those opportunities come at a price of gnawing away at the narrator’s unique, artistic, imaginative perception that she displays as a child. The solidity of the American world outside Chinatown parallels to some extent the narrator’s “American success that [she] wraps around [her] like a private shawl” (62), whereas the fragility of Chinatown corresponds partly to the narrator’s artistic gift that she needs to treasure ever more painstakingly outside Chinatown, which, in spite of its limitations, will forever remain for the narrator the golden bough of her creative impulses.

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