

A Study of Chinese Culture in *The Woman Warrior*

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Maxine Hong Kingston is a famous Chinese American female writer in America. She is famous for rewriting traditional Chinese culture and legendary stories based on American culture. One of her representative works, *The Woman Warrior* shows the miserable experiences of Chinese American women. Most researchers study it from the view of feminist, but there are few people analyze it from the perspective of Chinese culture. Based on Cheng's classification theory of cultural structure, this article analyzes the Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior* from three aspects, firstly, the chapter-based narrative of Chinese narrative; Secondly, traditional Chinese stories in the context of American culture; Thirdly, the creative adaptation of Chinese culture. This article aims to analyze the Chinese culture and the characteristics of Chinese American characters in *The Woman Warrior* in order to explore the purpose of shaping these characters.

Keywords: *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese American literature, Chinese culture

Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston, the author of the novel *The Woman Warrior*, was born in California, USA in 1940. She was a Chinese American woman who grew up in the United States. Her literary enlightenment was influenced by her parents. Her father cultivated her writing skill, while her mother taught her traditional Chinese culture which shaped her creativity. Part of the stories in *The Woman Warrior* were consisted of the stories told by her mother. After its publication, she soon became famous globally. As a Chinese American female writer, Kingston was involved in the American mainstream cultural values. Afterwards, her works *The Chinese Man* and *Tripmaster Monkey* were published subsequently. These works had expanded her influence and elevated readers' artistic conception. Besides, they revealed the differences in cultural attributes and cognitive thinking style between China and America from the perspective of Chinese American woman.

Kingston's novel *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, published in 1976, is one of the classic works of Chinese American literature. The novel uses multicultural materials which has attracted global attention and sparked in-depth discussion about historical reality and Chinese culture by Chinese American writers. Though it has been published for nearly half a century, the researchers' enthusiasm remains undiminished due to its unique cultural narrative style and extensive social influence. Besides, as early practice of cross-cultural Chinese narrative in Chinese American literature, her works have reflective and reference significance for promoting the dissemination of Chinese American literature.

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The Chinese culture in Chinese American novels is a hot issue concerned by scholars both at home and abroad. Gao (2005) analyzed the Chinese elements in Chinese American novels from the perspective of cultural studies. He believed that the purpose of Chinese narrative was to explore the relationship between cultural subjectivity and the creation of foreign characters, the relationship between cultural identity and different forms of Orientalism, and the issue of narrative strategies in practical writing creations. Moreover, as Kingston involved in two different cultures, it was difficult to understand the essence of Eastern culture with Western thinking style. Besides, it was also difficult to distinguish truth and imagination, reality and history. Because Kingston is a Chinese American, a minority in the United States, she had prejudice against Chinese culture and desired to integrate into American society. Therefore, she constantly identified with the American culture in which she immersed herself in (Sun, 2011; Xue, 2010; Zhan, 2008).

Foreign scholars' research on Kingston's novels mostly focuses on thematic studies, comparative studies, language features, and the Chinese cultural elements reflected in them. Maxey (2005) pointed out that as a writer in a dual cultural context, Kingston was suffered from cultural shock in America. Her works aimed to gain social positions of Chinese Americans. Lee (2004) compared Kingston and Winnifred Eaton, who were both American writers with Chinese background. Their similarity was using autobiographical novels to express discrimination against ethnic minorities. Tian (2010) pointed out that *The Woman Warrior* rewrote Chinese legends and allusions, and its narrative technique of combining historical facts and imagination was in line with the oral tradition of talk-book in China. He also identified and explained some Chinese myths and allusions, which expanded foreign researchers' understanding.

According to Cheng Yuzhen's classification theory of cultural structure, Chinese cultural structure can be divided into four levels: the first level is the substance culture level that involves people's clothing, food, housing, transportation. The second level is the system culture level that guides people's behavior and interrelationship norms. The third level is the behavior culture level which is about people's accepted habits and customs. The fourth level is the spirit culture level which represents people's social psychology, ideology, values, aesthetic judgment, and thinking patterns, which is the core and essence of culture.

Based on Cheng's classification theory of cultural structure, this article analyzes the Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior* from three levels, firstly, the chapter-based narrative of Chinese narrative; Secondly, traditional Chinese stories in the context of American culture; Thirdly, the creative adaptation of Chinese culture. This article aims to analyze the Chinese culture and the characteristics of Chinese American characters in *The Woman Warrior* in order to explore the purpose of shaping these characters.

The Chapter-based Narrative of Chinese Narrative

The Chinese narrative in Chinese American literature refers to traditional Chinese literary narrative forms (Pfaff, 1980, p. 1). Kingston adopted this narrative style to promote narrative strategies, emphasizing cultural origins, and expanding the influence of Chinese American literature. Moreover, it helps resist racial discrimination in American society, and enhance identity recognition among Chinese Americans. This chapter mainly discusses the chapter-based narrative of Chinese narrative.

Inspired by the traditional Chinese story of Mulan, the book was named *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, indicating that the book interweaves legend and history, illusion and reality. The book

contains five chapters: *No Name Woman*, *White Tigers*, *Shaman*, *At the Western Palace*, and *A Song for a Barbarian Pipe*. These five chapters are isolated stories while all of them form a coherent novel, and missing any part will not cause difficulties in understanding the main idea. For example, the second chapter *White Tigers* is adapted from the story of Mulan. The author rewrote this story based on her mother's narration and her own imagination, making it completely different from the story of Mulan. In this novel, Mulan entered White Tiger Mountain to learn martial arts for 15 years under the guidance of a bird, then, she became a highly-skilled warrior. She soon returned to her hometown and dressed herself as a man to join the army in order to replace her elderly father. In the end, she defeated the enemy and became a heroine. But instead of showing loyalty to the emperor, she killed him. This story is independent from another four stories. When readers read this novel for the first time, most people thought it was a collection of short stories. But if we see the overall structure of the book, these five stories are closely connected internally. They integrate the stories of Chinese gods, heroines, and the oppression and discrimination against Chinese American women. Kingston used ghosts to represent people, and compared the past with the present in chapter-based narrative pattern. This narrative structure and strategy associate with traditional Chinese chapter-based novels, such as *Journey to the West*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, and *Water Margin*, the Four Great Classical Novels of Chinese literature.

Therefore, in Kingston's novels, the chapter-based narrative of Chinese narrative is a unique, dynamic and meaningful narrative strategy for depicting the lives of Chinese American ethnic groups. As Plaks (1996) said, "Narrative is the way the author conveys the essence and meaning of life experiences to others through storytelling".

Traditional Chinese Stories in the Context of American Culture

From the perspective of American readers, *The Woman Warrior* is a literary work that reveals Chinese culture, life, and women containing strong cultural characteristics. As for Chinese readers, *The Woman Warrior* is a documentary literature about the lives of Chinese American women, highlighting Western cultural atmosphere.

The Woman Warrior is a book that presents abundant Chinese culture. It rewrites Chinese folklore, traditional beliefs and customs. Overall, it can be divided into two categories: one is the classic Chinese cultural stories that closely follow the theme, shows Chinese women's growth, explore cultural identity, and desire to express their own voices, such as the rewritten stories of Mulan, and Yue Fei (Kang et al., 2011, p. 58); Second part is beyond the theme which highlights the backward, weird, barbaric, and cruel Chinese customs, such as the stories of eating monkeys' brains and the special people who catches ghosts.

The leading character Mulan in *The Woman Warrior* was quite different from Mulan in classic Chinese story. The original work portrays the image of an ancient heroine, highlighting her loyalty to the emperor and the country. On the contrary, in *The Woman Warrior*, before Mulan set out on a campaign, her mother did not stab her with words of loyalty and patriotism, but her family hatred. She got married and had babies in the military, leading the army to victory, killing the emperor, rescuing women, and finally back home to take care of her husband and children. It can be analyzed that in the book, Mulan has complete control over her own destiny and can be regarded as a representative of independent woman.

The main reason why Kingston chose the story of Mulan is that she wanted to accuse and resist all forces that oppress women, protesting against the oppression of Chinese Americans by white people, and allowing Chinese American women to have their voices heard in American society. Part of the reason why Asian American writers adopt the strategy of pursuing cultural heritage or confirming community traditions is that they want to create a cultural metaphor to counter the cultural prototypes established by European American culture on immigrants and culture (Lin, 2006, p. 6).

In the second chapter, *White Tiger*, “I was unwilling to get married when I grew up because I was motivated to become a heroine. At the age of seven, I was led by a bird to the mountains to study martial art. In the end, I defeated enemies on the battlefield”. The motivation for the female warrior to join the army was due to her unwillingness to get married and live like a housewife in a patriarchal society. She determined to achieve great success in the future. Before the female warrior left for battlefield, her mother engraved words on her back to make her more masculine, which clearly referred to the story of Yue Fei. Her choice on marriage also embodied advancement and independence, which was totally different from traditional Chinese women. Influenced by American culture, it conforms to American social values.

Creative Adaptation of Chinese Culture

The Woman Warrior successfully portrays the cognitive, psychological changes of a little girl, focusing on depicting the characteristics and cultural attributes of Chinese women. Due to the cultural differences between China and America, it is difficult for the little girl to fully integrate into American society, besides, it also causes confusion about her identity and self-belonging. During the creation of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston deeply analyzed her cultural attributes, which formed her thinking style in the conflict between traditional Chinese culture and Western civilization and ideology, and combined her imagination to construct her own cultural dream and American dream.

The little girl in *The Woman Warrior* is the driving force behind the development of the entire story. Though there exist cultural differences between her and her parents, her mother is the core spirit of the novel, representing female warrior. She owns the virtue of traditional Chinese woman, and obeys the Confucianism. The relationship between her and her mother is complex, ever-changing, and contradictory. She absorbs the essence of traditional Chinese culture from their mother, motivated by the spirit to face adversity and never give up. However, deep down in her heart, she also eagers to be recognized by mainstream American culture. The contradictions and conflicts between Chinese and American cultures, as well as their mutual influence and infiltration, are vividly reflected in the book.

Kingston’s creation concept is to tell her American stories, using specific images, characters, plots and other elements related to Chinese culture. Her rewriting of Mulan is the confirmation of the above concept. In addition, the publication of *The Woman Warrior* coincided with the rise of the second wave of feminism in American in the 1960s. The female warrior contains multiple elements such as women’s liberation, the feminist movement, and war. Therefore, it is evident that the Chinese historical figures in Kingston’s works are the products of her variation and recreation based on different stories, readers, and environments. Chinese culture is valuable writing resource that distinguishes Chinese American writers such as Kingston from other ethnic groups.

Conclusion

This article analyses *The Woman Warrior* from three aspects: the chapter-based narrative of Chinese narrative, traditional Chinese stories in the context of American culture, and creative adaptation of Chinese culture. These three aspects have been transformed and inheriting traditional Chinese culture, reflecting cultural integration. Chinese literature, traditional customs, and historical figures in the novel are extension and infiltration of traditional Chinese culture in American society. Kingston's works have created a new field for spreading Chinese culture by giving Chinese traditional stories new vitality. Her cognitive and interpretative mode of stories intends to speak for Chinese Americans and promote the introduction and dissemination of Chinese stories in America.

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