“Talk-stories” in the Fictions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan

by

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Declaration

I hereby state that the thesis is my own work and confirm that the thesis has not been submitted for a degree at another university.
This thesis investigates the “talk-story” narrative patterns, which stem from the Chinese oral tradition, in selected works of two contemporary Chinese American women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston has experimented with a new kind of “talk-story” writing in blending family stories, cultural myths, fantasy, autobiographical details, and history, as she attempts to model her work on the familial talk-story culture she was nurtured in. Borrowing the term “talk story” from a pidgin Hawai’ian expression, Kingston develops a special kind of generic “talk-story” as an artistic creation in her fictions. Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club* is often compared to *The Woman Warrior* and a number of critics have observed the use of “talk-story” in Tan’s novels, but the talk-story components in the two writers’ works have been largely discussed in relation to the mother-daughter dyads and few critics have distinguished the different usages and functions of “talk-stories” in their works. Through a literary analysis of their works, my thesis attempts to enrich the concept of “talk-story” originated from Kingston, and discusses its relation to the works of Kingston and Tan, with an aim to teasing out the two writers’ differences within their sameness.

While Kingston exhibits a talk-story narrative structure in her works, Tan mainly confines the talk-story elements at a textual level as a healing narrative therapy between generations. I will argue that while both writers exemplify talk-story as a form of self-expression and empowerment, their talk-stories function differently as they interact with the mainstream discourse: while Kingston remolds the Chinese talk-story pattern by making it a form of literary art, Tan refashions talk-story as a kind of “talking-cure,” as in western psychotherapy, in her fictions and writes in the popular arena.
### Abbreviations

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<td>WW:</td>
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<td>AS:</td>
<td><em>Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa</em></td>
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<td>HMH:</td>
<td><em>In Her Mother’s House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing</em></td>
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<td>MHK:</td>
<td><em>Maxine Hong Kingston</em> by Helena Grice*</td>
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Chapter 1
Introduction: Stories and “Talk-stories”

For the tongue meats that the poor man feeds the women are not material, of course. They are fairy tales, stories, jokes, songs; he nourishes them on talk, he wraps them in language; he banishes melancholy by refusing silence. Storytelling makes women thrive – and not exclusively women, the Kenyan fable implies, but other sorts of people, too, even sultans.

... the story of storytelling is a tale that will never be done. As one traditional closing formula implies, the story is made by both together: “This is my story, I’ve told it, and in your hands I leave it.”

Marina Warner, From the Beast to the Blonde (XI, XXI)

A story is not just a story. Once the forces have been aroused and set into motion, they can’t simply be stopped at someone’s request. Once told, the story is bound to circulate; humanized, it may have a temporary end, but its effects linger on and its end is never truly an end.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other (133)

This thesis investigates the “talk-story” narrative patterns, which stem from the Chinese oral tradition, in selected works of two contemporary Chinese American women writers, Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. It examines how “talk-story” functions as a narrative theme and structure in the two writers’ literary works as they map out in “storied” forms their personal/socio-political concerns and physical/emotional conditions of being Chinese Americans. As a means of connecting the past with the present and future, storytelling becomes the vehicle through which Kingston and Tan re-mark their existence, reclaim their Chinese heritage, and reshape the American literary field.

Stories and storytelling

In Mules and Dragons: Popular Culture Images in the Selected Writings of African-American and Chinese-American Women Writers, Mary E. Young makes a comparative study of African-American and Chinese-American women writers and suggests that while “African-American women writers realize the difficulty of
survival in a highly complex social structure that is characterized by colorism, sexism, racism, and classism. Chinese-American women writers do not seem to have come to this realization" (146). According to Young, the majority of Chinese American women writers like Amy Tan "set the majority of their writings in China or in a mythical Chinatown" and "ignore their popular culture images or history in the United States, preferring instead to reinforce their identification with China" (128-129). While it is almost inevitable that the portrayal of a mythic China or Chinatown would attract Orientalist readings and give an impression of the authors' intention to pander to a white audience by highlighting their foreign-ness, I believe Young's view of the Chinese American women writers' ignoring of social history, and the degrading stereotypes arising from it, is too simplistic and that she has analysed the texts of Chinese-American women writers primarily with a reductive Orientalist view. Kingston and Tan demonstrate their awareness of the complex social structure they are in as their works feature bicultural characters who struggle to survive amid the complexities and crisscrossing of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class, within their particular socio-historical, cultural, political, and economic realities. References to China and Chinese culture, exemplified in the portrayal of mythic/imaginary China and re-telling of past Chinese stories, are their strategies for seeking an identity and creating a voice for their "between worlds" characters through connecting the past and the present (Ling, Between Worlds 20). This is essential for the bicultural characters as only by acknowledging their ancestral heritage would they be able to situate and define themselves in the state of "double consciousness," as pointed out by W. E. B. Du Bois for African Americans (qtd. in Ling, "Tradition" 137). In both writers' works, the mythic Chinese past and the contemporary American present are linked through storytelling.
Storytelling could be an effective form of education and bestowing information for young children: as Sara Ruddick observes, “children are shaped by – some would say imprisoned in – the stories they are first told. But it is also true that storytelling at its best enables children to adapt, edit, and invent life stories they can live with” (qtd. in Ho, *HMH 127*). In *The Uses of Enchantment: The Meaning and Importance of Fairy Tales*, Bruno Bettelheim discusses the importance of fairy tales in a child’s development into maturity and analyses why fairy tales make a positive psychological contribution to a child’s inner growth by coping with emotional insecurities such as fear, anxiety, and helplessness. Myths and fairy tales are regarded by modern thinkers as precious resources for literary and intellectual education, for example, Mircea Eliade, describes these stories as “models for human behaviour [that,] by that very fact, give meaning and value to life” (qtd. in Bettelheim 35). As works of art, fairy tales make significant psychological impact on a child but what the child extracts from a fairy tale largely depends on “his interests and needs of the moment” and therefore a fairy tale could be of different meanings for each person and different for the same person at various moments of his life (Bettelheim 12). In this sense, “[w]hich story is most important to a particular child at a particular age depends entirely on his psychological stage of development, and the problems which are most pressing to him at the moment” (Bettelheim 15). It is important, therefore, that the stories should be presented in an accessible form to a child in order for them to make satisfying and meaningful impacts. Stories, while being told from a parent to a child in the right manner, could also effectively transmit cultural heritage and information, which is the primary goal of the mothers of the two writers. Although the stories told by the mothers in the texts of Kingston and Tan are not exclusively
fairy tales, Bettelheim's analysis of the role of stories in a child's development is suggestive of how stories and the dynamic activity of storytelling shape one's development and why a particular story would appeal or be of no significant meaning to a listener.

Storytelling is an activity largely linked to women because it flourished in domestic settings in old times: Marina Warner has noted the relation between storytelling and traditional women's art of weaving: "[s]pinning a tale, weaving a plot: the metaphors illuminate the relation; while the structure of fairy stories, with their repetitions, reprises, elaboration and minutiae, replicates the thread and fabric of one of women's principal labours - the making of textiles from the wool or the flax to the finished blot of cloth" (23). Trinh T. Minh-ha observes that "the world's earliest archives or libraries were memories of women" from storytelling and "every woman partakes in the chain of guardianship and of transmission" of stories (121). In China, storytelling is popular among women: Elisabeth Croll has remarked, "the art of storytelling [was] highly valued by women audiences, who loved to hear the simple stories, which were told in rhythmic and popular language" (qtd. in Ho, *HMH* 147). The popular stories "were passed on in domestic settings as well as public spaces (village or town) 'from grandmother or mother or daughter and old tales were spun and embellished by amahs [nurse/nanny], servants and itinerant storytellers" (Ho, *HMH* 147).

For women living in male-dominated societies where they were silenced and excluded from public forms of involvement (while men controlled history and politics, women were relegated to domestic tasks which were devalued), storytelling provides a realm of voice and of building communities with other women. In order to have a space for self-expression, women start to gather together
and draw power from talk, generating gossips – an earlier form of storytelling. Mariner Warner has noted gossip as “a woman’s derided instrument of self-assertion” and “however pejoratively weighted,” the word “illuminate[s] the influential part of women in communicating through informal and unofficial networks, in contributing to varieties of storytelling, and in passing on their experience in narrative” (XXI, 33). Patricia Meyer Spacks observes that the appeal of gossip is the appeal of story: “merging the real with the imaginary ... claims other people’s experience by interpreting it into story” (qtd. in McHenry 13). For women of minority cultures whose experience and existence is continually conditioned and limited by race, class, and gender, storytelling continues to “be vital to their cohesion and literal survival” despite the demise of oral storytelling with the use of modern technologies as suggested by Walter Benjamin (McHenry 14). Operating on the margins and at ex-centric locations, storytelling becomes a means of articulating female experience as these marginalised women craft a literary space to reveal their emotions, desires, histories, and “discredited” knowledge that Toni Morrison has suggested: “people say it is no more than what women say to each other. It is called old wives’ tales, or gossip, or anything but information” (McKay 154). Therefore, a number of women minority writers, such as Toni Morrison, Leslie Marmon Silko, Zora Neale Hurston, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan, write with a strong oral dimension in their works, as expressing themselves in storied form through real or fictional tale-tellers liberate them from an otherwise silenced or invisible position.

Oral storytelling – the telling of folktales and stories – has been practised and developed in China for more than two thousand years from the time when most people were illiterate and the main way of bestowing knowledge and information
was through word of mouth till the present day when written documents are prevalent. The originality of oral tradition lies in the “particular interaction with this audience at this time – at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation, for in oral cultures an audience must be brought to respond” and “narrators also introduce new elements into old stories” (Ong 42). As “storytelling is always the art of repeating stories,” a “storyteller takes what he tells from experience – his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale” (Benjamin 91, 87). Mary Slowik has succinctly pointed out that “[a] story has power because ultimately it is not in the hands of the storyteller, but rather in the hands of the audience who actively interprets, re-tells and re-interprets the story generation after generation across time” (76). It is therefore a “living” literature as “it keeps changing and growing through repeated oral narration and performance” (Duan 57) and in present China, “storytelling remains the most popular form of literary entertainment in the countryside” (Wu 85). While it is not my intent to research into oral tradition in China, and the present day oral tradition as a performance art is different from what I refer to as the familial traditions of Kingston and Tan in chapters 2 to 5, it is important to point out a number of features of the Chinese oral tradition which are essentially relevant in the discussions of the two writers’ works: first, the continual revision and changing of stories along with the storytelling process; second, the spontaneity of oral tradition and the importance of both telling and reception of stories; and third, the function of preserving and transmitting knowledge and cultural legacies through stories and storytelling.

“Talk-stories” in Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan
In Woman, Native, Other, Trinh Minh-ha remarks on the condition of being “triply” bound as a writer, a woman, and a Third World member in a “white-male-is-norm” culture and seeks for an alternative mode of narrative for women (6). Trinh’s own writing departs from traditional genres as she attempts to narrate her story/theory in a fluid style mixing prose and poetry, and inscribe a space for the voice of women of colour. She also notes storytelling as a continual female living tradition where storytellers (re-)tell stories in ways they think should be told and set into motion a discourse that “overflows the boundaries of patriarchal time and truth” (149). For Kingston and Tan, their familial storytelling traditions provide them a rich reservoir for literary creation and set them into motion for the articulation of female voices, as they write in “talk-story” forms as an alternative mode of narration. If “the private is political,” Kingston and Tan resort to a “private” means (storytelling) for “political” deeds (Trinh 37).

In many interviews, Kingston has talked about the importance of talk-stories to her works and how the stories she has heard from her mother and relatives since she was young have provided her an inspirational force for artistic creation. It is from their stories that Kingston grasps a primary understanding of China, a place she had never visited when she wrote The Woman Warrior and China Men, and its history, culture, legends, and folk traditions. Kingston’s mother, Ying Lan Chew—Brave Orchid in The Woman Warrior, is the dominant and principal storyteller of her family and the mother’s storytelling functions as a means to bestow Chinese traditions upon, and provide didactic lessons to, the daughter.

Like Kingston, Tan was brought up in a familial storytelling tradition. Besides the influence from the exposure to Bible stories and fairy tales such as Grimm (Huntley, Tan 15), a greater influence comes from her family. Tan inherits her gift
of storytelling, or borrowing Kingston's term "talk-story" from both of her parents. Her father, John Tan, was a Baptist minister who practised his sermons by reading them aloud to his daughter, Amy, who recalls that those sermons were written like carefully-woven stories. Her mother, Daisy Tan, on the other hand, told stories including tales, myths, gossips, and activities of the family, to her in the most primitive form — fragmented, unorganised, and lacking refinement: in the daughter's words, the mother's stories are "all over the place" and require mental editing (Huntley, *Tan* 16). As Amy Tan matures, she learns how the activity of storytelling has seeped into her life since her childhood: "There was a lot of storytelling going on in our house: family stories, gossip, what happened to the people left behind in China. The gossip about people's character that went around as my aunt and my mother shelled peas on the dining table covered with newspaper" (Shields 21-22). Her mother's stories turn out to be a rich reservoir for Amy Tan's story construction and she manages to put in some of the mother's tales in her novels. Unlike Kingston who writes memoirs such as *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Tan writes predominantly fictional stories; yet, they also carry autobiographical traces of her mother's stories about herself or people around her.

A number of critics have noted the use of "talk-story," a specific term used by Kingston in *The Woman Warrior* to describe the "verbal style and form which the narrator learns from her Cantonese immigrant mother" (qtd. in Ho, *HMH* 28), in the works of both Kingston and Tan, and most of them have discussed it around the topoi of mother-and-daughterhood and designated it as a form of empowerment and survival for marginalised women and an articulation of female experience, functioning as a counter-discourse to the white masculinist and nationalist ideologies. For example, Sau-ling Cynthia Wong regards *The Woman Warrior* and
The Joy Luck Club as "both putatively elaborated from 'talk-story' passed on from mother to daughter" ("Chinese" 42). Bella Adams notes that for "the Chinese mothers and the American-born daughters in both Kingston's and Tan's texts, ... talk-story is 'a unique kind of semiotic system exemplifying different levels of female existence. These levels complement and contrast with one another to form a vigorous dialogic process of moulding femininity'" (27). Mary Snodgrass remarks that Tan, Kingston, and other feminist authors "have recovered the talk-story culture as a means of reclaiming women's history and of gauging how far women have come from the dark ages of patriarchy and feudal marriage" (164). In Her Mother's House: The Politics of Asian American Mother-Daughter Writing, Wendy Ho describes "talk-story" as characterised by "a complicated vocabulary of rupture - heavy sighs, silences, trembling lips, downcast eyes, weeping, and wringing of hands" (19). She defines the "coded talk-story language from Chinese women's social world" as including but not limited to "secrets, dreams, myths and legends, folk wisdom, incantations, singing, gossip, jokes, crazy talk, parables, and poetry" (140) and claims that women "create culture" with "talk-story" - "to retell stories - not to simply reproduce them" (143). Ho argues that "talk-stories" in Kingston's The Woman Warrior, Tan's The Joy Luck Club, and Fae Myenne Ng's Bone are practised by mothers and daughters as social protest against the dominant culture that renders them voiceless and invisible. According to Ho, talk-stories provide a means for the women characters to challenge and critique western feminist criticism, Orientalist representations of Chinese American women in American culture, and the Asian American cultural nationalists' claim that the "psychological attitudinizing" of stories and oral traditions is "egotistical" and "self-serving" (112). Ho argues that the women practising talk-stories are making
and remaking the culture and society they are in and through reclaiming the repressed stories, these women assert "social agency in their recovery of memory, feeling, and experience" (234).

In a nutshell, there is a consensus among scholars to regard "talk-stories" in the works of Kingston and Tan as a feminist discourse or female self-expression for the articulation of female subjectivities, experiences, and voices, which counteracts the white, masculinist, patriarchal, and nationalist imperatives in mainstream American culture. Much has been said about storytelling being a strategy of resistance for these writers, who record the concerns and conditions of being a minority woman writer in America. However, few critics have distinguished the different usages and functions of talk-stories in the two writers' works; while most critics have noted Kingston's use of talk-story as both a textual substance and a structural frame of her works, they have employed the term mainly and generally to designate the storytelling activity between generations in Tan's fictions. While my use of the term in the discussion of the two writers' fictions goes in line with most critics as I consider talk-story as a form of oral tradition characterised by revision of stories and taking place spontaneously at a specific moment with the presence of both teller and listener, I attempt to enrich the concept of "talk-story" originated from Kingston, and discuss its relation to the works of Kingston and Tan, with an aim to teasing out the two writers' differences within their sameness. In both writers' works, talk-story plays an integral part and functions as a cultural form of empowerment for the Chinese American literary characters. While Kingston exhibits a talk-story narrative structure in her works, Tan mainly confines the talk-story tradition to a healing narrative therapy between generations of her characters. I will argue that while both writers exemplify talk-story as a form of
self-expression and empowerment, their talk-stories function differently as they interact with the mainstream discourse: while Kingston remodels the Chinese talk-story pattern by making it a form of literary art and artistic creation, Tan refashions talk-story as a kind of "talking-cure," as in western psychotherapy, in her fictions and thus writes in the popular arena. While the claim that Kingston is more artistic and Tan provides a stronger popular appeal is self-evident in a sense 6, I intend to shed light on possible reasons for this distinction based on the study of "talk-story" in their literary texts.

Kingston has said in an interview with Laura E. Skandera-Trombley that it bothers her "when books are read for political messages and with an absence of looking at the aesthetic reason" (33). Tagging socio-political or historical labels on literary works by ethnic writers has been central to the Asian American literary criticism. A call for a returned emphasis on the aesthetic ("revitalizing the aesthetic") in Asian American literary scholarship takes place at the beginning of the twenty-first century, as distinct from the existing Asian American literary criticism which, like that of other minority literatures, has been analysing literary texts as "symbolic enactments of material forces; as exemplifications of a particular ideology, phenomenon, or a conflict; or as illustrations of the political, economic, and sociological concerns of the times" (S. Lee 4, 2). The emphasis on the "historical and material specificities" in Asian American literary criticism diminishes the role of the aesthetic (S. Lee 5) as there exists an assumption that "artistic merit’ and ‘minority writers’ are mutually exclusive terms" (S. Lee 6) 7. As King-kok Cheung has noted, the "tendency to value Asian American works primarily as autobiography or ethnography has perhaps prevented these works from being taken seriously as literature" ("Re-viewing” 19). However, in a sense, it is
inevitable that literary texts of minority writers would have strong nuances of both the personal/domestic-familial and socio-political spheres – there are overlapping spaces of home, family, and ethnic community life informed by racism, sexism, and classism. The recent call for return of the aesthetic by scholars therefore delineates the possibility of a parallel focus of both the material and aesthetic constructedness and questions the ethnic/aesthetic divide in earlier Asian American literary scholarship. In light of this recent move, my study will be based on a close reading of the literary texts of the two writers, which is a “significant strategy in revitalizing the aesthetic” (S. Lee 4), as I explore the use of talk-story as a literary component in Kingston and Tan’s fictions, while foregrounding the discussion on the specific experiences of Chinese Americans whose personal lives are profoundly affected by the “historical and material specificities” of their racial-ethnic groups.
Notes:

1. Walter Benjamin notes that the art of storytelling is gradually losing because “there is no more weaving and spinning to go on while they [the stories] are being listened to” (91). It is important to note that I am not suggesting storytelling is an exclusively female activity and that I point out the relation between women and storytelling mainly to illuminate on the possible reasons why the writers in discussion – Kingston and Tan – might find storytelling as a powerful means of articulation and self-expression.

2. John Tan died of brain tumour when Amy Tan was fifteen. This probably explains why Amy Tan’s works revolve more around the mother and her mother’s storytelling style and languages influence her more.

3. For example, one of the stories Daisy Tan has told Amy is about her friend who fled the Japanese during wartime and eventually had to drop the bags she was carrying one by one as her energy burnt off and the bags became too heavy for her to carry. This episode makes its way into the poignant story of Suyuan Woo in The Joy Luck Club, who drops off her heavy bags one by one as she flees the Japanese, and finally comes to an agonised moment that she has to drop off her twin baby girls on the road. Winnie Louie’s story in The Kitchen God’s Wife is, to a large extent, a revelation of Daisy Tan’s turbulent and poignant past in China.

4. I will discuss in more details Kingston’s use of the term “talk-story” in chapter 2. In this introduction, I will only cite the sources when “talk-stories” in the two writers’ works are discussed together, reference of “talk-story” to the two writers’ works separately will be noted in later chapters.

5. For example, E. D. Huntley describes “talk story” as a “narrative strategy” for the Tan characters “whose ties to Chinese tradition remain strong” and “talk story” enables “women who have been socialized into silence for most of their lives – the Joy Luck mothers, for instance – to reconfigure the events of those lives into acceptable public utterances” (Tan 32-33). Wendy Ho’s employment of the term “talk-story” or “talking-story” while discussing Tan’s novels also give the impression of designating it as an oral tradition practised among women, in particular mothers and daughters. I do not mean to claim that this designation is inaccurate but I would expand Tan’s use of “talk-story” as an oral tradition based on this primary and basic usage of the term by other critics.
6. In her recent work *Maxine Hong Kingston*, Helena Grice has noted that “[o]f the two [Kingston and Tan], Tan is considerably better known in a commercial sense, and her novels have had more popular appeal than Kingston’s. Kingston has undoubtedly had more critical acclaim, and is more likely to appear on university and college curricula” (4).

7. For example, Elaine Kim suggests that “reviews of our [Asian American] literature by Anglo-American critics reveal that the criteria used to assess their literary merit have been other than literary and aesthetic” (“Defining” 90). Deborah Woo mentions that ethnic minority writers “have been more appreciated by their audiences for what they have to say about their respective ethnic experiences than for their work as artists” (173).
Chapter 2
Singing a High-pitched Song: Struggle for a Voice through “Talk-stories” in Maxine Hong Kingston’s The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts

Whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on.

- The Woman Warrior (13)

Language is important to our sanity. You have to be able to tell your story, you have to be able to make up stories or you go mad. Part of sanity is to be able to understand the language of other people, and also I think that even when people aren’t mad, sometimes when you hear two people speaking in another language – you get a little bit of paranoia.

- Maxine Hong Kingston (Islas, Yalom 30)

In The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts (1976), the narrator’s mother’s stories are the backbone of the memoir about the growth and the struggle of the narrator – a girl with Chinese descent growing up in America – to find a voice and pursue a self-definition amid the conflicting Chinese and American cultures. In The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston has portrayed her own experiences, difficulties, struggles, and reflections as a Chinese-American girl growing up in Stockton, California. Retelling of stories is a prominent feature in Kingston’s debut, in which she develops and improvises stories of her mother, female relatives, and mythic and historical figures that offer her “ancestral help” as their lives continue “branching into” hers (WW 16). The book is a fragmented imaginative intertwining of myths, legends, tales, family histories, ghost stories, and realistic cultural conflicts; and storytelling provides a strong basis for the fabrication of this memoir. In the book, Kingston employs a “talk-story” narrative style as she gives new interpretations to the Chinese stories from her mother and retells them in the American context. The daughter-narrator wrestles with the haunting obstacles – cultural conflicts, generational gaps, racial and gender discrimination – around her, and finally breaks the silence imposed on her by her mother and articulates her voice, thus achieving a self-definition amid the Chinese
and American cultures. In this chapter, I will explore how talk-story functions as an imaginative and crucial narrative strategy in *The Woman Warrior* by examining the founding of the self-identity of the narrator amid the conflicting cultural inheritances and the development of this girlhood in relation to the female role models' significance in the adolescent narrator's life. Structuring *The Woman Warrior* with talk-stories, Kingston puts the oral stories into the written static novel form and hence shapes the American literary culture with the literary art of "talk-story."

Maxine Hong Kingston's talk-story

Transformation, of course, is an essential principle of oral culture. Each storyteller puts his or her personal stamp on the story, and each telling is different.

- Debra Shostak (54)

The specific narrative style of storytelling Kingston uses in *The Woman Warrior* is talk-story and she uses this term to describe her mother's storytelling. While a number of critics have decided that "talk-story" is a literal translation of the Chinese term "jiang gu shi" (講故事), that is, the activity of storytelling of passing down tales from one generation to another, Kingston mentions in an interview with Susan Brownmiller that "talk story" is "actually an Hawaiian pidgin phrase, borrowed street language from her adopted city" (178). In Hawaii, "talk story" refers to a kind of speech act practised by two or more speakers characterising "overlapping speech, joint authorship and performance, informal turn-taking" and is mainly used for educational purposes as the teachers encourage the children to participate in "talk story" in classroom discussions. As Steve Sumida notes, by mid-1978, "talk story" also "characterizes much of Hawai'i's contemporary written literature" such as "anecdotes, vignettes, sketches, short
fiction” (qtd. in Ho, *HMH* 28). Adopting the phrase from Hawaiian culture, Kingston invents her own form of “talk-story,” modelled on the traditional Chinese oral culture, in *The Woman Warrior*, in which she retells her mother’s Chinese stories in the American context. The term “talk-story” itself might be awkward in English, but it aptly refers to the dynamic activity of storytelling specific to an oral tradition and highlights the transition from an oral culture and a written one as it transfers from the activity of “talking” to a “story” in print. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston has added a hyphen to the phrase “talk story,” as in Hawaiian culture, and made it a hyphenated term, signifying the interactive transference of orality to literacy.

Kingston’s acknowledgement of the fluidity of oral tradition and the malleability of stories provides her the flexibility to reshape and recreate stories as a written storyteller. The fluidity of oral tradition is aptly manifested from Kingston’s recounting of an anecdote: in an interview, she remarks that there are storytelling practices in some Asian countries in which storytellers come to restaurants to tell stories but stop purposefully before the climax and refuse to continue to narrate the ending unless customers pay them. Most interestingly, the higher the payment, the better would be the ending. It resonates with Kingston’s familial storytelling culture: different versions of a single story emerge in the narrations of her mother and relatives. Oral stories are dynamic because they are demand-driven and ought to accommodate the needs of diversified contexts and audiences. Storytelling is therefore interactive and commands influences over action as stories are subject to changes “according to the needs of the listener, according to the needs of the day, according to the interest of the time” (Islas, Yalom 31). With sources from the mother, Kingston experiments with a new type
of narrative prose using talk-story as the basic structuring device. However, oral storytelling is different from written storytelling in that oral stories change all the time, possibly from telling to telling, whereas written stories are presented and preserved in a static and permanent form. Kingston tackles this differentiation between oral and written storytelling by keeping "ambiguity in the writing all the time" in her narrative (Islas, Yalom 31). The ambiguity, shown from the various divergent versions of a single story, leads to difficulties in comprehending the works of Kingston, since she deliberately modifies, reworks, manipulates, and transforms the stories that are storied in her mind since she was young. As McHenry has noted, "[b]y establishing her own rhythm of talk-story with her memories of the stories of others, Kingston stresses the essential interactiveness of storytelling and the appropriateness of the characteristics of talk-story to recording the many perspectives, experiences and events which compose any one 'story'" (192).

Inspired and shaped by the flexibility of the oral tradition which allows for stories serving specific purposes and targeting specific audiences, Kingston imaginatively recounts her own set of stories, appropriates them in an American context so that she, through talking-story in her direction, is able to come to terms with the multiple emotional landscapes surrounding her. Just as the female protagonist/narrator in The Woman Warrior who is confused with the ever-changing stories that her mother and relatives tell, readers participate in the puzzling and frustrating process of comprehension as well. On the other hand, though, as "orality relegates meaning largely to context whereas writing concentrates meaning in language itself," the transference from orality to literacy provides a space for readers to tease out meanings on their own, invoking the
participation of readers in written storytelling (Ong 106). The talk-story narrative form of Kingston's books, replicating the style of oral storytellers, blurs the distinction between facts and fictional elements and questions the notion of authenticity. Due to the fixity in written form, stories that are written down tend to acquire a weight of omniscience, absolute authority, and undeniable authenticity. Yet, the specific talk-story prose narrative that Kingston employs has subverted the conventional concept of authenticity as it mixes facts with fiction. It also remarkably demonstrates that a story in static written form does not amount to absolute authentic representation of the past because those stories are stabilised out of a random chance 10. As the storytelling narrative crafted by Kingston juxtaposes imaginative elements with authentic historical facts, it subverts the conventional frame of genre categories in distinguishing texts into fiction or non-fiction. With a view to presenting the unique Chinese-American experience, a new generic form is engineered and manipulated by Kingston 11. Through talk-story narrative, Kingston creates and magnifies a new voice in multi-cultural America which reverberates with and transcends Chinese and American cultures. By crediting the cultural legacy of China through developing talk-story narratives in the American context, Kingston also acts as a bridge between Chinese and American cultures. Her experimentation with genre enriches the literary sensibility in America, a country which is hospitable to a wide range of cultural practices.

The Book: The Woman Warrior (1976)

The Woman Warrior enjoyed an immediate success in both critical reviews and popularity when it was published in 1976 and since then, Kingston has become an important literary and iconic figure for Chinese/Asian American literature 12.
The book is a crossover hit and its enduring power could be seen from the various published official and pirated translations selling over the world and its continual appeal to readers of diversified ages, gender, and backgrounds more than twenty years after its first publication. In *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent*, David Leiwei Li summarises the importance of *The Woman Warrior* as follows:

... *The Woman Warrior* remained the first text to both enter the arena of national culture and arrest American public imagination. Its appeal to the shared category of gender produced a heterogeneous readership beyond ethnicity; its postmodern play of the folk fanned commercial interest in the future publication of Asian American texts; and its extensive review and study by critics of legitimate cultural affiliations also enabled the scholarly excavation and preservation of Asian American literary tradition. (44)

Despite its success in sales markets and critical reception, the book has spurred series of criticisms, particularly from Chinese or Chinese American scholars, because of its non-fiction/autobiography label. In so far as it is seen as a non-fiction/autobiography, the book is expected to carry a weight of authenticity. The validity of Kingston's usage, or distortion, of Chinese sources is questioned, as critics believe its misrepresentations might further intensify the misconceptions of some westerners, who are largely exposed to the mainstream media's stereotypes towards the Orient. Critics charge *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiography for a number of reasons: the integration of fictionalised elements in a supposedly "truthful" account, the passing of a self-reflexive work for an autobiography with non-verifiable references, the mistranslation of Chinese terms, the distortion or misappropriation of Chinese folklore and legends, and the proclamation of
Chinese-American men as sexist. The misrepresentation of Chinese cultural sources is mainly considered as betraying the cultural heritage by Chinese scholars, or pandering to the white readership by Chinese-American critics. Due to the socio-political context of literary creation, an ethnic autobiography is always approached with a conviction that it is representative and therefore "an ethnic autobiographer should be an exemplar and spokesperson whose life will inspire the writer's own people as well as enlighten the ignorant about social truths" (Wong, "Autobiography" 37). Kingston's portrayal of her unique experience is measured against the yardstick of the "history of the collectivity" and is thus heavily criticised (Wong, "Autobiography" 37). Among them, Frank Chin is possibly the most vocal and notable scholar who criticises Kingston for writing in a "fake" tradition and confessional autobiographical writing, and falsifying history and culture to please the white audience, leading to the infamous "pen wars" between Kingston's accusers and defenders. To sum up in a few words, Kingston is being accused of falsifying culture and reinforcing the white stereotypes in order to please the Anglo-American audience by the Chinese-American critics and this claim is based on the assumption that an ethnic autobiography is deemed to be "representative."

In a sense, the critics' frustration and accusation is not without grounds. The Woman Warrior is largely praised for its exoticism and Oriental inscrutability by the American reviewers who take the book as representing the Chinese society and culture. Responding to the debates on cultural authenticity and generic status, in her essay "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Kingston criticises the American reviewers for labelling Chinese people and her work "inscrutable" and praising the book for fulfilling the white fantasy of Chinese: "How dare they call their ignorance our inscrutability!" (96). In her opinion, while the majority of the
American reviewers give favourable reviews on her book, most of them praise “the wrong things” by measuring her work against the “exotic-inscrutable-mysterious-oriental” stereotype of Chinese (95). She is disappointed that many of the reviewers consider her a Chinese instead of an American writer and are ignorant of the book’s dual cultural context: “Because I was born in Stockton, California. I am an American woman. I am also a Chinese American woman, but I am not a Chinese woman, never having travelled east of Hawaii” (98). On a stronger note, Kingston categorically rejects the Americans’ reading of her book as a representative work of Chinese-Americans and thereby rejects the accusation that she portrays a negative image of China and Chinese culture to please the white audience:

Why must I ‘represent’ anyone besides myself? Why should I be denied an individual artistic vision? And I do not think I wrote a ‘negative’ book, as the Chinese American reviewer said; but suppose I had? Suppose I had been so wonderfully talented that I wrote a tragedy? Are we Chinese Americans to deny ourselves tragedy? If we give up tragedy in order to make a good impression on Caucasians, we have lost a battle. (101)

Essentially, the “burden of representation, understood not in the aesthetic but the political sense of the term” has turned literature “into very limited rhetoric” by excluding “literariness” that makes “a given work a literary work,” which is problematic for Kingston as well as any literary writer, particularly those from minorities (Adams 10). Hence, Kingston appeals for artistic individuality and refuses her book to be judged as being representative – this is a book about how a Chinese-American girl growing up in a small town struggles for a voice.

Differentiated from a conventional autobiography, the book is not centred
round the girl narrator, but assembles memoirs about the women of her family and her heritage—her mother (Brave Orchid), aunts (No Name Aunt and Moon Orchid), a legendary and mythic heroine (Fa Mu Lan), and a historical poetess (Ts’ai Yen).

In Malini Johar Schueller’s “Questioning Race and Gender Definitions: Dialogic Subversions in The Woman Warrior,” Schueller argues that The Woman Warrior represents Kingston’s quest to subvert existing unified definitions of institutions and cultural forms as she “questions the ... definitions of racial and sexual identity, and simultaneously presents dialogic intersubjectivity and community as the realm of hope and possibility,” while showing the ambiguity between myth and history to illuminate her doubts and questions about a single concept of identity (54-55). In this sense, the ambiguity in narration and the shift in narrative voices in the book represent the difficulty of fighting for a single, unified identity for a Chinese-American. To get rid of this difficulty, Kingston explores a position outside of rigid and unified categories—by mixing facts with imaginative fictional elements, the author remarkably creates a new voice and space for the Chinese-American narrator as she transgresses the boundaries of fiction/non-fiction, real/imaginative, and Chinese/American. Feminist theorists have redefined the genre of autobiography and suggested that women’s autobiographies are characterised by its “intertextuality” and the representation of an identity which is exemplified by a “fragmented, multiple, and collective consciousness” (K. Lee 185) – in this sense, Kingston’s incorporation of fictional elements and nonlinear narrative structure in The Woman Warrior could make it a woman’s autobiography. However, since the word “autobiography” inevitably induces debates on the issue of cultural authenticity and representation, it is not a desirable category for Kingston’s book. In light of this, I tend to agree to Lee Quinby’s idea in approaching The Woman
Warrior as a series of memoirs, the word used by Kingston in the subtitle, because a memoir gives light to "what other forms of life writing" (including autobiography) "often ignore – the pervasive 'invisible presences' that are the most profound determinants of subjectivity" and the "invisible presences" in the book are the mother, aunts, legendary and mythic figures, and the mother's stories, which together shape an "I" which is "dialogic, externalised or collective" (Grice, MHK 39) 26. In this sense, The Woman Warrior could be conceived as a series of stories that illuminate the inner consciousness and concerns of the narrator, who spells them out in words through turning traces of memories into narratives 27 and shaping experiences into "a knot of significations" (Quinby 141).

The Woman Warrior is a self-narration for the female protagonist-narrator, Maxine, whose psychological development is largely shaped by her mother's talk-story practice, as the book records the inner emotional and mental workings, which is filled with stories of her ancestors and female relatives, of the narrator and delineates the significant events that shape her development in girlhood. In this way, the mixed genre is a product of the Chinese and American cultures as Kingston attempts to re-modify her mother's Chinese oral tales in the American context and engages in her own talk-story – while the stories of the mother are given to her in the mythic sense, she receives, interprets, and translates them in an artistic sense as she puts the materials twisted with her imagination in the form of a published book, experimenting with a new form of writing style moulded by the oral tradition. The relation between myth and art is outlined by T.S. Eliot as he explains the mythic method as "a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history ... a step toward making the modern world possible for art"
Echoing Marlene Goldman's claim that Kingston's work presents her "experimental treatment of the novel form" to inscribe a female identity in literature (223), *The Woman Warrior* is an artistic creation of a new genre of talk-story writing as Kingston retells and rewrites the mother's stories, continuing her mother's talk-story practice in print. In the following part of this chapter, I will explicate the problems experienced by the daughter-narrator, as a member of the first American generations, who exists in two conflicting ways of life in a ghost world largely built up by the mother, and how the narrator overcomes these haunting problems through engaging in her own talk-story in the American context to achieve a voice, and ultimately a self-identity as a Chinese-American woman and an artist - a writer and storyteller. In order to avoid confusion and over-generalisation, I would identify the narrator in the book as Maxine, though Kingston has said that the narrator is not herself; and the author as Kingston or Maxine Hong Kingston.

Maxine's "ghost" world - the mother and her stories

In the process of striving for a voice and a self-identity, Maxine needs to fight against the set of "ghosts" in the world built up by her mother, Brave Orchid. "Ghost" is an important entity in *The Woman Warrior* - whose subtitle is *Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* - in which there is a detailed account of Brave Orchid exorcising an almost corporeal Sitting Ghost from a haunted room at school; and in the Chinese immigrants' view, America is full of Ghosts. A "ghost" is normally a supernatural entity, a disembodied soul without a body, and a shadowy trace of being without a concrete and materialised feature. Stephen Dedalus says in *Ulysses* that a "ghost" is "one who has faded into impalpability through death, through
absence, through change of manners” (154). It suggests that the ghost is neither “real” nor “unreal,” but something which becomes intangible because of various reasons. In *The Woman Warrior*, the word “ghost” signifies something mysterious, shadowy, intangible, incomprehensible, and probably scary. Kingston has said that the word *ghost* in the subtitle denotes not only “white people,” but also shadowy figures from the past or “unanswered questions about unexplained actions of Chinese, whites, and Chinese in America” (Kim 200). It is used to denote people who are unwanted or abandoned 31 and people who are not in the same cultural categories. While Brave Orchid’s chasing out of the Sitting Ghost in China exemplifies her strength, leadership, and unconventionality in overturning the dominant Chinese patriarchal culture 32, “ghost” acquires a new meaning after she relocates to America. She labels the American people “ghosts” because in her view, they are strangers who do not fit into her familiar Chinese categories and therefore she puts them into a new category “of unfathomable beings whose actions are puzzling to the immigrant community” (Huntley, *Kingston* 82). The impossibility for Brave Orchid of understanding her Americanised children, including Maxine, results in her designation of her own children as “half ghosts” (*WW* 165).

For Brave Orchid, “ghost” probably only refers to the white people as in the Chinese cultural meaning, but for Maxine, it carries other meanings. In “*The Woman Warrior* as a Search for Ghosts,” Gayle Sato notes that “‘ghosts’ define two antithetical worlds that threaten the narrator’s sense of a unified self” as the narrator is unable to articulate this in a space called “Chinese America” when she is surrounded with ghosts from China and America (139). Though the existence of ghosts presents as a problem to the narrator, she cannot destroy them altogether as “she realizes that banishing them all means banishing the poetry and magic too”
While there seem to be various amplifications of the word "ghost" in *The Woman Warrior*, I intend to use this word to signify the problems Maxine encounters as a result of her mother's talk-story and resistance to assimilating into America. In this sense, "ghosts" materialize as the problems that are mysterious, unfathomable, incomprehensible, and yet inevitable.

Brave Orchid considers Maxine a "half ghost," yet, she is also the sole agent of Maxine's ghost world. One set of ghosts that Maxine has to combat is the mother's stories and Chinese myths and legends, which have been haunting her since childhood. These stories, weaving together, embody flustering messages that Maxine has to decipher in her search of self-identification. In *The Woman Warrior*, Brave Orchid is a dominant storyteller who furnishes Maxine with stories from China in order to extend Chinese culture and wisdom as she enacts "her role as keeper and transmitter of the 'traditional ways' of her Chinese culture and village community" (qtd. in Ho, *HMH* 118); yet, the mother's stories also pose a main problem as those confusing stories have problematized Maxine's process of founding an identity in America: she does not know how to distinguish in her mother's stories what is reality and what is imaginative, fictional, or exaggerated. She speculates that it is her mother's intention to test her "strength to establish realities," and it is her task, as a first American generation, to find out how "the invisible world" their immigrant parents build around their childhoods "fits in solid America" (*WW* 13). This "invisible world" is built up of stories from China, a mysterious place to Maxine because she has never been there, and lots of unspeakable things that her mother never explains: "She never explained anything that was really important" (*WW* 112). As Maxine starts to menstruate, Brave Orchid breaks the silence of a familial story about her paternal aunt, who is...
impregnated after her husband has gone to the Gold Mountain for years. The mother's message is cautionary and pragmatic: "Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful" (WW 13). Given that the story is told once and for all with all its necessary parts, the mother would not give any further details of it to the narrator, leaving her utterly baffled and curious: "My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (WVIV 13). Denied of the right to request details, the narrator has to store up questions in her mind.

Maxine is also haunted by the mother's inconsistent and scary stories. She is bewildered at the mother's ever-changing stories: there could be multiple versions of a single story. She recounts the frustration she has over one trivial matter — whether a thumbprint on her mother's forehead in one old photo is fashion or intentionally marked by somebody — because Brave Orchid gives different answers at different times: "I disliked the unsureness in her voice" (WW 60). Learning from her mother's talk-story, Maxine understands that she had an elder brother and a sister in China who died when they were toddlers 35. When Maxine wonders why her mother calls her the Biggest Daughter instead of the Oldest Daughter and asks whether it is because the Oldest Daughter and Son die in China, and thus she is denied of the title, her mother accuses her for dreaming and making-up stories: "No, you must have been dreaming. You must have been making up stories. You are all the children there are" (WW 96). Other stories by Brave Orchid are also haunting: for example, the mother's story of buying a girl slave is frightening — she is worried that she would be sold as a slave if she returns to China. While Brave
Orchid’s success in conspiring with the girl slave to fool the seller demonstrates her quick wit and smartness, the buying of a girl slave also leaves an emotional impact on Maxine, who believes that her mother’s enthusiasm for her is duller than for the girl, as in comparison, she is useless because she fails to assist Brave Orchid in bargaining (WW 78). Maxine also ponders on the possibility of her mother’s participation in the practice of infanticide of baby girls. The stories of how the villagers kill girl babies are nightmarish: “My mother has given me pictures to dream – nightmare babies that recur, shrinking again and again to fit in my palm” (WW 82). The tragedy of the stoning of a madwoman induces the narrator’s subconscious fear of being the madwoman in the family. To Maxine, China is only a place that exists in the mother’s talk-stories as she funnels it into her ears and is therefore mysterious, fictional, and frantically frightening.

Besides the stories, Brave Orchid herself is manifest as another ghostly creature to Maxine: Brave Orchid not only confuses her daughter with the stories, her behaviour also creates unfathomable questions to Maxine. While Brave Orchid tries to educate Maxine to observe proper behaviour as the girl grows up, her messages are contradictory and ambiguous at times, leaving Maxine baffled. Throughout the book, Brave Orchid is presented as a strong and dominating woman, who is educated and aggressive, which is atypical of the Chinese women in traditional times. In “Shaman,” Brave Orchid is a hardworking and smart medical student, who leads her fellow schoolmates in chasing the Sitting Ghost out of the school, and a much-admired, capable and effective village doctor. In “At the Western Palace,” she is an assertive and decisive sister who manipulates and contrives the “claiming back” of an Americanised husband of her timid sister, Moon Orchid. The portrayal of Brave Orchid aptly demonstrates that she is an
unconventional Chinese woman, whose is not submissive, passive, delicate, and timid. However, from the messages she sends out from her talk-stories, it appears that she is still bound and limited by the prevalent patriarchal values of China. Brave Orchid suggests to Moon Orchid that she should claim the husband back because she claims that it is Moon Orchid’s right as the “First Wife” (WW 117). More interestingly still, Brave Orchid claims that her sister, as a first wife, should even possess the children borne by the second wife and suggests that her sister should take away the children and become their mother. By reiterating Moon Orchid’s status and rights as a first wife, Brave Orchid participates in the unjust system of marriage in old China, which devalues women by allowing men to marry more than one woman but condemning women who have more than one lover. On the other hand, Brave Orchid’s plot of claiming back the husband and children is in itself contradictory as traditional Chinese women are expected to keep silent and have no right to intrude in the matter of the husband marrying another or even more women. Far from being submissive, Brave Orchid requests Moon Orchid to make it plain to her husband that “there will be no third wife” because “That is what a wife is for – scolding [the] husband into becoming a good man” (WW 119). In warning her daughter with the tragic story of no name aunt, the tool Brave Orchid uses for caution is male power: Maxine should not tell about the existence and story of this aunt because her father has denied her. Here, Brave Orchid again reinforces the male supreme power in a Chinese family and reflects that in China, “history belongs to fathers, not mothers. Mother is no parent, except as a personification of father’s will, without which, mother is only a signifier” (qtd. in X. Chen 112). In this sense, cautioning the daughter with the will of the father seems to Brave Orchid a powerful and convenient means of conveying cautionary
messages, but she fails to realise that she repudiates and reinforces patriarchal values at the same time. In addition, Brave Orchid loves story-talking about heroines and swordswoman to her daughter. The legend of Fa Mu Lan appeals to Maxine, yet she cannot refrain from having doubts because she perceives that Brave Orchid sends out contradictory messages: “She said that I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan” (WW 26). As Pin-chia Feng has succinctly remarked, the mother’s stories “send out contradictory messages which simultaneously uphold patriarchy and female heroism” (112).

In addition, Maxine is perplexed at Brave Orchid’s imposed secrecy and silence and most importantly, the lack of explanation over “unspeakable.” Brave Orchid advises her children to make up stories about when and where they are born and hide from others their real birth certificates and documents, out of fear of deportation. According to Brave Orchid, there are always secrets not to be told to the “ghosts” because it is a danger to disclose private information to strangers: if they know their immigration history, they will be sent back to China (WW 107). Maxine is utterly distressed and infuriated for the imposed secrecy: “Sometimes I hated the ghosts for not letting us talk; sometimes I hated the secrecy of the Chinese. ‘Don’t tell,’ said my parents, though we couldn’t tell if we wanted to because we didn’t know” (WW 164). Growing up in the American society where individualistic culture is upheld and disclosing information even on television talk shows is prevalent, Maxine fails to acknowledge that Chinese people treat family as the most important unit in their society and therefore it is critical for them to be on guard against the evil intentions and manipulations of outsiders all the time (Tung 30). Maxine is completely nonplussed at what her mother is doing during some
traditional Chinese religious rituals and reveals her anger that she is not given any warning for what she can and cannot do but is being hit for doing the wrong thing. Even if she asks, the adults “get mad, evasive, and shut” her up (WW 166). Forbidden to name the unspeakable, Maxine wonders how the Chinese people is able to keep up “a continuous culture for five thousand years” because if “we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (WW 166).

Another prominent problem that Maxine faces concerning her mother is the generational and cultural gap between them, which is a direct result of the narrator’s positioning in cultural oppositions because the mother refuses to acknowledge America as her homeland: “Whenever my parents said ‘home,’ they suspended America” (WW 92). The cultural contexts in which Maxine and Brave Orchid are nurtured are sharply different, leading to a gulf between the mother and daughter and another “ghost” hindering Maxine’s development. While Maxine finds Brave Orchid’s stories about Chinese culture mysterious, superstition-ridden, and confusing, Brave Orchid also considers her Chinese-American children incomprehensible and illogical as she judges them by Chinese standards. In The Woman Warrior, “At the Western Palace” is the only chapter narrated from a third-person point of view without the ostensible presence of Maxine and it is interesting to note how Brave Orchid perceives her children and interprets their behaviour. For example, Brave Orchid is puzzled at the uneasiness of the children when Moon Orchid appreciates the athletic and scholarship trophies at their home and praises their smartness. Seeing her children’s reluctance at being complimented, Brave Orchid doubts whether they have really achieved what the trophies say or have stolen them from the real winners and conjectures that probably “they fooled the
Ghost Teachers and Ghost Coaches, who couldn’t tell smart Chinese from dumb Chinese” (*WW* 118). When the oldest son who drives her and Moon Orchid to Los Angeles to claim the husband refuses to obey her instruction, Brave Orchid accuses him for not taking life seriously and not knowing “about Chinese business” (*WW* 136). To sum up, by Brave Orchid’s standard, her children are wayward, useless, stupid, and apathetic — because they are Americans. Presented with a third-person narration, “At the Western Palace” seems to be the most objective among others; yet, it is worth noting that in fact an omniscient narrator, Maxine/Kingston, is present all along who illustrates herself, an American, through the eyes of her mother, a Chinese. At the beginning of the next chapter “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Maxine admits that certain parts of Moon Orchid’s story are utterly her own imagination because she only gets the story from a third-hand source. Maxine highlights this problem of miscommunication and misunderstanding from the perspective of Brave Orchid in “At the Western Palace” and in turn reveals her perception of how her mother views and judges her and her siblings.

In “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Maxine further elaborates the problem of generational and cultural gap with her mother from a first-person point of view. A remarkable example is Brave Orchid’s insistence on requesting reparation candies when a delivery boy from a nearby drugstore mistakenly delivers medicine to her home. She insists that the druggists should rectify their mistakes by giving candies to remove the curse with sweetness because they have “tainted” the house with the “sick medicine” (*WW* 153). Maxine, well aware that the American druggists would not understand, is ordered by Brave Orchid: “You just translate” (*WW* 153). Though embarrassed, she acts accordingly and it turns out as she has expected: the druggist thinks she is a little beggar and since then, she receives
“Halloween candy in December, Christmas candy around Valentine’s day, candy hearts at Easter, and Easter eggs at Halloween” (WW 154). Ironically, Brave Orchid marvels triumphantly that she has taught “the Druggist Ghosts a lesson in good manners” (WW 154). Another example is that when Maxine explains to her mother an eclipse occurs because the earth makes a shadow when it comes between the sun and the moon but not a “frog-swallowing-the-moon,” Brave Orchid scolds her for “believing what those Ghost Teachers tell” her (WW 152-153). In Maxine’s view, her mother withholds cultural secrets from her because she is ghost-like: “They would not tell us children because we had been born among ghosts, were taught by ghosts, and were ourselves half ghosts. They called us a kind of ghost. Ghosts are noisy and full of air; they talk during meals. They talk about anything” (WW 165). As an immigrant parent, Brave Orchid considers her daughter an American, thus in her eyes, Maxine is a “ghost,” an outsider of the Chinese heritage.

While her Chinese mother labels her an outsider because she is an American, the mainstream Americans do not consider Maxine as an insider either, complicating her identification with both cultures/heritages and process of self-definition. Sometimes parents contribute to the impossibility of assimilation: as immigrant parents do not sign anything unnecessary, Maxine is deprived of the opportunity to go to the auditorium during her second grade class because she does not have the permission slip. As she is brought up in a circle of Chinese immigrants before she starts school, she is ignorant of American culture and is unable to fit in smoothly. She also encounters embarrassment and misunderstandings when she tries to “translate” Chinese practices to American people. When she tries to explain to her Hawaiian teacher that the Chinese can’t sing “land where our fathers died” because of curses, her teacher argues with her
about politics (WW 151). She recalls an incident when her American teacher scolds a boy in her class for not knowing his father's name and is relieved to be saved from embarrassment because even though Chinese children normally do not know their father's personal names, her parents have "the foresight to tell us some names we could give the teachers" (WW 159). Figuring out the way to harmonise her Chinese familial teachings and her American education in a "ghost-free" world seems to be an everlasting task of Maxine.

The daughter-narrator's talk-story

Born to an existence between two conflicting ways of life but belonging to neither one completely, Maxine encounters exclusions from both sides and thus experiences a crisis of selfhood. This could be observed from Maxine's questioning of the word "I" in the two different languages she is exposed to:

I could not understand 'I.' The Chinese 'I' has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American 'I,' assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight? Was it out of politeness that this writer left off strokes the way a Chinese has to write her own name small and crooked? (WW 150)

By attempting to understand and differentiate the two "I"s (the small "我" in Chinese and the assertive "I" in American English) – the word denoting oneself – in the two languages, Maxine metaphorically reveals how culturally created the apparent simplicity of the "I" is and her difficulty in establishing a concrete and coherent self-identity. The autobiographical "I" is further complicated as the narrator suggests that there "is a Chinese word for the female I – which is 'slave,'"
demonstrating the impossibility for narrator to achieve a coherent "I" under the
tensions of racism, sexism, and cultural difference (WW 49). This difficulty is also
amplified from the narrator's fluctuation in defining herself as an insider/outsider
of the Chinese community. She considers herself as an insider when she argues
with her Hawaii teacher: "We Chinese can't sing 'land where our fathers died'"
(WW 151); yet, she acts as an outsider and distances herself from the Chinese when
she ponders on the continuity of Chinese culture: "I don't see how they kept up a
continuous culture for five thousand years" (WW 166). As Ian Watt has pointed out,
"the primacy of the individual over the collective became the defining characteristic
of modern Western society as a whole" (237), the Chinese's normal submission to
the collective and the culture's "submergence of the individual" are confusing to
Maxine because she is brought up in a society favouring individuality (Young 117)
38. The function of myth, in general, is communal and cultural: Schueller observes
that "Myths ... could play the conservative function of creating and preserving
cultural unity" (61) and Vera M. Kutsinski notes that "[m]yths, in the broadest
sense, are storehouses of cultural values and beliefs, which serve as paradigms for
the interpretation of historical 'fact'" and therefore myths "are the foundations of a
culture's identity" (qtd. in Gao 7). The Chinese myths handed down to the female
narrator are largely products of the collective as one important function of myth is
"to maintain and strengthen social solidarity," yet, on the other hand, the narrator is
exposed to the individualistic nature of the American society (Watt 230). Her
questioning of the word "I" in the two languages: the English "I" with three strokes
and the Chinese "I" with seven strokes ("我") is an exemplification of her
uncertainty and struggles between the individual and the collective: "It is more a
constant struggle to break from the community of ‘we’; whether with mother, family, or society, to reach an understanding of oneself as an individual ‘I’ in community” (Ho, “Mother/Daughter Writing” 233). To tackle the problem of individuality versus collective consciousness, Kingston transforms the myths received in the collective sense to a form of individual art for the narrator as she engages in her own talk-story and creates a unique set of American myths out of the Chinese ones with her own voice in The Woman Warrior.

Possibly the most outright question in Maxine’s mind is: “Who am I” and in The Woman Warrior, Maxine sets out her journey to locate answers for this question. In “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Maxine records her poignant experience of articulating a voice when she is a small girl. Her reluctance and inability to speak English makes her early days in American school miserable – she is completely silent during the first few years at school. She observes that other Chinese girls do not talk either and decides that “the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl” (WYV 150). However, most of the Chinese girls find their voices and are not mute at the Chinese school. Silence, for Maxine, is therefore a consequence of language barrier and cultural displacement. Maxine is self-conscious of her voice and in order to distinguish herself from normal Chinese women whose voices are strong and bossy, she invents an American-feminine speaking personality by whispering even softer than Americans, but ends up in alerting her teachers to refer her and her sister to speech therapy (WW 155). Frustrated and infuriated with the failure to find a proper voice, Maxine directs her anger and irritation to a silent Chinese girl at school “whose silence represents everything she fears and hates about herself” (Madsen 11). Noticing the various similarities between them with the girl reminding some of her inner fears, Maxine finally corners the girl into the
lavatory and beats her physically by pulling her hair and shouting at her to force her to speak: "Talk! Talk! Talk!" - a remarkable scene that many critics have had analysed (WW 161). By reprimanding the girl who is her double 40, Maxine reveals the danger she knows she is facing if she does not talk: "And you, you are a plant. Do you know that? That's all you are if you don't talk. If you don't talk, you can't have a personality" (WW 162). The danger of having no voice and personality, and by extension, no self-identity, is an ultimate fear that Maxine harbours as she endeavours to situate herself in a bi-cultural context. After she fails to make her double speak, she gets a mysterious illness and is confined in bed for eighteen months, which is possibly a punishment and a sign of self-loathing for her previous inability to speak. This is also a “moment of Maxine’s self-birth” as she recognises the importance of the “ability to communicate” and speak (Outka 479). When she grows up, she begins to recognise that “talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity” as “insane people were the ones who couldn’t explain themselves” (WW 166). As there are many crazy women around her house, she concludes that every house has a crazy woman or crazy girl and she is worried that she is the madwoman in her family. Struggling to avoid becoming mad, Maxine determines to make her voice heeded with an articulation of a high-note song.

To articulate her own voice and unveil the “houses and flowers and suns” underneath the “black paint,” Maxine aspires to beat those ghosts around her by embarking on her own talk-story and creating her own sets of American myths (WW 149). In order to make her American life normal, she needs to eradicate those scary and ghostly nightmares and therefore she decides to “push the deformed into [her] dreams, which are in Chinese, the language of impossible stories” (WW 82). As the mother’s stories from China pose as major obstacle to her development and
these stories are not easily translatable to her American circumstances, Maxine determines that the only way she would succeed in having a personal voice and identity is by revising and improvising those stories in her American mentality so that the past Chinese stories make sense at the American present. In an uncontrollable outburst, Maxine, frustrated by her mother’s contradictions in talk-stories, shouts at her mother and criticises her mother for making her American life difficult: “And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. 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” (WW 180). In pouring out the list of grievances she has kept secret, she is astonished to realise that “in the telling, it grew” and discovers that there is “No higher listener. No listener but myself” (WW 182). As the authority figure fades away, she determines that it is time to leave home and see the world in a new logical way: “she must be her own voice, her own listener, her own authority” (Ling, “Dialogic Dilemma” 179). Here, “leaving home” is a metaphorical representation of Maxine’s wish to liberate herself from her mother’s dominating influence and look for a “ghost-free” space for herself: “Shine floodlights into dark corners: no ghosts” (WW 182). Only through releasing herself from the ghost world would Maxine be able to become a storyteller on her own. It is also the only way Maxine copes with the confusions, ambiguities, and contradictions her mother has brought upon her.

In Ulysses, Stephen Dedalus suggests that Hamlet is a ghost story and an artistic product of Shakespeare as he attempts to transmute his frustration into art. The Woman Warrior, similarly, is a ghost story not only because of the overwhelming presence of the haunting sensation, but also because Kingston vents her real-life frustrations as the daughter of Chinese immigrants in an artistic form.
with a new vision of literary creation. In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz (1986), Kingston reveals that the “ghosts” are not “exorcised” in her writing, instead she wants to “record” and “find the words” for the “ghosts” which are “visions,” “beautiful, and powerful” (67-68). Significantly, Kingston has transformed her mother’s once haunting talk-stories into a kind of “spiritual muse” and turned them into a positive inspiration for her artistic work (Jenkins 66). As Lois Parkinson Zamora observes, these literary ghosts becomes Maxine’s “guide” and helps her to “look beyond the limits of the knowable” (490). Hence, Maxine’s liberation from the ghost world is not through total isolation from the haunting stories and the problematic mother figure, but through transforming the “ghosts” into positive agents and motivations for her artistic creation and development of the self: “Talk-story ... becomes a way of ordering and fighting symbolic and real ‘ghosts,’ of learning ways to reclaim through language and image the cultural processes of achieving one’s identity as a woman, writer, and individual in society” (Ho, “Mother/Daughter Writing” 225). The haunting past of the mother’s China is not to be dismissed entirely: as Stuart Hall has suggested, the “production of identity” is made possible with “the re-telling of the past” and “imaginative rediscovery” (qtd. in Hammad 166). By charting her talk-stories in The Woman Warrior – reinterpreting the Chinese tales and recreating and rewriting them in an American context, Maxine, and by extension Kingston, is able to come to terms with the mother’s stories, reclaim the stories as her heritage, and transform “the language of impossible stories” into “the language of possible stories” – a category which enables her to mediate between the two conflicting cultures and teachings, thus actualising her final outcry of voice and articulation 41.

In the following, I am going to explicate the significance of the female role
models in Maxine's psychological maturation as an artistic story-talker. Instead of discussing the five figures according to the book's sequence, I have rearranged the order to discuss first the fantasy of Fa Mu Lan in "White Tigers" because I consider this fantasy as an eye-opening tale for Maxine, who decides to fight with words as she recognises the power of her mother's talk-story, and that the warrior motif is an initial and central ambition for the girl narrator. Elaborating on the narrator's aspiration to explore the power of words, I would discuss the no name aunt in "No Name Woman" and Moon Orchid in "At the Western Palace" as these two women are supposedly negative models to the narrator, but she manages to transform their stories into agents of strength. The discussion would then turn to a positive yet paradoxical role model of Maxine -- her mother Brave Orchid -- in "Shaman," as at the end of this chapter, the narrator has grown up and there is a temporary rapprochement between them. Finally, I would examine the significance of Ts'ai Yen in "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" as the historical poetess represents Maxine's final turn from silence to articulation and her eventual identification as an artist. The last story is also ostensibly collaboratively "talked" by both the mother and daughter, signifying a final resolution and connection reached between them.

- The fantasy of Fa Mu Lan: the beginning of a story-talker vocation

"White Tigers" is the most discussed and quoted section of The Woman Warrior (Feng 119), not only because it closely relates to the central metaphorical image of the book -- a female avenger, but also because it matches the Americans' oriental fantasy. In "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Kingston reveals that many American readers pick "White Tigers" as their favourite story in
the book and tell her that it ought to have been the climax. Referring to this comment, Kingston explains that she puts the tale at the beginning because she intends to acknowledge that “the childish myth is past, not the climax we reach for” (97). Though the military figure of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, is not a resolution that Maxine reaches for, I would like to argue that this childhood fantasy is of critical importance in the girl-narrator’s development in the sense that the mother’s talk-story of Fa Mu Lan serves as a trailblazing tale in Maxine’s, and by extension, Kingston’s, vocation as an artist—a story-talker, despite the fact that it provides no concrete resolution in her American real life.

In “White Tigers,” Kingston appropriates the traditional Chinese legend of Fa Mu Lan to portray an ideal role model of a woman warrior, who is capable of fighting against gender and racial injustice that Maxine suffers from. The figure of Fa Mu Lan originates from a literary ballad, “The Song of Mu Lan,” which is based on oral tradition and composed by an anonymous sixth-century Chinese writer (Gao 10). In the chant, Mu Lan, in the disguise of a man, substitutes for her father to battle against the invading Tartars for twelve years. After the victory, Mu Lan refuses the honour, official rank, and award conferred on her, but returns home and happily resumes her girlhood and femininity, puts on make-up and a beautiful gown, and celebrates the return with her family and villagers. As a legend that is passed on for so many years, Fa Mu Lan becomes a female icon in many girls’ minds and is celebrated for her filial piety, exceptional strength as a woman, military prowess, loyalty, and intelligence.

Impressed and inspired by the mother’s talk-story of this much-admired legendary heroine, Kingston rewrites the myth and develops a fantasy of a swordsman, who is capable of doing both men and women’s work. The
development of the fantasised swordswoman is led off by young Maxine’s tribute to her mother’s talk-stories: “Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep” (WW 25). She is unaware of the trailblazing influence of the mother’s talk-story until after she has grown up and become an adult:

At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story. After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father’s place in battle. ... I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind.

(WW 25-6)

On reflecting, she recognises the great power inherent in her mother’s Fa Mu Lan story and perceives it as an inspirational force. Maxine’s fantasy opens with a girl of seven, following the call from a mysterious bird, leaving her family and joining a pair of magical elders for martial training. She spends a few years of training on the mountains of white tigers, from which the title of this chapter derives. During the fifteen years of intense training, the girl is only allowed to look at her family through a water gourd, where she sees herself, represented by a proxy, marrying a childhood mate whom she loves. After the training, she returns home and her parents inscribe words of revenge – list of grievances and names of victims – on her back, reminding her of the purpose of fighting, with sharp knives. During the military campaign, she manifests her valiant spirit and leadership, kills a giant, an emperor, and a baron, and gives birth to a baby boy silently during war, after successfully concealing the pregnancy beneath an altered armour. After the war, she victoriously returns to the village, happily relinquishes the male power she
assumes in the armour, and dutifully resumes her obligation as a daughter-in-law, who promises to do “farmwork and housework” and give the parents-in-law “more sons” (WW 47).

Maxine’s swordswoman fantasy differs from the original Fa Mu Lan in various ways, except that both plots involve a girl replacing the father to join an army. Some notable differences include: detailed passages of the heroine’s training and descriptions of each battle are added; episodes of marriage and childbirth are inserted; the slaying of a misogynist baron is imagined; and the purpose of going to war is changed – the swordswoman fights for reasons of revenge whereas Fa Mu Lan replaces her father primarily out of filial piety. The fantasy gives the swordswoman privileges that normally only men possess. In the fantasy, the marriage takes place with a proxy representing the girl, but in reality, it is always the boy/man who is being represented. When the swordswoman returns from martial training with the two old people, she is welcomed with the steaming of a chicken as if they are “welcoming home a son” (WW 38). In Maxine’s imaginative retelling, the group of women whom she releases after the war form a militant group to kill men and boys in women’s clothes instead of male disguise, signifying the narrator’s inherent hope to right the sexual injustice (WW 47). In young Maxine’s view, an ideal woman warrior should demonstrate abilities to do both men and women’s work, as well as be rendered the privileges of both sexes. In addition, an ideal model of a modern woman warrior is someone who is capable of combining “career goals with childrearing and marriage” (Cook 143) and balancing “family and career, fulfilling both her domestic roles and her duty to her people and country” (Huntley, Kingston 99). By inserting the episodes of marriage and childbirth in the fantasy, Maxine marvels at the ability of the swordswoman in
handling both public and private spheres successfully: “Marriage and childbirth strengthen the swordswoman, who is not a maid like Joan of Arc. Do the men’s work; then do more work, which will become ours too” (WW 49). Fantasy is important in the development of a child: “[a]s soon as a child is able to imagine (that is, to fantasize) a favorable solution to his present predicament … with hope for the future established, the present difficulty is no longer insufferable” and thus “the problems a child encounters and cannot solve at the moment become manageable, because disappointment in the present is mitigated by visions of future victories” (Bettelheim 125). The fantasy of Fa Mu Lan as a warrior-wife imagined by young Maxine therefore helps tackle her confusion and anxiety as whether to become a wife or warrior after she has grown up.

Nonetheless, by juxtaposing the imaginative fantasy and realistic American life in the narrative, it demonstrates significantly that Maxine’s childhood fantasy of the swordswoman does not prove to be useful for her disappointing American life. In the fantasy, the swordswoman symbolically avenges the female by killing a sexist baron, who tries to appeal to her “man to man” by quoting misogynistic sayings such as “Girls are maggots in the rice” and “It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters” – the very expressions she hates the most (WW 45). In reality, young Maxine is well aware of her low status in her family as she grows up in an anti-female environment where sexist expressions such as “Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds” and “There is no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls” are commonplace (WW 48). She believes that she is not given a full-month party because she is a girl (in the fantasy, the full-month ceremony of the swordswoman’s son is celebrated with eggs rolling over his face). When the fantasised swordswoman accuses the baron of taking away her childhood (JVJV 46),
it symbolically echoes the sexual injustice Maxine endures during her childhood. Trying to change others' views, she endeavours to show that she is not useless as the old Chinese anti-female sayings claim. She studies hard, gets straight As, goes to college (Berkeley in the sixties), and aspires to change the world; yet she fails to gain recognition. She would like to be returning home as a boy for her parents “to welcome with chickens and pigs” like the swordswoman, but in reality the welcome party is for her brother, who returns alive from Vietnam (WW 49). When her mother yells “[b]ad girl” at her, she wilfully wonders if a bad girl means almost a boy (WW 49). In the fantasy, the giant, which is “so much bigger than the toy general I used to peep at” (WW 41), turns out in reality to be the racist bosses Maxine encounters after she has grown up (Gao 16): “From the fairy tales, I’ve learned exactly who the enemy are. I easily recognize them – business-suited in their modern American executive guise, each boss two feet taller than I am and impossible to meet eye to eye” (WW 50). While the fantasised swordswoman valiantly kills the giant, the only thing Maxine could do in reality is to protest “in my bad, small-person’s voice that makes no impact,” which the boss casually ignores (WW 50). Finally, Maxine recognises the impossibility of becoming a woman warrior in real life: “after all, no bird called me, no wise people tutored me. I have no magic beads, no water gourd sight, no rabbit that will jump in the fire when I’m hungry. I dislike armies” (WW 50-51). She envisions that fighting and killing in real life are not glorious, birds could be tricky, and there are no old people who would be her gurus, and she therefore decides that “martial arts are for unsure little boys kicking away under fluorescent lights” (WW 53). Maxine fails to translate the power of the Fa Mu Lan tale into the American reality as “she finds herself still powerless to confront the sexist, classist and racist social structures in
which she must survive” (Su 164).

Though the childhood fantasy of the swordswoman, or Maxine’s Fa Mu Lan tale, does not provide any concrete help in Maxine’s American life, she could identify with her fantasised swordswoman in a way:

The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. ‘What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for revenge are ‘report a crime’ and ‘report to five families.’ The reporting is the vengeance – not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. (WV 53)

The grown-up Maxine realises that she is going to use words/writing as a metaphorical weapon to release the vengeance of enduring sexual and racial injustice since childhood, showing that she is a pacifist who opts for a peaceful way of exorcising the ghosts around her. Instead of expelling and literally destroying them, she believes that the best way is to live with them harmoniously and the tactic she chooses is to use the pen as her surrogate sword – through engaging in written talk-story, she transforms those mysterious and incomprehensible ghosts around her into tangible beings, flesh-and-blood human beings, who could be connected to her; and translate the mother’s Chinese view into her American reality.

From the vantage point of an adult, Maxine acknowledges that she has inherited her mother’s talent in telling stories and avenging wrongs – sexual and racial injustice – through words, and her talk-story ability is demonstrated in her childhood fantasy. As discussed earlier, the swordswoman fantasy reflects some of Maxine’s inherent fears and anger of being sexually discriminated against as she harbours a subconscious hope to avenge her wrongs through fantasy, corresponding to what Patricia Spacks observes: “imagination creates a space for whatever
possibility is denied its realization by society” (qtd. in Gao 12). In this sense, the traditional myth of Fa Mu Lan has been adjusted and modified to suit her present (as during her childhood) life experiences. At the beginning of the fantasy, the heroine surreptitiously rails at the Chinese for lying so much: “‘No, I haven’t,’ I would have said in real life, mad at the Chinese for lying so much. ‘I’m starved. Do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies’” (WW 26). This remark, which is put in brackets in the text, signifies a different context the narrator is in and demonstrates that she has significantly retold a Chinese ballad with her American consciousness. Many critics have faulted Kingston for conflating the stories of the legendary heroine, Fa Mu Lan, and the historical nation hero, Yue Fei, who defends China in fighting against the Mongols in the twelfth century, in “White Tigers,” because according to them, it is disrespectful to one’s heritage and it leads to confusion in readers who are unfamiliar with the Chinese sources. The episode of word incision on the back of the swordswoman alludes to the story of Yue Fei, whose mother writes four words “jing zhong bao guo” (serve one’s country with steadfast loyalty) on his back to remind him of his duty and mission to the country. Whereas the hero’s mother only writes four words on the back of her son, the swordswoman’s parents inscribe “oaths and names” so that her back is covered with words “in red and black files” (WW 38). As Yan Gao has impressively remarked, the word-engraving allusion is significant: “Kingston – either mistakenly or deliberately – switches the meaning of the word bao in bao guo, which means ‘to render service in repayment,’ to bao in bao chou, which means ‘to revenge’” (23). The critics, in reprimanding Kingston’s liberty in manipulating the precious Chinese sources, have overlooked her intention to change an old Chinese myth into an American one 46. In transforming the
traditional legend of Fa Mu Lan and rewriting it into a story of a fantasised swordswoman in the American context, Kingston lays claims on the Chinese heritage and reclaims the story as her own: “this chant that was once mine” (WW 26). As some of the critics have noted 47, the name “Mu Lan” could be literally translated into “Wood Orchid” – thus situating the transformed Mu Lan in Maxine's matrilineage (the mother is “Brave Orchid” – Ying Lan; while Moon Orchid’s name could be translated as Yu Lan 48) and signifying her intention to claim this figure as an important role model, a mother or aunt figure, in her development.

When being asked in an interview if there is anything she would like to alter or expand on concerning the myths in The Woman Warrior, Kingston remarks that she would like to include the bits of knowledge that Fa Mu Lan is a weaver in the original chant into her transformed myth so that another connection of the heroine (the weaver) and her narrator (the writer) could be built up: “weaving and writing have a connection” because “the word ‘texture,’ which has to do with weaving, comes from the same root word as ‘text’ – ‘text’ in writing” (Skenazy 131). She notes that to “make a woman character a weaver” is “wonderful because it is a woman’s art, something that women have done through thousands of years” and it is important to demonstrate that the woman warrior “isn’t just a military hero” (Skenazy 131). Pin-chia Feng has connected the narrator and Fa Mu Lan through the figure of a “word warrior” (121), however, as the story of the woman warrior is mostly a fantasy and that Kingston has stated that she would like to change and reconstruct the world through “artistic pacifist means” (Perry 168), I contend that the warrior figure might be too violent for the narrator’s identification, though the warrior spirit (fighting against racism and sexism) is important for her. Instead, I
suggest that the figure of an artistic weaver would be appealing for Maxine/Kingston: by connecting the activity of weaving and writing, Kingston remarkably proclaims the narrator’s, and also her own, aspiration to be an artistic weaver of words so that her book becomes a piece of woven materials shaped by talk-story.

Though the childhood fantasy of the swordswoman proves to be too idealistic and fails to resolve the problems in the narrator’s American life as those “‘chink’ words and ‘gook’ words” do not “fit on” her skin, Maxine manages to envision that the connection between her and the swordswoman is “the words at our backs” (WW 53). Upon such an epiphany, she sets out to retell other tales – the haunting ghosts in her subconscious – to participate in the “great power” her mother has rendered her (WW 25). Though the childish myth is past and does not provide a concrete resolution, the narrator learns from the mother’s talk-story tradition of aesthetic forms and vibrant images and uses them to articulate her voices, as she develops from girlhood into artistic-weaver-noon.

-- No Name Aunt: the “forerunner”

In “No Name Woman,” Maxine retells the story of her nameless paternal aunt who is deliberately forgotten because of her illegitimate pregnancy that brings humiliation to the family and village. The tragic story of the no name aunt opens with the mother’s maternal injunction to bid silence: “‘You must not tell anyone,’ my mother said, ‘what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born” (WW 11). Maxine is then given the bare details of her aunt’s story, which include all the parts Brave Orchid
believes are necessary: the message is straightforward, pragmatic, and didactic – as Maxine enters her puberty, she should be careful not to bring any shame to the family, as the mother warns: “Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don’t humiliate us. You wouldn’t like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful” (WW 13). When asked about the contradictions of the mother in silencing her but at the same time giving her the tale of this aunt, Kingston remarks that her mother is actually the one who pioneers the disclosure of this hidden secret of their family: “My mother did it; she’s the first one that said, ‘Let’s remember this story.’ And actually she’s even the one that gave it a meaning, but then her meaning was just don’t fool around or you’re going to get pregnant and get in big trouble. But she broken the frozen ice” (Skenazy 123). The mother’s role in the retelling of stories is of critical importance: she is “the center and the driving force behind the narrator’s storytelling” and the “central transmitter of the stories and the one who starts a new dynamic circulation of the stories” (Feng 111). Taking the mother’s initial step further, she writes it down and publishes it at the end.

The mother takes the no name aunt as a negative model and warns Maxine against any inappropriate behaviour; but Maxine does not readily accept Brave Orchid’s barely-detailed version of the story. To support her life in America, Maxine has to challenge the mother’s version and work out an applicable meaning from it, thus making the no name aunt a role model for her. Thus, Maxine rebelliously ignores her mother’s admonition and determines to uncover the repressed past in the family history. In the reconstruction of the aunt’s tale, she practises talk-story by imaginatively presenting multiple versions of the story. As the daughter-narrator starts to challenge her mother’s version of the aunt’s story,
she discovers the possible gap and doubts the reliability of her mother’s story: “My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all” (WW 15). She decides that her mother has withheld certain information from her: “But they had sent her back to her own mother and father, a mysterious act hinting at disgraces not told me. Perhaps they had thrown her out to deflect the avengers” (WW 15). This observation of a “missing loop” in the mother’s storytelling provides Maxine the inspiration and freedom in recreating her aunt’s story. As Maxine reconstructs no name aunt’s story, she devises various possibilities of the aunt’s adultery: the aunt is firstly seen as a victim, who is forced into having sex with the man. By portraying the aunt as an innocent victim who is punished for being forced into an adulteress, Maxine announces her critique of the women’s position in a traditional Chinese social structure. She shows sympathy when she observes that her aunt, the only daughter in the family, is expected “to keep the traditional ways” alone whereas her brothers, “now among barbarians, could fumble without detection” (WW 15). The no name aunt’s fate is manipulated and arranged by others: a young man in the next village is “found” to be her husband and after the marriage, the man leaves her behind and sails off to the Gold Mountain, and she is expected to observe the social code of chastity. The only thing she could do is to wait for her husband’s return: “Divorce, remarriage, elopement, love affairs out of wedlock – anything that might in some sense free a bound woman – were equally out of question, even in the event of a seemingly endless separation without hope of reunion” (Gao 28). In old China, women were not treated as human beings with individuality and passions, but were commodities which could be sold, mortgaged, stoned, or sent away. Maxine decides that this
hypothesis of the aunt as a victim is not helpful because it simply reinforces the unjust social concept of women, which does not suit her present circumstances.

To embellish no name aunt’s story in a more supportive way, Maxine develops a second hypothesis so that her aunt becomes her “forerunner” (WW 15). In this conjecture, no name aunt is envisioned as a counter-model to the Chinese cultural norm: her adultery is a result of romance and her willful desires. “This” aunt harbours a love of beauty and has a love affair out of wedlock and she risks society’s condemnation in pursuing her dream lover: “On a farm near the sea, a woman who tended her appearance reaped a reputation for eccentricity” (WW 16). In certain ways, no name aunt’s story could be viewed as a counterpart of the swordswoman fantasy in “White Tigers” 51. As the fantasy of swordswoman encapsulates the narrator’s critique of the anti-female tradition, though in a valiant and violent way which she rejects later, juxtaposing the two stories reinforces the burden the Chinese patriarchal culture has put on no name aunt and invalidates the wish-fulfilment purpose of the fantasy. Even though no name aunt tries to fight for her own rights as a woman, she cannot get what she wants — what the swordswoman in the fantasy achieves 52. While the story of no name aunt sounds discouraging as it ends with her death and being dismembered, Maxine manages to crave out a positive meaning to the aunt’s story at the end: “Carrying the baby to the well shows loving. Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into the mud. Mothers who love their children take them along” (WW 21). In this sense, no name aunt is a silent heroine who maintains dignity through her adultery, labour, and death. She emerges as a unique and unconventional Chinese woman — a daring nonconformist who acts according to her personal pleasure, digs out a freckle which is said to predestine “her for unhappiness” (WW 17), chooses to withhold the name of her
lover, leads a secret love life, bears the consequences of breaking the "roundness" of the village (WW 19), and protects her child till her death. Suicide, according to Margery Wolf and Roxane Witke, for Chinese women, is an act of exerting influence: for a young woman, it is "the ultimate rebellion in a society that requires respectful submission to the will of one's seniors, and for a woman it is the most damning public accusation she can make against her mother-in-law, her husband, or her son" (qtd. in Simmons 57). By throwing herself into the family well, the no name aunt symbolically repudiates the overwhelming anti-female Chinese tradition, vents her vengeance, and ostracises those people who are against her, including her family members: by jumping into the family well, "she contaminates, in a recapitulated gesture of disruption, the water that literally and symbolically promises the continuance of patrilineal descent and the symbolic order it nourishes" (S. Smith 62). Though no name aunt pays for her nonconformity and rebellion with the lives of herself and her baby, she arises as a new role model for Maxine, who sees her aunt's life as "branching into" hers and gives her "ancestral help" (WW 16).

In this way, Maxine is able to identify with her nameless and forgotten aunt as both of them yearn for liberation: "No Name Aunt's suicide becomes, then, an act of individual will and personal desire against collective values and communal constriction, an act with which Maxine, searching for her own liberation from the constraints of family, can identify with and then represent" (Hammad 196).

After participating in the punishment of silence for twenty years under the male-sanctioned tradition, Maxine deliberately re-enters the aunt's tale and appropriates it in a positive and meaningful light. As the aunt is without a name, she is left forever hungry after death as she cannot receive paper replicas: "Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts, snatch and
steal it from those whose living descendants give them gifts” (*WW* 22). Fuelled with sympathy, Maxine alone devotes “pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes” (*WW* 22). Though she perceives that the aunt does not always mean her well and she is frightened of being pulled down as a substitute by the drowned weeping ghost of her aunt, she bravely exorcises this haunting story by submitting its missing details and completing it on her own, while both connecting and separating from her mother’s lack-of-details and necessity-driven story. Through breaking the imposed silence, overturning the linguistic admonition, and narrating the aunt’s story with her vivid imagination, Maxine not only creates an identity for her obliterated aunt, acknowledges her existence and thus resurrects and situates the aunt back into the family tree, but also manages to envision a connection between herself and the no name aunt, and claims this once-ghostly story as her heritage 54. Participating in and practising talk-story – connecting to and separating from the mother/her stories at the same time – Maxine follows the footsteps of the mother in becoming a storyteller, though in a transgressive way, like her forerunner, by the mother’s standard 55.

-- Moon Orchid: a “negative” model

While “No Name Woman” is about her paternal and unnamed aunt, Kingston introduces her maternal and named aunt, Moon Orchid, in “At the Western Palace,” a meek, passive, dependent, and delicate woman, who ultimately emanates as a negative model for Maxine. Moon Orchid’s fragility is detected at her first appearance at the airport: “She was a tiny, tiny lady, very thin, with little fluttering hands, and her hair was in a grey knot” (*WW* 108). She is also a boring person who shows over-zealousness in trivial matters: after arriving at her sister’s house, Moon
Orchid spends a long time presenting and describing the gifts she has brought along, turns the light of the goldfish tank on and off, picks up pieces of string, and pauses to look at the family photographs on the wall. The purpose of her visit, according to Brave Orchid, is to claim back her Americanised husband who has abandoned her and married a second wife in America. Moon Orchid, an anxious and frail woman, however, hesitates: when Brave Orchid plots with her how to claim back her husband, she timidly replies that she is scared (WW 115). Her adherence to the Chinese tradition in favouring boys over girls is detected as she is satisfied that her husband still financially supports her and her daughter, “even though she’s only a girl” (WW 115). While staying with her sister, Moon Orchid spends her day childishly trailing around her nephews and nieces, creeps up behind the children with a comb to smooth their hair, hovers over a child who is reading, and curiously describes their actions and repeats what they say aloud (WW 123). The narrator also describes Moon Orchid as an ineffective person: she tries to help out in the laundry but fails to manage even the simplest tasks such as ironing and folding towels and becomes inarticulate but only giggles as she sees a customer coming in. After she has learnt to fold towels, she congratulates herself for accomplishing “a great deal” without improving her working speed (WW 127) and delightedly ponders on showing this off as a sign of cleverness to her husband when they meet (WW 131). However, when Brave Orchid inquires whether she is ready to see her husband, she secretly thinks of the possibility of postponing the “claiming” (WW 129).

When Moon Orchid’s husband is finally lured from his office to meet his “first wife” at Brave Orchid’s altered plot, the result is dramatically tragic. Her husband at first fails to recognise her and addresses her and Brave Orchid as “grandmothers”
(WW 137). Knowing who she is, he refuses to take her and their daughter back and announces that they have become “people in a book I had read a long time ago,” signifying the sense of alienation between them and the husband’s deliberate pushing them into the realm of fictional characters (WW 139). In the husband’s mind, Moon Orchid has become part of his past history, bearing minimal significance to his present-day life. Throughout the confrontation, Moon Orchid does not follow her sister’s instruction but simply keeps a shocking silence, only spends moments on reflecting that she and her husband have “become ghosts” for each other in “the land of ghosts,” whereas Brave Orchid does all the talking and interrogation (WW 139). This demonstrates Moon Orchid’s cultural misplacement in America as upon arriving America, not only her husband becomes a ghost to her, she has become one herself as well. The meeting leaves a traumatic impact on Moon Orchid as she becomes increasingly paranoid afterwards and ends up dying in a mental asylum.

Moon Orchid can be regarded as an exemplary model for the traditional Chinese women: she is submissive, keeps silent at her husband’s bigamy, clearly agrees with the old saying that girls are not worthy of money or food, and is very dependent. Her name alludes to femininity, lunacy, and “her shadowy, unrealistic existence” (Feng 118) – which epitomises her personality traits, characteristics, and eventual status as a culturally misplaced and shocked person in America. When her husband does not send for her after relocating to America, she waits patiently without taking any initiative to seek him out; after her husband categorically rejects a reunion with her, her life is utterly smashed. As Moon Orchid relocates to America, it becomes apparent that her exemplary behaviour, by the traditional Chinese standard, does not fit into the foreign place but turns into the destructive
agent of her life – just as the old tale signifies, the Empress of the East could never fit in at the Western Palace. Moon Orchid’s fragility and powerlessness in surviving the American environment with traditional Chinese beliefs make her a negative role model in Maxine’s development. She is unable to communicate with her American nephews and nieces: she does not understand the stares and vanity of her nephews and nieces while the children consider her weird and erratic. Even among other overseas Chinese, she fails to assimilate and spends a long time thinking of a joke for conversation. Her financial and psychological dependence on her husband and her repeating of the children’s actions and speech signify that “her life is but a reflection of others” (Feng 118). Her developed lunacy frightens Brave Orchid, who believes that “Moon Orchid had misplaced herself, her spirit (her ‘attention,’ Brave Orchid called it) scattered all over the world” (WW 141). Recognising Moon Orchid as a negative role model and endeavouring to avoid the same fate, “Brave Orchid’s daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science or mathematics” (WW 144). As Helena Grice has impressively noted, Moon Orchid is unable to provide a tangible role model but only “fragile, paper effigies” – a paper cutout of Fa Mu Lan – to her niece (Negotiating 55).

Moon Orchid’s story conveys another important message to Maxine as she realises the potential danger in following her mother’s ministrations. Brave Orchid orchestrates the entire scheme of claiming back Moon Orchid’s husband, but the effort ends in a futile and tragic manner. She finds a Chinese-American husband for Moon Orchid’s daughter so that Moon Orchid could come over to America as well but it turns out that the man is a tyrant, making the mother and daughter “sorry
for one another" (WW 117). Her insistence in pushing Moon Orchid to reclaim her husband eventually leads to Moon Orchid’s disastrous mental breakdown. Thus, Brave Orchid’s power is revealed to be ineffectual in both cases even though she has spent much time in toughening them up – the “lovely, useless type” (WW 118). While Brave Orchid attempts to exercise her power, which is elusive to her in America, she works under the impression she can act as if she and Moon Orchid, and everyone who is Chinese in ethnic origin, are in China, regardless of the different cultural milieu they are in, and therefore she meets with failure in her directorial ambition because, although the “characters” in her drama are Chinese on surface, most of them are Americans deep down. The mother’s ineffectiveness thus contributes to Maxine’s eventual realisation of the necessity to metaphorically leave her mother – a “ghost” – so that she could have her own logic and voice, and be free from her mother’s misplaced influences. As Brave Orchid finally sees that “all variety had gone from her sister” and decides that “she was indeed mad,” she tells her children: the difference between mad people and sane people is that “sane people have variety when they talk-story. Mad people have only one story that they talk over and over” (WW 143). Instilled with a fear of being the madwoman in her family, Maxine acknowledges the importance of having variety in her stories, corresponding to her role as a written story-talker, who gives multiple versions, possibilities, and varieties, throughout the text.

Moon Orchid’s tale seems to be the most objective one due to its third-person narration, yet it transpires in the next chapter that certain details of the story are heavily twisted with the narrator’s design. Like the story of no name aunt, this thrice-told tale signifies Maxine’s ambition to carve out autobiographical possibilities for her shadowy aunt, who only knows to echo and reflect others,
lacking in individuality. By supplying missing details and giving her a space in the book, Kingston creates an identity for her aunt, and “appeases her spirit, which is also a form of ancestral worship” (Feng 118). Towards the end of “At the Western Palace,” Moon Orchid finds her happiness in the mental institution, where she is able to make up a new story and communicate with her “daughters” there: “we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them” (WW 144). In this way, Maxine pays tribute to her role model, though a negative one, by rendering her an autobiographical place and symbolic peace at the end. In addition to this, the tale of Moon Orchid serves another purpose in undermining the mother’s dominating influence throughout the narrator’s childhood and growth. While the third-person narration in “At the Western Palace” seems to be giving the readers an objective glimpse of the mother figure as the author/narrator keeps a distance from maneuvering the narrative, it should be noted that the story is largely an imaginative work of the author/narrator. Though Moon Orchid’s story is not handed down to the narrator by the mother through talking-story, as the tales of no name aunt and Fa Mu Lan do, the story and this aunt figure are significant in highlighting the danger of imbibing everything from the mother, as we could note the comic and slightly teasing tone throughout the episode of the claiming back of the husband, which is proudly directed by her mother and laid down by the daughter.

-- Brave Orchid: a positive “misplaced” ghost exorcist

While Moon Orchid is presented as a negative role model for Maxine, her mother, Brave Orchid, pronouncedly emerges as a positive model in the manner of
a real-life woman warrior, who possesses strength, energy, courage, leadership, and intelligence. As “a woman left behind – *the gum san po* (Gold Mountain woman),” Brave Orchid has to be “strong and independent to survive” (Ho, *HMH* 71). “Shaman,” situated in the physical centre of *The Woman Warrior*, signifying the mother’s central position in Maxine’s development into a story-talker, is a reconstruction of Brave Orchid’s past history, putting side by side the mother’s past in China and the narrator’s memories of the mother in America. The mother’s independence and uniqueness is exemplified as she pursues a professional education to becoming a doctor, an atypical feat of traditional Chinese women. The description of the mother’s arrival at the medical school invokes Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*: “Not many women got to live out the daydream of women – to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself” (*WW* 61). By alluding to Woolf’s feminist icon, the mother celebrates her freedom and appreciation of privacy, and foreshadows the importance of the daughter’s artistic creation. Brave Orchid triumphantly boasts of her brilliance to Maxine by recounting how her classmates fight to sit next to her in order to take a glimpse at her paper during examinations. After her study, she returns to the village in the manner of a real Fu Mu Lan (Rusk 73): “She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous” (*WW* 74) and practises her profession using her maiden name. The second half of the mother’s story in China portrays her successful career as an effective village doctor who is so miraculous that the villagers praise her as a “Jesus convert” (*WW* 78). In order to magnify her power as a doctor to the public, she deliberately avoids treating the terminally ill (S. Smith 69). The title of the chapter, “Shaman,” on the one hand alludes to the magical power the mother has as a village doctor, using “a powerful female figure well
known in Cantonese culture” (Simmons 71), while on the other hand, heightens the mythic aspect of the mother’s tale by referring to Brave Orchid as a priest who possesses magical power to tease out evil spirits, which is unlikely to take place in reality.

Brave Orchid’s trailblazing influence on Maxine’s development is accentuated with the portrayal of the mother as a ghost exorcist. Brave Orchid demonstrates her heroism and bravery, as her name signifies, in exorcising a Sitting Ghost in a haunted room of her school. This scene is prominently significant, as is reflected in its detailed narrative, to Maxine’s journey of searching for her voice and self-identity because the mother manifests herself as a ghost exorcist, a role that the daughter inherits and adopts as she has to expel the ghosts in her psyche to explore the power of words. As a scientific woman who receives western-style medical education with independent thinking, Brave Orchid, listening to her classmates’ talk-stories, questions the existence of ghosts by dismissing ghosts as nightmares and regarding them just as “an entirely different species of creature” (WW 64). Possessed with overwhelming strength, she does not believe the ghost would do her any harm as ghosts have no power over a strong woman (WW 68). Her superior courage and leadership is noted when she unflinchingly volunteers to sleep in the haunted room, battles against the Sitting Ghost, and eventually leads a group of classmates into banishing the ghost – a disease, “as invisible and deadly as bacteria” (WW 71). This triumphant getting rid of a “disease” symbolises Brave Orchid’s hidden hope of getting rid of the patriarchal Chinese culture, and her doing so with other female medical classmates, a group of intelligent and atypical Chinese women, highlights the importance of female solidarity and cooperative strength in face of injustice. As Sidonie Smith observes, Brave Orchid’s
compelling re-creation of her encounter with the ghost to other women (and her
daughter) exemplifies her self-authoring "as powerful protagonist" (69). It registers
the mother's confidence and inscription of an autobiographical selfhood. Battling
with the ghost, Brave Orchid emerges as a warrior, who "could make herself not
weak," as she faces danger (and/or the binding nature of patriarchy), because she is
a dragoness with dragon claws (WW 65).

As the daughter-narrator rewrites her mother's biography, the role model of a
mother-warrior is counterbalanced with uncertainties and ambiguities, and a
problematic maternal model starts to gain space. Brave Orchid's haunting stories
and her manifestation as a ghostly figure, discussed previously, inevitably make her
an inconsistent and contradictory model, and the inapplicability of the mother's
power in America further problematises the daughter's identification with her. In
America, Brave Orchid's brilliance as a shaman with healing and ghost-chasing
powers does not shine, undermining the positiveness of the mother as a role model.
While she successfully chases out the Sitting Ghost in a haunted room in China, she
encounters many difficulties when dealing with the Ghosts, who materialise and
manifest in human-forms, in America. In "At the Western Palace," we witness the
ineffectiveness of the mother's healing power and talk-stories 59 when she futilely
instigates Moon Orchid's attempt to win back the American bigamist husband and
drags the mentally disturbed sister back to sanity in vain. Faced with professional
exclusion from medical practice in America, the once miraculous doctor who
refuses to cure hopeless cases in China becomes a laundry worker and a menial
labourer in picking tomatoes in her ripe old age. Though still maintaining her
bossy and authoritative flair at home as a "champion talker," Brave Orchid fails to
assimilate completely (WW 180). This could be evidenced in the misunderstanding
between her and her American half-ghost children. This could be shown in her dismissal of America as a ghost country of incomprehensible beings who complicate her life (Huntley, *Kingston* 106). This could also be shown in her insistence on lingering on in the Chinese old values, practices, and rituals, which turn out to be completely misplaced in America as evidenced in the impossibility of applying the old tale of the East Empress in America, the impossibility of making the Druggist Ghosts recognise they are rectifying their mistakes by giving reparation candies, and perhaps most importantly, the impossibility of funnelling Chinese patriarchal teachings to Maxine, who ultimately ignores her admonition and breaks the silence.

There is a temporary reconciliation between the mother and daughter at the end of “Shaman,” when Brave Orchid finally assents to the grown-up Maxine’s request to forgo the hope to return to China, that Maxine is able to visualise a connection with her mother. Exasperated by the Urban Renewal Ghosts who tear down their laundry, Brave Orchid laments the hardship she faces in America: “This is a terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away” (*WW* 97). At the same time, she acknowledges the impossibility of returning to China because the ancestral land is sold, forcing her to face the fact that “We have no more China to go home to” (*WW* 99). The adult Maxine, feeling for her mother’s disappointment, appeals to her mother to give up the sense of belonging and confinement: “We belong to the planet now, Mama. Does it make sense to you that if we’re no longer attached to one piece of land, we belong to the planet? Wherever we happen to be standing, why, that spot belongs to us as much as any other spot” (*WW* 99). Here, Maxine attempts to draw a connection with her mother by claiming that they share the same identity – a global or universal one,
free from any geographical and cultural boundaries. In a sense, this is a kind of "compromise" that the mother and daughter try to agree on, in an attempt to avoid further arguments and conflicts due to their different self-identifications and cultural milieux. Yet, the resolution is not permanently achieved as Maxine still spots the necessity to get away from her mother – the ghostly influence – in order to find a "ghost-free" space in America. Maxine refuses Brave Orchid's request to stay home and not leave again because she always feels sick at home but does not catch colds and most importantly, does not hear "ghost sounds" when she is away (WW 100). With the mother's consent to let her go, Maxine falls asleep, with a sense of release and relief, and marvels at the matrilineal connection between the mother and daughter: "I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years" (WW 101).

The name of "Brave Orchid," as suggested by Helena Grice in *Negotiating Identities*, is deemed inconceivable because of its male/female clash: "brave" denotes masculinity whereas "orchid" signifies femininity. Grice remarks that the linguistic link of the female figures' names provides a further significance for Chinese-speaking readers. She identifies "Orchid" as a traditional female surname and thus making "Moon Orchid" a possible name but not "Brave Orchid": "'orchid' carries female connotations in Chinese, 'Brave' carries male, warrior connotations, and this male/female, yin/yang clash could not be conceivable ... In contrast, 'Moon Orchid' is a traditional name, carrying significations of both femininity and lunacy, as does the narrator's aunt" (56). As a native Cantonese speaker myself (and Kingston's exposure to Chinese culture is mainly Cantonese), I have a different view on the name of "Brave/Moon Orchid." In my understanding as at the context of *The Woman Warrior*, the name of the mother "Brave Orchid" is a direct
transliteration of the maiden name of Kingston’s mother: Ying Lan, with “Ying” being translated as “brave” as in “ying yung” (bravery) whereas “Lan” being translated as “orchid” as in the flower “lan hua.” In this way, “Orchid” is not a traditional female surname in Chinese, but is a transliteration of part of the maiden name of the mother. While I agree with Grice that the name is a signification of its bearer as Brave Orchid is a person who “denies the confines of femininity” (56), I believe that the male/female clash in the mother’s name also represents the contradictory selfhood of Brave Orchid: a person who simultaneously upholds “patriarchy and female heroism” (Feng 112). By juxtaposing the two contrasting values of femininity and masculinity in the mother’s name, Kingston tactfully draws the readers’ attention to the mother’s contradictory image. And this, I perceive, is also the reason why Kingston does not adopt her mother’s Chinese maiden name, Ying Lan, in the text but transliterates her name word-by-word to “Brave Orchid.” By changing her mother’s name to a seemingly western one, Kingston deliberately incorporates her mother in her American book while at the same time, shows her determination to decipher the mother by asserting authorship of the dominating figure in the book.

Though Yan Gao gives a verdict that Brave Orchid is a “ghost exorcist who succeeds in one culture, but fails in another” (32), I still reckon her as a strong positive role model to Maxine as the mother’s ghost exorcising and talk-story powers are the most important driving forces to the daughter’s self-discovery. As David Leiwei Li has noted, the mother is “both a literal and literary midwife: she was an obstetrician back in China and she transmits stories to her daughter until the girl claims that she can also ‘talk story’” (“The Production” 329). Though Brave Orchid is unable to transport her career brilliance to and translate Chinese values to
her daughter in America, her strength and enduring adaptability is manifested as she swallows the hardship in the alien place without flinching. Instead of being completely failed to assimilate like Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid has exemplified “a Chinese woman’s strength and independence by her successes in China as a village doctor and ghost fighter and later in America as the family breadwinner and preserver of cultural values” (Khaw-Posthuma 268). Her heroic spirit, courage, and the ability to improvise are thus important qualities that Maxine should aspire to inherit: as Linda Hunt observes, Brave Orchid “has lived a life that conforms quite closely, within the limits of realistic possibility, to the woman warrior model” (9).

What Maxine needs to do is to cast out the unfavourable factors in the model and re-place it in the new situation (America) so that her mother would transform from a positive yet misplaced model into a purely positive one, and her way of doing so is to review her mother’s history, retell her talk-stories, rewrite the family history, resolve the mother-daughter conflicts, and ultimately reconnect with the mother by becoming a story-talker, following her mother’s footsteps, in *The Woman Warrior*.

--- *Ts’ai Yen: resolution achieved through arts*

In the final chapter of the book, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” Kingston retells the story of Ts’ai Yen, a second-century poetess, who was abducted and captivated by the barbarians for twelve years. Few historical facts about this poetess are known. She was the daughter of a famous poet and statesman, Ts’ai Yung. She married once but the marriage ended at the death of her husband. She was kidnapped by the barbarians when she was twenty years old, and became the concubine of a powerful chieftain, to whom she bore two sons. After twelve years she was ransomed when the ruler Cao Cao wanted Ts’ai Yen to complete the
editing of her father’s books, but she had to leave her two children behind. After she returned to China, she was married to a statesman of Cao Cao. Among the poems which are dubiously identified to be hers, “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” (*Hui jia shibapai*) is the source of Kingston’s appropriation of Ts’ai Yen’s story. The poem, written in eighteen stanzas set for a nomad’s flute (Gao 43), is narrated with the autobiographical voice of Ts’ai Yen, who laments her misery in captivity. In the poem, she reveals a disgust of her captors’ barbarisms and laments the estrangement and she is also emotionally tortured with homesickness: “As geese fly high, out of sight,/ I felt lost, tormented with the longing of returning” (qtd. in Gao 44). Though “overjoyed” at the news of returning home, Ts’ai Yen is frantically distressed with the separation from her sons and she is plagued with grief and feels that the pain “still lingers in my broken heart” (qtd. in Gao 44). The original version of Ts’ai Yen’s story emphasises “the poet’s eventual return to her own people, a return that reinforces certain traditional and ethnocentric Chinese notions” (Cheung, “Don’t Tell” 171).

Like her intriguing appropriation of the ballad of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston reconstructs the story of the historical poetess to signify the power of words. In the retelling, she transforms the weeping, passive, and delicate Ts’ai Yen, as presented in the original poem, to a valiant, active, and capable woman who fights “desultorily,” “cut[s] down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat,” and gives birth “on the sand” (*WW* 185). The sentimental element of homesickness, grief, and heartbreaking as a cultural outcast is removed in the retelling. The most notable revision of the story comes as Ts’ai Yen, disturbed by the music of the barbarians, ultimately sings songs about China and her family along with the music, which match the flutes. Though her words are Chinese, the
barbarians miraculously understand their “sadness and anger” and could catch phrases “about forever wandering” (WW 186). Her barbarian children, who once imitate and laugh at Ts’ai Yen’s language of “senseless singsong words,” eventually sing along with her (WW 185). Ts’ai Yen’s song, hence, is able to transcend the language barrier and cultural displacement. After she is ransomed, she leaves the savage land and brings her songs back to China, where people sing the song of “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” to their Chinese instruments and wonderfully discovers that “it translated well” (WW 186). It is noticeable that there are two interchanges in the retelling: Ts’ai Yen and the barbarians, including her own children, are able to communicate finally through arts – music and poetry – and her poem also matches well with the Chinese musical instrument, signifying a successful transcendence of cultural differences through words 65. Instead of adopting Ts’ai Yen’s ending from the original poem which mourns for grief and sorrow at the impossibility of reunion with the children (Gao 47), Kingston’s retelling ends with a sense of hope and anticipation 66.

There are varied opinions on the function of Kingston’s retelling of the Ts’ai Yen story. Amy Ling sees it as a resolution of the conflict between the mother and daughter as the Ts’ai Yen story is narrated by both of them and it symbolises both their lives (129-130). Ts’ai Yen’s victimisation in exile and difficulty in communicating with her own children symbolises Brave Orchid’s painful experience in America as well as the child Maxine’s difficulty in being alienated by “the fearful ‘ghosts’ created all around her by her mother;” whereas Ts’ai Yen’s victory in communicating her anger and sadness to the barbarians and her children parallels Brave Orchid’s ultimate reconciliation with Maxine “when resentment and anger are replaced by understanding and affection” and Kingston’s transformation.
from "her victim's state of cut frenum into a victor's state of full-throated song" (Ling 129-30) 67. Leslie W. Rabine, on the other hand, views the reconstruction of Ts'ai Yen as an agent of "distortion" (Gao 41). She agrees with Ling that both the mother and daughter could fit into the figure of Ts'ai Yen, but not at the same time. Thus, in her view, the daughter's conflict is not resolved at the end as the figure of Ts'ai Yen "alternates between embodying Kingston and embodying her mother" which "creates both a difference and a relationship between mother and daughter" and "the alternating form of the Ts'ai Yen analogy distorts the relationship between the mother and daughter but also clarifies a not-yet-existing possibility" (98). Yan Gao provides a third interpretation as she considers a "straightforwardly allegorical reading" of Kingston's Ts'ai Yen as problematic because it is hard to say whom Ts'ai Yen embodies. Instead, she proposes, through Ts'ai Yen, Kingston tries to express "her strong desire to be understood and accepted by her mother, her family, her community and the mainstream culture as a daughter, a woman, an ethnic woman writer, and, finally, a human being" and her "musing on the life of Ts'ai Yen" presents "a wishful resolution, not a reconciliation in reality" (45-46).

My reading of the reconstruction of the Ts'ai Yen story is similar to Gao's in that I agree with her that an allegorical reading of the story is inappropriate, but differs from hers in that I see that by the end of the book, a reconciliation between the mother and daughter is achieved in the sense that the daughter-narrator, Maxine, is able to relate herself to the mother and the mother's stories: through Ts'ai Yen, Maxine celebrates the importance of voice to "exorcise" the ghosts her mother has once created around her, transforming them from haunting beings to harmonious and meaningful presences, and follows her mother's footpath in becoming a storyteller by collaborating with the mother in talk-stories. In the retelling, Ts'ai
Yen bridges the cultural gulf between the Chinese and barbarians through singing her poems — the poems signify the power of words whereas conveying the words through singing it in “a high note” denotes the importance of making the words heeded (WW 186). The gulf between the mother and daughter, likewise, is bridged as the daughter articulates her voice at the end of the book: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker” (WW 184). Unlike the passive Ts’ai Yen in the original poem, Maxine actively seeks for a resolution for the mother-daughter relationship. The one-way verbal admonition at the beginning, when the mother authoritatively imposes silence on the daughter with the story of no name aunt, turns to a two-way verbal trafficking at the end as the mother and daughter talk-stories together: “The beginning is hers, the ending, mine” (WW 184). Instead of revising the mother’s stories as she has previously done, the book ends with the narrator’s own voice in telling her own story, as a continuation of her mother’s. Interestingly, the two-part story produced collaboratively by the mother and daughter also celebrates the importance of the arts. The first part told by the mother is about Maxine’s grandmother, who is fond of theatre and insists that everyone in the family should accompany her to watch plays, regardless of the fear of the bandits. Consequently, the bandits invade the theatre but the family is left unharmed, which is a “proof to my grandmother that our family was immune to harm as long as they went to plays” (WW 185). Maxine continues the story of her mother with the retelling of Ts’ai Yen who transcends cultural gulf with poetry and music by merging her own story with her mother’s: “I like to think that at some of those performance, they heard the songs of Ts’ai Yen, a poetess born in AD 175” (WW 185). Opera, music, and poetry are all important forms of arts and by becoming a written story-talker — an
artistic weaver of words, Kingston relates herself to the familial tradition of celebrating arts as a literary writer.

The childhood fantasy of Fa Mu Lan, the woman warrior who uses swords as weapons and acquires power in male disguise, is now past, but replaced by an adult identification with Ts’ai Yen, the female poet who sings her poems to harmonise. A military and aggressive model has turned into a literary and artistic model, and the "'chink' words and 'gook' words," which once did not fit on Maxine's skin (WW 53), have turned into words in a high-pitched song, which transcends gulfs between the mother and daughter, the Chinese and the Americans. The journey of self-discovery is thus completed.

Through embellishing and modifying the mother's stories, thus giving new meanings and significance to the once-confusing and haunting sources, and reconciling with the mother, a problematic and mazy figure, at the end, Maxine triumphantly exorcises the ghosts, which haunt her childhood and adolescence, and transforms them into people, who are on speaking terms with her, bringing them into beings through her imagination. Unlike her mother who exorcises the Sitting Ghost in a valiant and warrior manner, Maxine chases out her ghosts through a pacifist and harmonious means – words and mutual communication. In her effort to exorcise the ghosts – the mother's stories and the mother herself, Maxine discovers that "her world can never be free of ghosts, nor could her writing exist without them" (Rusk 71). These ghosts, as the mature Maxine finally realises, are the inspiration of her artistic vision and her talk-story vocation. After successfully deciphering the "Mother's ghost stories and Mother-as-ghost" (Gao 34) and hence overcoming the obstacles in her search for voice and self-identity, she eventually celebrates her articulation and her identity as a Chinese-American artistic-word-
weaver as she connects the mother’s Chinese past with her American present. Hence, at the end of *The Woman Warrior*, as Maxine continues “to sort out what’s just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (*WW* 183), at the same time, she learns to appreciate her “hyphenated” status – Chinese-American – in which the hyphen pictorially symbolises the bridge connecting the two cultures, and where she is now happily mediating between.

By invoking the Chinese talk-story oral tradition and transforming it into an American-English written form, Kingston employs the talk-story narrative strategy in *The Woman Warrior* to define the “I” for the narrator through appropriating the stories of her female role models, which are integral to her development. Equipped with a storyteller’s ability to improvise and revise, Kingston succeeds in drawing on the stories of her forebears for her strength, carves out applicable meanings from them, and turns them into American myths: from the fantasy of Fa Mu Lan, she learns to right wrongs through pacifist means; from the remodelling of no name aunt, she identifies her as a forerunner; from the tragic story of Moon Orchid, she recognises the danger of being culturally misplaced; from the talk-stories of the indomitable mother, she inherits the talk-story talent and eloquence and the strength in ghost-exorcising; and from the reconfiguration of Ts’ai Yen, she discovers her voice as an artist and celebrates the importance of arts in transgressing the cultural, notably mingled with linguistic and racial, boundaries. Instead of striving for the individual “I” totally devoid of the collective/communal, Kingston chooses to tease out her “I” with the community’s talk-story tradition: as McHenry has noted, “She taps into this ‘great power’ by developing an individual voice which takes place in the context of her mother and in the community’s tradition of talking story instead
of ‘explaining’ herself outside of her family and community” (210). She remodels the familial tradition of talk-story into an artistic/literary device that she is going to use again in *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Like Fa Mu Lan, Kingston becomes a weaver who weaves the Chinese past stories and myths into the fabric of her American present. Like Ts’ai Yen, Kingston manages to “translate” well the mother’s stories into an entirely different cultural milieu as she takes in while at the same time reads beyond the mother’s vision, from a mythic sense to an artistic sense, and thus completes the journey from silence to voice, introducing a new kind of talk-story writing, in a high note so that it reverberates and can “fly the highest, reach the furthest”: “It would not just be a family book or an American book or a woman’s book but a world book, and, at the same moment, my book” (Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings” 102-103).
Notes:

1. Madsen suggests that the connecting thread of the five stories in *The Woman Warrior* is "the idea of femininity" and each story "presents the adolescent narrator with a female role model from which to learn as she seeks her own way to live as a woman in modern America" (1).

2. Some quotes from *The Woman Warrior* where Kingston uses the term "talk-story" or "talking-story": "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be but wives or slaves" (25), "Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep" (25), "At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (25), "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also am a story-talker" (184).

3. For example, Linda Ching Sledge interprets "talk-story" as "a conservative, communal folk art by and for the common people, performed in various dialects of diverse ethnic enclaves and never intended for the ears of non-Chinese ... because it served to redefine an embattled immigrant culture by providing its members immediate, ceremonial access to ancient lore, talk-story retained the structures of Chinese oral wisdom (parables, proverbs, formulaic description, heroic biography) long after other old-countries traditions had died" (143). David Leiwei Li describes this "distinctive narrative mode" as "the original Chinese oral tradition that a story is first delivered to a community and then becomes 'Hua Ben' or 'story roots' of later written versions" ("China Men" 495).

4. Regardless of its original sources, in this dissertation, I refer to "talk-stories" as a unique way of storytelling that originates from China and is used by immigrant parents to bestow information and preserve cultural heritage. As I will show, Kingston and Tan have approached and remodelled "talk-stories" in different manners in their works.

5. The "talk story" practice in Hawaii could be referred to in Karen Ann Watson’s "Transferable communication routines: strategies and group identity in two speech events" (qtd. in McHenry 190-191).

6. In the interview, Kingston describes the anecdote as follows: "Did you know that in some Asian cities – I know this happened in Singapore, but probably less so now – there are storytellers who walk into a restaurant and they will come to your table and tell you a story, and then, just before the climax, they'll stop telling the story until you pay them. And after you pay them, they tell
you the ending! The more money you pay, the better the ending! I feel so bad sometimes thinking of this great oral tradition, and along comes somebody like me who writes it down” (Islas, Yalom 32).

7. Kingston mentions in an interview with Arturo Islas and Marilyn Yalom (1980) that when stories are written down, the stories become static and unchangeable: “Writing is so static. The story will remain as printed for the next two hundred years and it’s not going to change” (31). Walter Ong states that “[t]here is no way directly to refute a text” as “[a]fter absolutely total and devastating refutation, it says exactly the same thing as before” (79). He suggests that this is “one reason why ‘the book says’ is popularly tantamount to ‘it is true’” (79).

8. E. D. Huntley describes these landscapes as “China, America, a Cantonese village, a neighbourhood in Stockton, and ultimately the world” (34).

9. In The Woman Warrior, the narrator is “bursting with anger as she criticises her mother for confusing her with stories: “And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. 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 don’t even know what your real names are. I can’t tell what’s real and what you make up” (180).

10. Kingston dismisses the notion of “authentic story” as she talks about oral tradition in an interview: “People go to the library and pull out a book and say, ‘Here’s the authentic story.’ It’s not! That was only the odd person who came along, like Homer, and wrote it down. It’s the same thing with the Chinese. Most of the tradition was oral and then someone came along and wrote it down” (Islas, Yalom 32). Debra Shostak has noted the plurality of historical record: “Kingston’s writings draw attention to the very documents that might be used in writing history, the texts of a culture, and at once both undermine and validate their authority as documentary evidence. The nature of the evidence is responsible for this effect: because many of the ‘documents’ have been transmitted orally rather than written, they are plural and, frequently, contradictory” (53).

11. With regards to generic form, Kingston herself considers The Woman Warrior and China Men as “biographies of imaginative people” as she tells “the imaginative lives and the dreams and the fictions of real people” and those stories in the books are “stories of storytellers, and so instead of telling the dates when people are born and where they’re born, I tell you what their
dreams are and what stories they tell" (Bonetti 37). Rocío G. Davis calls this an “experiment of intergenre synthesis,” attributing some of the “distinctive and impact of the text to this experimentation” (qtd. in Grice, MHK 9). Bonnie TuSmith notes that Kingston plays a “literary trick” in *The Woman Warrior* by making “words ‘change on the page’ in the manner of oral performances” (287), thereby “challenges the static notion of autobiography in the ‘American tradition’” (281).

12. *The Woman Warrior* has been the subject of many research projects and dissertations concerning Asian American literatures since then. As the winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award for non-fiction, *The Woman Warrior* became a popular bestseller and is probably the best-known contemporary work of Asian-American literature (Wong, “Autobiography” 29). It is now canonised in many women’s writing, feminist studies and ethnic American literary courses in tertiary institutions and is possibly the most frequently assigned work in courses on university level by a living American writer (Huntley 57). Yan Gao describes the book as “the most widely-used text in college level courses in literature, autobiography, culture, women’s studies and ethnic studies” and is “excerpted in at least a dozen anthologies” (1). In an interview with Marilyn Chin (1989), Kingston reveals her excitement at the enduring popularity and influence of her work: “Two teachers back east on my tour told me that I was the living author whose books are most taught in colleges. Somebody just told me they did an informal survey, walking around the UC Berkeley book stores and found it in twelve courses in one university. And the MLA is coming out with a book on how to teach my work” (97). For a summary of the book’s success in sales and critical acclaim, see Li’s essay “Re-presenting” on p.195. Due to its subject matter, the book is analysed in a wide spectrum of academic disciplines such as biography, fiction, autobiography, history, oral storytelling, myth and folklore, the Chinese diaspora, and ethnography. The book was positively reviewed by American readers mainly for its imaginative depiction of the struggles of marginalised people who are exposed to two cultures, its clarity in prose, and its unique narrative structure in blending myth, fantasy, biography and history. The nonlinear narrative and fragmented structure of *The Woman Warrior* creates a sharp contrast to the then existing mainstream American literature which is characteristic of being “action-oriented and straight-lined, organized analytically into beginning, middle and end, peaking at an Aristotelian climax”
As Shirley Lim has noted, Kingston “eschews conventional narrative structure” to “pursue an elusive literary form capable of expressing alternative self-images” — “a form that reflects an indeterminate cultural content” — for her bicultural characters (“Self-Definition” 245-246). John Leonard is among the first who praises the book: “Those rumbles you hear on the horizon are the big guns of autumn lining up, the howitzers of Vonnegut and Updike and Cheever and Mailer, the books that will be making loud noises for the next several months. But listen: this week a remarkable book has been quietly published; it is one of the best I’ve read in years” (77). William McPherson writes in the Washington Post Book World and describes the book as “a strange, sometimes savagely terrifying and, in the literal sense, wonderful story of growing up caught between two highly sophisticated and utterly alien cultures, both vivid, often menacing and equally mysterious” and Jane Kramer says that The Woman Warrior is “a brilliant memoir ... an investigation of soul, not landscape. Its sources are dream and memory, myth and desire” (qtd. in Huntley, Kingston 14). The Woman Warrior still remains a very important in Asian American literature: Helena Grice has noted that The Woman Warrior’s publication blazes a trail for many Asian-American woman writers: it initiates a mass evolution of Asian American writings by women and has “created a new commercial market for Asian American books about maternity” (Negotiating 36). Laura Hyun Yi Kang locates Kingston “along with the likes of Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare” and describes “The Woman Warrior as one of a select few ‘disciplinary brand names’ in academia” (qtd. in Grice, MHK 17). Since the publication of The Woman Warrior, Kingston has received several honours for her achievement, one of it being that she was made a Living Treasure of Hawai‘i at 39, a young age for such an award.

In a personal communication with Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, Kingston revealed that her involvement in the process of labelling the book as a “non-fiction” is very little: “The only correspondence I had with the published concerning the classification of my books was that he said that Non-fiction would be the most accurate category; Non-fiction is such a catch-all that even ‘poetry is considered non-fiction’” (qtd. in Wong “Autobiography” 30). She also said in an interview by Eric J. Schroeder (1996) that she does not categorise her works as she writes: “I just write whatever I’m thinking, and I don’t categorize as I go along. I’ll leave it up to others where they put the book on their shelves” (216). In “The High Note of the Barbarian Reed Pipe:
Maxine Hong Kingston,” Gloria Chun traces “the origin of *The Woman Warrior*’s nonfiction autobiography classification” and discovers that Kingston’s editor “thought the text would sell better if it was labeled as nonfiction autobiography” (qtd. in Skander-Trombley, “Introduction” 11).

14. Elaine Kim has summed up the image of Asians in American popular culture: “Caricatures of Asians have been part of American popular culture for generations. The power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius are all part of the standard American image of the Asian” (3).

15. For a detailed summary of the criticisms on *The Woman Warrior* as an autobiography, see Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong’s “Autobiography as Guided Chinatown Tour?”.

16. Chinese readers who are familiar with Chinese culture are in general perplexed or even outraged at Kingston’s illustration of traditional China and Chinese people in *The Woman Warrior*. In her article “A Chinese Woman’s Response to Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*,” Ya-jie Zhang, a visiting professor from China, expresses her distress and frustration about the “imagined situations” and the ambiguous use of the term “ghost,” and her anger at the misrepresentation of Chinese culture in the book such as the claims that Chinese people are loud in public places and like to tell lies (17). She feels “personally offended” as “some of Kingston’s remarks offended my sense of national pride as well as my idea of personal discretion” and dismisses the book as having nothing Chinese about it because “the stories in it seemed somewhat twisted” and are “full of American imagination” (17). After attending a lecture on American Ethnic Literature at Rutgers, she begins to acknowledge that her inability to comprehend the American imaginary materials in *The Woman Warrior* may be attributed to the differences between the Chinese and American cultures and learns to appreciate Kingston’s innovative strategic use of Chinese literary and cultural resources. Zhang explains this in her article: “Chinese emigrants must have gone through tremendous difficulties, bearing the old world’s superstitions and mysteries, entering into the new world’s liberty, reason, science, and technology. What a mixture. No wonder it is hard for me, a Chinese, to share the imagination of a Chinese-American” (18). Zhang’s failure to understand the use of mythic materials in the book and her reasons for failing have provided us with a broad view of why many Chinese
critics are puzzled at Kingston's presentation of Chinese materials and culture. However, not everyone who feels that the distortion of Chinese traditional materials is acceptable undergoes the emotional journey from scepticism to acceptance and appreciation as Zhang does. There are many Chinese readers who remain nonplussed and critical at Kingston's revision of traditional Chinese legends and myths in *The Woman Warrior*. Shaoming Liu considers Kingston as being “overvalued” and dismisses the Fa Mu Lan in *The Woman Warrior* as “a malformed cultural embryo” whereas Qing-yun Wu admits that she finds Kingston's “bold rewriting of some Chinese tales” disturbing though she is amused by the author's innovative technique (qtd. in Gao 3). While many Chinese readers appreciate Kingston's literary writing skills, most of them have difficulties in understanding the “transplantation of the familiar stories into a foreign milieu,” that is, the American scene in which Kingston “translates” the Chinese stories for (qtd. in Gao 2).

17. Not all Chinese-Americans are critical of Kingston's book and some Chinese-American women are enthusiastic and regard the book as a “social ethnography” (Woo 175). For example, Lily Wong Fillmore and Jacqueline Leong Cheong think that *The Woman Warrior* “was of sociological value to their own research” and Vivian Hsu has identified nine themes in the book which she “says makes the book readable as 'ethnography'” (Woo 175-176). Suzi Wong is excited that “the book has forged an emotional, sisterly bond between herself and the author” (Woo 176).

18. Katheryn Fong locates the problem of *The Woman Warrior* as that “non-Chinese are reading [her] fiction as true accounts of Chinese and Chinese-American history” (qtd. in Wong, “Autobiography” 31) and as a Chinese-American woman, she finds that Kingston's account of Chinese-American male chauvinism in the book exaggerated. Laureen Mar criticises that “the various women in Kingston's book do not approach real-life characters with textured lives but rather represent 'her [Kingston’s] own stereotypical characterization of Chinese women: alternately dutiful, submissive, passive, stoical, repressed beings or frivolous, flirtatious temptresses, and helpless in either case’” (qtd. in Woo 180). Joseph S. M. Lau, a Chinese-born scholar in America, considers *The Woman Warrior* as just a “retelling of old tales that would not impress those having access to the originals” (qtd. in Wong, “Autobiography” 33). Jeffery Paul Chan accuses Kingston of mistranslating the term “ghost” and suggesting that the...
conviction that generations of Chinese Americans go nameless in America is misleading and ridiculous. He concludes that Kingston’s “experience is unique” if she does not know her father’s name as a child (86). Benjamin R. Tong regards The Woman Warrior as a “work of fiction passing for autobiography” (qtd. in Wong, “Autobiography” 30) and criticises Kingston “of being ‘purposeful’ in mistranslating Chinese terms to suit white tastes so that her book would sell better” (qtd. in Wong, “Necessity” 3).

19. Frank Chin argues that the distortions of Chinese myths and legends in The Woman Warrior are cynical and irresponsible because that gives a false picture of China and Chinese culture to those who are unfamiliar with it. He places the book in the tradition of Christianised confession and claims that Chinese-Americans should not adopt this form of confessional autobiographical writing because its origin is from the West. In a letter to Kingston (before the publication of The Woman Warrior), Chin expressed his reservation for the book’s classification as an autobiography. He wrote that “[t]he yellow autobiography is a white racist form, ... an insult to our writing and characterizes us as freaks, anthropological phenomena kept and pampered in a white zoo and not people whose world is complete and complex” (qtd. in Li, “Re-presenting” 189). In his essay “Come All Ye Asian American Writers,” he tags The Woman Warrior as the beginning of a “fake” tradition of Chinese-American writings, accuses Kingston (and Tan) of “boldly fak[ing] the best-known works from the most universally known body of Asian literature and lore in history,” and describes Kingston’s strategy as “simply a device for destroying history and literature” (3). He accuses Kingston as an assimilationist writer and writes a parody entitled “The Unmanly Warrior” about a French girl growing up in China in his article “The Most Popular Book in China,” to exemplify the problem of Kingston’s book in falsifying history and culture to please the white audience. In his view, Kingston, like the authors of Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan, confirms the white fantasy and stereotypes, suggesting that “everything sick and sickening about the white self-image is really Chinese” (“Most Popular” 28). In another essay “This is Not an Autobiography,” Chin argues that “the genre of autobiographical writing is essentially a Western, Christian, literary genre and as such has no place in the canon of Chinese American literature” (Madsen 73).

20. Kingston has detailed the comments on The Woman Warrior by some American reviewers in “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers” (97-98). For example, Margaret Manning
suggests that the book creates mythic forces which “have their own strange and brooding atmosphere inscrutably foreign, oriental” whereas Helen Davenport comments that Kingston becomes “as inscrutable as the East always seems to the West” when telling about “her dream of becoming a fabled ‘woman warrior’” in the book (qtd. in Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings,” 95-96). The term “inscrutable” is also used in the reviews of Barbara Burdick, Alan McMahan, and Joan Henriksen (qtd. in Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings” 96). Some reviewers express their delight in observing Chinese culture and materials in The Woman Warrior while some others are dejected because they find that the book deviates from their deep-rooted stereotyping image of what a Chinese woman should be.

21. Kingston has always thought of herself as an American writer. In a personal letter to David Leiwei Li, Kingston situates herself in the larger context of the American literature: “I am in the tradition of American writers who consciously set out to create the literature of a new culture. Mark Twain, Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, the Beats all developed ears for dialect, street language, and experimented with how to make written language sound like spoken language. The content of that language is the ever-changing mythology. I am writing American mythology in American language” (qtd. in Li “China Men” 496). In an interview with Fishkin, Kingston reflects her surprise at being considered as one of the Chinese writers who continue writing on “roots” because she never thought of herself as a Chinese writer: “I feel that I descended from Walt Whitman and Nathaniel Hawthorne and Virginia Woolf, and then a Chinese man told me how much Tripmaster Monkey reminded him of the Red Chamber Dream – so they showed me that I have my roots in Chinese writing. I think that’s good, that’s very nice, to have roots that spread all over the world” (Fishkin 790).

22. In the essay, Kingston categorically questions: “Critics do not ask whether Vonnegut is typical of German Americans; they do not ask whether J.P. Donleavy is typical of Irish Americans” (101). In an interview by Arturo Islas and Marilyn Yalom (1980), Kingston recalls that she has asked her sister a question: “‘On a range of 1 to 10, how odd do you think we were? How odd was our upbringing?’ My sister said it was 8. That means pretty odd, which is saying that we are not very representative” (21). She also implicitly rejects the notion of “representative-ness” by highlighting the atypical and abnormal experience of the protagonist in The Woman Warrior: “I asked my sister, just checking to see if hearing voices in motors and seeing cowboy movies
23. In an interview with Skandera-Trombley, Kingston explains that what she is doing "is riding that border between fiction and nonfiction": "You know, we have a land of fiction and there is a land of nonfiction; there's a border in the middle. Well, what I'm doing is making that border very wide, and I am taking into consideration I am writing about real people and these real people have powerful imaginations. They have minds that make up fictions constantly, and so if I was going to write a true biography or an autobiography I would have to take into consideration the stories that people tell. I tell the dreams that they have and then when I do that, that border becomes so wide that it contains fiction and nonfiction and both going toward truth" (35). Kingston is not the first Chinese-American writer who creates a new literary form in blending fact with fiction. In Crossings by Chuang Hua, published in 1968, the author "experiments with form and structure, reality and fantasy, myth and legend" and Mary E. Young reckons that Kingston follows Hua's literary tradition "in the use of myth and legend to create new literary forms" (123). Amy Ling has also identified Crossings as "a forerunner of Kingston's Woman Warrior" in "theme and style" ("Tradition" 154).

24. According to Wong, The Woman Warrior "aims at creating what James Olney calls 'a realm of order where events bear to one another a relationship of significance rather than chronology' ("Some Versions' 247)" ("Autobiography" 31). Huntley suggests that "Kingston's text functions as an autobiography in the sense that it is a personal history centered on reflections about her early life as she attempts to interpret and understand the cultural codes that have shaped her life" (77). Feng considers The Woman Warrior as a revision of "the tradition of the Bildungsroman" because "instead of concentrating on her individual story of development, the narrator situates her identity formation in relation to the stories of her female relatives" (113). Based on the study of Jo Malin, Helena Grice suggests that The Woman Warrior could be considered as a form of "women's intersubjective life-writing practice" in which one "seeks to resist the use of a monologic, authoritative narrative voice, in preference for a form of intersubjective conversational inscription" (MHK 36).

25. To an extent, charging Kingston's unauthentic representation of China based on its being an autobiography seems not appropriate. Given that an autobiographer has an absolute power and right over his/her text, arguing whether the details in The Woman Warrior are completely
factually true or entirely authentic seems fruitless. Autobiography, written by a person who has an omniscient vision of his/her own life, is impossible to challenge at the level of fact because it has to be respected as a unique experience of a single person. As readers, we are unable to tell whether the autobiographer tells lies or intentionally omits certain facts or distorts specific pictures to portray himself/herself in a more positive light. Hence, given the impossibility of making a final judgement on the authenticity of the book, the debate on whether *The Woman Warrior* is an autobiography and if the author deliberately makes use of Chinese materials to pander to a white audience is therefore out of the scope of my argument. On the other hand, debates on a book's generic definition could devalue the book's artistic value. As Li has claimed, "the generic definition can have the effect of depriving Asian American expression of its credibility as imaginative art and reducing it to some subliterary status, serving the role of social scientific data, an encompassing reflection of Asian American totality," over-focusing on the book's generic tag would depreciate its value as an artistic product (*Imagining* 52). While "any deliberate attempt to offer something specific to a particular person cannot be the purpose of a work of art," appreciating the novel as a literary and artistic creation would deem the question of representative-ness and authenticity irrelevant (Bettelheim 154). After all, the artistic freedom of the writer should be respected instead of beset her with ethnographic and historical labels.

26. Shari Benstock points out that the use of ghosts by Kingston places her "in lineage with Virginia Woolf" who also "associates memoir writing with the inclusion of material on 'invisible presences'." Woolf describes the importance of "invisible presences": "This influence, by which I mean the consciousness of other groups impinging upon ourselves; public opinion; what other people say and think; all those magnets which attract us this way to be like that, or repel us the other and make us different from that; has never been analysed in any of those Lives which I so much enjoy reading, or very superficially" (qtd. in Quinby 128). In an interview, Kingston has remarked that she thinks it is particularly important for minority people to recognise the "invisible forces" that are very powerful in themselves and she has a mission to invent a "new autobiographical form that truly tells the inner life of women": "I think that some of our truths are things that are not dealt with in standard autobiography. I think that dreams are very important to women — and important to everybody's psyche — and to have access to those
dreams is a great power. Also visions that we have about what we might do, also prayers — that’s another ‘silent, secret’ kind of thing. I think part of what we have to do is figure out a new kind of autobiography that can tell the truth about dreams and visions and prayers” (Fishkin 786). Therefore what Kingston attempts to do in The Woman Warrior is to capture this inner life of the girl, whose development is largely influenced by the stories and female figures around her.

27. Marwa Elnaggar suggests that the word “memoir comes from the Latin memoria, referring to memory and remembering” and therefore its “use in the subtitle suggests that the book deals more with memory and remembering than with the writing of a historical life” (178-179).

28. King-kok Cheung notes that Kingston’s “recourse to talk-story — which blurs the distinction between straight facts and pure fiction — accomplishes two key objectives: to reclaim a past and, more decisively, to envision a different future” (AS 121). Lauren Rusk describes the talk-story in The Woman Warrior “as artistic product in a work both collective and singular — a singular interpretation of that which has been collectively imagined” and “Kingston’s talk-stories bespeak a female collectivity that extends both horizontally, across geographical space, and vertically, through time” (84). Helena Grice conceives of talk-story in the book “as a form of feminist praxis” (MIHK 39).

29. Kingston once said in an interview, “Did you notice that the narrator of The Woman Warrior doesn’t have a name? Her name isn’t Maxine; that’s my name. I see this as a literary text that’s very separate from myself. Throughout, nobody calls her anything” (Skenazy 133). However, as I perceive that there are quite a number of autobiographical traces in The Woman Warrior and for the sake of convenience, I take the liberty of naming the narrator Maxine.

30. In The Woman Warrior, Maxine suggests, “But America has been full of machines and ghosts — Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and Dime Ghosts” (90). Anglo-Americans are “White Ghosts” and Negro Americans are “Black Ghosts” (91). The boy who delivers newspaper is the “Newsboy Ghost” (91), the one who delivers medicine is the “Delivery Ghost,” (152), and the druggists are “Druggist Ghosts” (154). The narrator and her siblings are always referred to by the immigrants as “Ho Chi Kuei” (Ho Chi Ghosts), a term that she tries to look up in books for translations but in vain (WW 182). Lots of other examples could be found in chapters “Shaman,” “At the
Western Palace,” and “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe.”

31. The No Name Aunt is condemned as a “ghost” because of her illegitimate pregnancy and her unwanted new-born baby is a “little ghost,” and “ghostlike” (WW 20-1). After the swordswoman, Fa Mu Lan, releases the women who are captured during the war, the women “wandered away like ghosts” because they are unwanted by their families (WW 47).

32. Pin-chia Feng contends that the Sitting Ghost symbolises “the unspoken and unspeakable patriarchal rule in Chinese culture” (123).

33. According to Lauren Rusk, “Kingston marks out the particular territory the book explores: the inner life, intangible and elusive” with the word “ghosts” of the subtitle (55). Schueller also notes that “the narrator lives in a double ghost world – that of the China of legends, rumor, history, ancestors she does not know and that of an American world full of its own ritual ghosts” (60). While it is obvious that the daughter-narrator faces racism and alienation from the “real ghosts” in the American society, I contend that the symbolic “ghosts” from her mother is more haunting and the narrator’s main target is to come to terms with the “ghost” from her mother and the mother’s stories.

34. By “inevitable,” I go along with the general belief that ghosts are the continuance of dead people but they exist and probably live in the same world as human beings in a different form.

35. The mother’s talk-story about her two dead children is in quotes: “They were three and two years old, a boy and a girl. They could talk already” (60). It seems to me that Kingston deliberately puts this in quotes and brackets to highlight that the story about her brother and sister in China indeed comes from her mother and she is not making it up.

36. Maxine reveals her anger in a long list of grievances: “You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it’s during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly” (166).

37. To Brave Orchid, the children are Americans whom she considers “lazy” (WW 110), having “wandering feet” (WW 105), having “no feelings and no memory” (WW 107). When her children open gifts in front of Moon Orchid, she accuses them of being “greedy” and
“impolite,” as they are so “untraditional” in Chinese (WW 111). She also regards her children “abnormal” because they do not like sweets (WW 112) and “antisocial and secretive” as they do not fancy talking to their aunt (WW 118). In letters to Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid describes her Chinese-American children as “absent-minded and messy,” “thick-headed,” odd, and labels the youngest children as the “inaccessible cliff” and “the raging billows” (WW 120-121).

38. In The Fifth Book of Peace, Kingston remarks on this cultural difference of collectivism and individuality of the two places: “All over Asia, people confidently say ‘we.’ Each naturally speaks for all the rest of the nation family. Americans say ‘I.’ I can speak for no one but myself, my opinion, my point of view” (56). Feng Lan has described the relation between “community” and “individual” in the Chinese culture: “In the traditional culture of China, ‘community’ is never an abstract concept, but a concrete social framework sustained by specific renlun or ‘human relations’ between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, older brother and younger brother, one friend and another. Such a formulation defines an individual as a relational being and positions her or him in reciprocal obligations to others in the family, the clan, and the society” (239).

39. Feng describes this silence as “a direct result of the demand of her ethnic community and the socialization of mainstream American ideology” (126). Silence is an important theme in The Woman Warrior and many critics have analysed the significance of silence in the text as well as other Asian American works. While silence is largely perceived as an imposed condition by racism and sexism, it could be a positive attribute. For example, in Articulate Silences: Hisaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa, King-kok Cheung has discussed silence as an agent of power to express political vision and critique.

40. In an interview with Arturo Islas and Marilyn Yalom (1980), when being asked if the little speechless girl in the book is a double for her in some way, Kingston replies, “She is, but then also she is based on somebody I know, and she is a recluse today in that Victorian-woman sense” (30). Sheng-mei notes that the “fragile girl symbolizes all what is wrong with the narrator herself in accordance with the Orientalist stereotype: a soft and passive body, voiceless and will-less” and the “narrator has irrevocably internalized the Orientalist assumptions and therefore reacts violently toward a girl who, like a mirror, reflects what she perceives to be her own image” (113).
41. Huntley suggests that by engaging in her own storytelling, Kingston “embraces and internalises the stories of her Chinese heritage, combining them with her own experiences as an American child, creating a fresh approach to describing the American experience” (94). Pin-chia Feng says the narrator's talking story not only helps her to cope with her confusion, but also “provides a kind of ‘talking cure’ for the narrator to reveal the racial oppression of Chinese immigrants in America and the gender oppression of a Chinese American girl” (112). I interpret Feng's use of the term “talking cure” to mean that the narrator is cured after enacting in her own storytelling as she metaphorically fights against the racial and gender oppressions with her voice in the book. I would like to point out that “talking cure” is a central element in my discussion of Amy Tan's novels in chapter 5 but my use of the term is different from Feng's as I focus and emphasise on the “curing” and psychotherapeutic impacts of both the mothers and daughters after the actual “talking” (not a metaphorical talking) at a specific moment when both parties are ready for the outpouring of emotions through talking and listening and the chapter would see an expansion of the term “talking cure.”

42. In discussing The Woman Warrior, many critics go from the beginning to end according to the book’s order. For example, Marjorie Lightfoot suggests that the specific sequence of the book’s content reflects the psychological development of the writer into an artist (59-63). Exceptions include Feng and Gao, but both without explanations of why they have rearranged their order of discussing. My order of discussion is similar to Gao's but while Gao focuses on how Kingston draws on Chinese traditions for new meanings “to support her life” and how she builds up a central image of woman warrior from the women in her mother's stories (10), my approach is to trace the women's roles in shaping the narrator's inner consciousness and development into an artist. My idea of considering the tale of Fa Mu Lan as a trailblazing one partly goes in line with Gao's idea in viewing this tale as a “leading metaphor” of the book (24). But some critics, like McHenry, pick the “No Name Woman” episode as more significant: “the 'No Name Woman’ episode becomes a map for the overall patterning of The Woman Warrior” (201).

43. For details on how the book is reviewed with an Orientalist mode, see Kingston's “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers.”

44. It is worth noting it is in “White Tigers” that Kingston uses the term “talking-story/talk-story” for the first time.
45. E. D. Huntley suggests that it is written in the fifth-century (Kingston 98).

46. Kingston says in “Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers” that “White Tigers’ is not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody,” showing that she intends to make an American story with Chinese sources (97).

47. For example, Helena Grice notes that Fa Mu Lan could be roughly translated as “wood orchid” (Negotiating 55). Sau-ling Cynthia Wong translates it as “Sylvan Orchid” (“Handling” 32).

48. Kingston’s mother’s forename is Ying Lan but there is no mention of whether there was an aunt called Moon Orchid. Yet the name could be translated into Chinese as “Yu Lan.”

49. Katherine Lee has elaborated on the inability to fit the “many words” of the narrator on her skin: “Although she draws a connection between herself and Fa Mu Lan, she also makes an important distinction: by claiming that she has ‘so many words,’ Maxine describes not just the power of the words that she wields but the power that words wield over her. Their overabundance and the inclusion of racist epithets leads the reader to wonder if words do not fit on her ‘skin’ because she is caught in so many contradictory discourses that they coexist without resolution” (193).

50. Gao recognises the significance of Fa Mu Lan as it “becomes the master of Kingston’s destiny by becoming the leading metaphor which Kingston uses thematically to focus her view of other woman models in her life and technically to set the key for her song, to frame her stories and to develop and deepen her theme” (24).

51. The aunt’s marriage is arranged whereas the swordswoman marries a childhood mate she loves; a proxy (a rooster) represents the aunt’s husband whereas it represents the swordswoman in the fantasy; both women give silent births but the aunt’s baby is met with misery whereas the swordswoman’s is welcomed with joy; the aunt separates from her husband for a long time, possibly with the impossibility of reunion whereas the swordswoman meets her husband while preparing for war, fights together, and reunites with him at the end; the aunt is a wife and slave in the sense that she is enslaved by the misogynistic culture whereas the swordswoman is a woman warrior.

52. Yuan Shu has envisioned the connection between the woman warrior and no name aunt in a different light: she suggests that Kingston “constructs the woman warrior as an antithesis to ‘the no-name woman’ and, in the process, pits the more successful woman against the less fortunate
one in precisely the same patriarchal terms against which she has tried to rebel" (201-202). She concludes that in pairing the women “in terms of success and failure” – “the ‘no-name woman’ as a failure and the woman warrior as a success in patriarchal terms” – Kingston “cannot effect any critique of Chinese patriarchal values but reproduces their logic in rewriting the female subject” (213). While I do not intend to offer a feminist reading of the text, I would like to suggest that in rewriting no name aunt’s story in a positive light and illustrating the mismatch of the woman warrior fantasy in the realistic American life, Kingston, in my opinion, has given her critique of patriarchal values and shown that these values are not suitable for her American life.

53. Huntley suggests that in retellings, Kingston refuses “to privilege one telling over another” (79). However, I do believe that in the retelling of No Name Aunt’s tale, Kingston intends to take the second hypothesis and view her aunt as a role model who presents critique of the traditionalism of Chinese society because it is only in the second hypothesis that the narrator could link to this aunt: “Unless I see her life branching into mine, she gives me no ancestral help” (IVIV 16).

54. Kingston acknowledges the importance of writing down the story of no name aunt in an interview, “I now realize that what I did by writing down her story and giving it my concern and care and finding the words for it, is I have saved her. I realize now that this is the power of art. I gave her a life, I gave her history, I gave her immortality, I gave her meaning” (Skenazy 119).

55. Elizabeth A. McHenry has described the relationship between the mother and daughter’s stories: “Alternating between stories told by the mother and those told by the daughter, between ‘true’ stories and stories which are invented or imagined, Kingston creates in The Woman Warrior a pattern by which to begin to understand her own identity in the context of but separate from her family and specifically, her mother” (201). Amy Ling notes that “the daughter’s journey for her own voice is a struggle in which the ‘mother-tongue’ must be both refused and embraced, both preserved and modified, both acknowledged and gone beyond” (“Dialogic Dilemma” 178). Paul Outka has pointed out that “[t]his dialogic relationship between mother and daughter, which mixes independence and bond to produce the daughter’s selfhood, is itself a generic characteristic of feminist autobiography” (461).

56. Brave Orchid encourages Moon Orchid to claim back her husband by identifying her as the rightful Empress of the East: “‘A long time ago,’ began Brave Orchid, ‘the emperors had four wives, one at each point of the compass, and they lived in four palaces. The Empress of the
West would connive for power, but the Empress of the East was good and kind and full of light.

You are the Empress of the East, and the Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth’s Emperor in the Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor. You must break the strong spell she has cast on him that has lost him the East” (WW 130). However, Brave Orchid has not recognised that the different cultural context should be taken into account – in America, the story of claiming back a husband as the right of an Empress of the East does not make sense as no person would have four wives there.

57. The narrator reveals that she gets only bare-fact details from her sister. It further undermines the story’s credibility as her sister actually does not witness it, but only gets it from the recollection of their brother – the one who drives the aunt to Los Angeles – who has, likewise, forgotten many of the details.

58. The allusion to Virginia Woolf is noted by a number of critics such as Ling, Schueller, Rusk.

59. Moon Orchid listens to Brave Orchid’s advice and instructions as if her sister is “only talking-story,” indicating a certain unrealistic aspect of Brave Orchid’s advice (WW 120).

60. Kingston’s mother’s surname is Chew and so her full name is Chew Ying Lan as the Chinese naming structure puts the surname first, followed by other names. In addition, I also disagree with Grice’s comment that “Brave Orchid” is an impossible name because in Chinese naming, people are in fact free to choose the combinations of the two words in the forename(s) and choosing words with opposite meanings in making up a forename are acceptable. In fact, the word “Ying” is a traditional name for girls in China; if the word “Ying” is used in a different phrase, the meaning could be entirely different. For example, the phrase “ying guo” means “England” whereas the phrase “ying wai” means “handsome” in Chinese. I believe Kingston deliberately picks the meaning of “Ying” from the phrase “ying yung” so that the denotation of “bravery” could be taken for the mother. While I agree with Grice in the male/female, yin/yang clash in the name “Brave Orchid” and the significations of those names to the characters, I have to clarify that this name is not impossible in Chinese.

61. The historical facts of Ts’ai Yen are mainly from the books of Gao and Huntley (Maxine Hong Kingston: A Critical Companion).

62. The Chinese name of the poem is Hujia shibapai. There are a few English translated names:
Gao translates it as “Song of the Barbarian Reed-Whistle in Eighteen Stanzas;” Huntley translates it as “Eighteen Songs from a Barbarian Reed Flute;” whereas Grice translates it as “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” which is also the one Kingston uses at the end of the book.

63. Excerpts from the poem demonstrating this are: “Like tigers and snakes, these barbarians are mostly fierce;/ Wearing armor and drawing bows, they are contemptuous/ ... / Alien customs and different mind-sets, I find it difficult to live with;/ Not sharing the same desires, with whom can I talk?” (qtd. in Gao 44).

64. The following lines illustrate the poet’s paradoxical feeling: “I am overjoyed with returning home, thanks to having/ encountered a sage ruler,/ Meanwhile I am grieved at the separation from my sons,/ with no hope of ever a reunion” (qtd. in Gao 44).

65. Yan Gao parallels the ending of the original poem to the ending of Kingston’s book. The ending of the original poem is as follows: “Ht jia originates from the barbarians;/ Though an instrument of the barbarian, it produces the same musical tones./ The eighteen-stanza song now reaches its end, / But the sound lingers, and the longing remains./ This instrument is such a wonder of creation,/ It matches the heart’s tone of joy and sorrow as the human mood changes” (qtd. in Gao 46-7).

66. Antje Lindenmeyer interprets Kingston’s retelling of Ts’ai Yen’s story as her alignment “with her origins, at the same time reinforcing the fact of her exile, positioning her identity as ‘forever wandering’ between the worlds” (235). To a certain extent, I disagree with her analysis in the respect that I see Kingston’s retelling as a positive note rather than a negative lamentation of the author/narrator.

67. Sidonie Smith also notes that the story of Ts’ai Yen is “the tale of Brave Orchid, who finds herself hostage in the barbarian land of America where even her children, born like Ts’ai Yen’s among the aliens, cannot ‘speak’ her native language, cannot understand her” (80-81). It is also “the tale” of “Kingston herself, whose sense of alienation is doubly complicated, since, as a product of two cultures, she remains outside the circle of both” (S. Smith 81). Other critics interpret the tale of Ts’ai Yen as a point of resolution by either linking the poetess to Brave Orchid or Kingston/Maxine. Schueller links Ts’ai Yen to Brave Orchid: “captive in a strange land, who fights when needed, and whose children do not speak her language,” while being
“both an indomitable matriarch, protector of the family, and a captive in a strange land, straining to be heard” (57). She also regards this ending tale as “a tale of intercultural understanding” in which the voices of the mother and daughter “are inextricably and dialogically linked, even if they are different” (57). Goldman describes Ts’ai Yen’s “position as exile among barbarians is analogous to Kingston’s position as Chinese American” because “Kingston, like Ts’ai Yen, is dislocated and must struggle to make sense of contradictory discourses if she is to comprehend her identity”: “The high note captured in the poet’s voice can be likened to the stories Kingston narrates – stories begun by her Chinese mother and concluded by the American daughter” (231).

68. The image of weaver could be related to the image of “knot-maker” which Kingston uses to describe the twisting of design of the narrator’s storytelling (JWV 148). As Marwa Elnaggar observes, like knot-makers who “create complicated things out of a simple piece of string,” “Kingston creates multi-layered tales, complete with motives, emotions, and symbolism out of the bare facts of a story” (189).

69. Amy Ling interprets this as reflecting that “she is still working at her self-definition” (Between Worlds 122).

70. Lindenmeyer describes this condition of mediation as an inescapable situation: “As a self defined by her position in between China and America, Kingston’s narrator remains always fragmented and always shaped by contradictory cultures, both resisting and using Chinese and American stories, heroes, and traditions. Retaining the position in the middle, wandering and mediating between the imaginary China and concrete America, she can at the same time reject and reshape the myths that formed her childhood” (235).

71. Gao describes the mother, Brave Orchid, as being able to “only transport – not translate – her stories into a different context” (40).
Chapter 3
Mythic/Creative Rewriting of American History: Claiming America through “Talk-stories” in Kingston’s *China Men*

They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets. ‘I want home,’ Bak Goong yelled, pressed against the soil, and smelling the earth. ‘I want my home,’ the men yelled together. ‘I want home. Home. Home. Home.’ Talked out, they buried their words, planted them. ‘Like cats covering shit,’ they laughed.

‘That wasn’t a custom,’ said Bak Goong. ‘We made it up. We can make up customs because we’re the founding ancestors of this place.’

-- *China Men* (118)

We’re not outsiders, we belong here, this is our country, this is our history, and we are a part of America. We are a part of American history. If it weren’t for us, America would be a different place.

-- Maxine Hong Kingston (Islas, Yalom 25)

This chapter explores how “talk-story” functions to reconstruct Maxine Hong Kingston’s male forebears’ stories in the Gold Mountain in her second book, *China Men*. As in *The Woman Warrior*, retelling of stories is a prominent feature in this second memoir and its narrative strategy follows the talk-story culture that Kingston is nurtured in. In *China Men*, stories of the male ancestors of the Kingston family, with the fabrications of Chinese traditional myths and legends alongside the daughter-narrator’s narration, are presented in imaginary flashbacks. Kingston revisits traditional myths/legends and the history of her male ancestors and renders new significance and interpretations of them in the American context. The recreation, revision, and retelling of stories of the father and grandfathers in *China Men* is a dominant technique Kingston employs to demonstrate the difficulties and struggles of her male ancestors and relatives in America and the significant contribution they have made in the establishment of the nation, and thus in turn, the book aims to “claim America” in a literal sense by situating her family in the historical context of American history. By detailedly portraying and recapturing the efforts made by her patriarchal forebears and relatives in the sugar cane plantations, the building of the transcontinental railroad in the Sierra Nevada,
the running of domestic laundry services, and the Vietnam war, Kingston triumphantly confronts readers and in particular, the majority white Americans who consider citizens of Chinese descent as the permanent historical "Other," with her claims that Chinese people in America are in fact "part of America." 2.

The Book: *China Men* (1980)

After the remarkable success of *The Woman Warrior*, a memoir sketching the growth and personal wrestling for a voice of a Chinese-American girl, whose experience mirrors her own, and improvising on stories of her mother, female relatives, and legendary and historical female figures, *China Men* pays tribute to Kingston’s male ancestors who are the early Chinese immigrants in America. While *The Woman Warrior* highlights a Chinese-American girl’s struggle in breaking silence and finding a voice amid the Chinese and American cultures, *China Men* impressively illustrates the endeavours of the early Chinese immigrants in America, the various obstacles they have surmounted in the Gold Mountain, the mental battle they have engaged in while transiting from one country to another, both geographically and culturally, and the journey the Chinese men have gone through as sojourners, labourers, and finally legal citizens of America. In short, in contrast with the domestic emphasis of *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* is a saga of Kingston’s family history in America and is presented as an intertwining of fantasy, myth, stories, history, and memories, as Kingston imaginatively rewrites part of the American history – the official record that obliterates the efforts of the Chinese men in the building of America.

Like its predecessor albeit to a lesser extent, Kingston’s second memoir was welcomed and praised by critics and readers for its enthralling narrative of the
adventures and survival of the early Chinese male immigrants in America. It is a captivating account which fuses traditional Chinese myths, parable, historical fact, and fantasy to illustrate the remarkable and courageous path that Kingston’s male ancestors and relatives have trodden as gold miners, sugar cane worker, railroad builder, laundry worker, and Vietnam war veteran in America. Possibly due to the book’s subject matter in focusing on men’s stories instead of women’s, *China Men* seems to receive relatively less popular critical attention than *The Woman Warrior* and while it triggers off debates on its mixed generic status and (mis)representation of Chinese experience, it appears to be less intense. In fact, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* could be considered as parts of a whole because they are originally designed to be one book and the last chapter of *China Men* was actually written before Kingston had started writing *The Woman Warrior*. In an interview with Kingston, Paula Rabinowitz has remarked that she was struck by the way Kingston “played with intertextuality in the two books, where an insignificant reference in one of the books will be elaborated to a great extent in the other one” (70). Kingston has reflected that she originally intended to write one huge book that embraced an interlocking story and history of both Chinese men and women in America but the idea was later dismissed as Kingston contended that the men’s stories were interfering and “weakening the feminist point of view” of *The Woman Warrior* (Rabinowitz 68). Hence, the two enchanting memoirs of Kingston were published on different dates, with four years apart, and both remarkably depict themes of exile, suffering, abandonment and endurance, and illustrate the social, psychological, and cultural problems faced by the immigrant parents and their American-born children. However, the central focuses of the two books differ: whilst *The Woman Warrior* concentrates on women’s secrets and private stories
and the journey of a Chinese-American girl's pursuit of a voice and establishment of a concrete identity amid two sharply different cultures; *China Men* extends from a private and familial sphere into a public one and imaginatively explores the turmoil suffered by the Chinese men in America, uncovers the history of early immigrants, and reclaims metaphorically their lives and places in the "Gold Mountain," a fantastic mythologised dream place and a land of "golden" opportunity for many Chinese people who ventured to make a fortune in the foreign land.

Inheriting the tradition of talk-story from her mother and testifying to its need at the present, Kingston gives voice to her forgotten ancestors, who are obliterated from the family history or official record — in *The Woman Warrior*, stories of her mother, aunts, and herself are relived whereas *China Men* revisits the unknown stories of her father, grandfathers, uncles, and brother and credits their efforts in the building of America. Both books exemplify the talk-story narrative strategy and share similar motifs, images, and characters. The daughter-narrator's voice is perpetuated in both books but her degree of participation is different: whilst the narrator's voice in *The Woman Warrior* is dominating and rather subjective in the retelling of stories and narration, the one in *China Men* is less involved and intrusive. In *China Men*, the narrator's voice is evident at the openings of each of the six principal men's stories but gradually fades away as the narration continues.

Though the two books could be considered as one huge account as they encompass stories of both Chinese male and female immigrants and paint an embracing picture of their history when they are considered intertextually, there is a shift in the perception and meaning of the hyphenated cultural identity from *The
"Woman Warrior" to "China Men." As mentioned in chapter 2, the hyphenated term "Chinese-American" in *The Woman Warrior* suggests an equal emphasis of both sides and that a third space of cultural hybridity is built up as the daughter-narrator negotiates and mediates between the two conflicting cultures. In *China Men*, there is a noticeable terminal shift from "Chinese-American" to "Chinese American" where the hyphen of the term is suggestively removed. The erasure of the hyphen is consistent with Kingston's aim to "claim America" and create an American sensibility with this memoir. Debra Shostak has mentioned in her essay "Maxine Hong Kingston's Fake Books" that *The Woman Warrior* "seems both to question and celebrate the hyphen" whereas in *China Men*, "she demonstrates the historical shift from one singular identity (the Chinese father in the first main chapter) to another singular identity (the American brother in the final main chapter)" (57).

My idea of exploring the terminal shift from "Chinese-American" to "Chinese American" is inspired by Shostak's idea of the shifting in *China Men* and I intend to expand her remark by analysing the talk-story method Kingston employs in her second book. While this chapter does not offer a stunningly new argument on *China Men*, it forms an essential part of my overall argument in suggesting that Kingston remolds the oral tradition in China/her home as a form of literary art. In the following part of this chapter, I will examine the terminal shift and demonstrate how Kingston "claims" America through exploring the talk-story narrative strategy in *China Men*.

"Talk-stories": mythic/creative rewriting of American history

*China Men* imaginatively recaptures the history of early Chinese male immigrants in America and honours the men – father, grandfathers, uncles, and
brothers — in Kingston’s family who are adventurous and diligent pioneers. The
book, which was awarded the National Book Critics Circle Award and the
American Book Award, celebrates the unwavering efforts and courage of the male
ancestors who set off for the Gold Mountain with the hope of financially improving
their families in China, but were unfortunately disillusioned to find out that they
encounter humiliation, discrimination, injustice, and exclusion instead. Through
the portrayal of the men’s heroic stories, Kingston subverts the negative stereotypes
of Chinese men that are prevalently presented in the media, implicitly requests an
acknowledgement of her male ancestors’ contribution in the construction of
America and thus commits her demand to literally “claim America.” Like The
Woman Warrior, China Men is structured around recollected past stories and
exhibits a talk-story narrative strategy that transforms myths to appropriate the
present demand of both the narrator and audiences. By tracing the odyssey of the
generations of men who head off for a new life in America in a talk-story form that
clips together separate men’s stories in China, Hawai’i, California, and New York,
Kingston rewrites history and creates an American myth that paints the picture of
Linda Ching Sledge analyses the text in relation to oral performance in China and
claims that the book reveals forms “common to all oral cultures: formulaic diction;
a fixed ‘grammar’ of repetitive themes, or topoi; a spectrum of stock characters;
ceremonial and heroic appropriation of history; symmetrical structures, ... copia
and repetition” (147). Sledge then argues that the “retold legends” in “the twelve
short parables or ‘pure’ talk-story sections” are “far more important” than the
biographical sketches in the book as those tales “delineate China Men’s essentially
oral form and provide the scaffolding on which the eclectic, open-ended, true-to-
life sections fit” (147). While I agree that the retold legends in the separate short sections are important in framing the entire narrative and that those tales evidently exemplify the oral elements in the book, I disagree that they occupy a far more important role in the text as only by putting the retold legends and the biographical sketches of the Chinese men side by side can Kingston’s talk-story work to reconstruct her family history as part of American history. Instead of discussing all retold tales in the book, I focus only on those that are related to Kingston’s project in “claiming” America as I attempt to connect those tales to the reconstruction of the men’s stories.

Highly influenced and attached to William Carlos Williams’s *In the American Grain* in which Williams manifests American history mythically, Kingston starts writing her American myth which includes Chinese immigrants in *China Men* from 1850, roughly around the period where Williams has left off. In an interview with Kay Bonetti (1986), Kingston describes *In the American Grain* as one of the two most influential books on *China Men*: “One of them is *In the American Grain* because he tells the story of America as myth. ... and I thought that that was the truest book of American history I had ever read. And he did it mythically, and I wanted to do American history in that same way, especially for *China Men*, and I was so lucky because he ended at the Civil War and I pick up at the Civil War when the Chinese Americans came, and I showed how the Chinese made the bands of steel, which is a railroad, and they banded the country back together again” (39). Accepting Williams’s view of mythic creative writing as the appropriate way to approach and record American history, Kingston continues his myth and reconstructs part of American history by “foregrounding the personal stories of her male ancestors who helped to complete the transcontinental railroad and to clear
mountainsides for Hawai’ian sugar cane plantations” (Huntley, Kingston 118). She is particularly fascinated with the final image in Williams’s book where President Abraham Lincoln is portrayed as a woman who is tending the soldiers and acts like the mother of the country. The emasculation of Tang Ao in the opening vignette of China Men, which serves as a prologue to the entire text, remarkably shows the influence of the gender-crossing image of Williams’s work. This brief literary sketch, “On Discovery,” sets off Kingston’s journey in claiming America and opening up the stories of Chinese men in America which have been submerged beneath the official historical record and mainstream culture.

The legend of Tang Ao in “On Discovery” signifies the metaphorical emasculation of Chinese men after arriving in America and sets the tone for the entire book in which the Chinese male immigrants experience the silenced oppression that they have imposed upon their female counterparts in patriarchal China. This legend originates from the tale in Flowers in the Mirror by Li Ju-Chen, a classic Chinese novel written in the nineteenth-century. In the original myth, two men – Lin Zhiyang, a merchant, and his brother-in-law, Tang Ao – set out on a journey and arrive upon a land known as the Country of Women where Lin is captured and forced into the role of concubine and suffers from the humiliation. By reversing the gender roles of men and women in the Country of Women, Li illustrates and in turn criticises the cruel and inhumane treatment of Chinese women in the ancient patriarchal culture.

In Kingston’s revised version in China Men, it is Tang Ao, the scholar, who endures the pain inflicted on him for the sake of feminine beauty: feet bound, ears pierced, hair and eyebrows plucked, face painted red when he enters accidentally upon the Land of Women on his travel to the Gold Mountain. He is then forced to
silence and enhanced with femininity: he undergoes the beautification ordeals that Chinese women have had to suffer for centuries, and made to serve as a servant to the queen and her court. On the Land of Women, Tang Ao’s “armour and boots,” the conventional symbols of masculine empowerment, are taken off by the women (CM 9). Just as Fa Mu Lan in The Woman Warrior disguises herself in men’s clothes and attempts to enter the male territory, Tang Ao also experiences a reversal of gender roles by crossing over to the female landscapes albeit unwillingly: “Tang Ao is also involved in a gender crossover, but one representing a ‘demotion’ in gender hierarchies and one forced on him rather than one willingly adopted: no one, it seem, wants to fill the ‘feminine’ gender role” (Goellnicht 230). Kingston notes at the end of her revised legend that some scholars say that the mythical Land of Women discovered by Tang Ao is “North America” (CM 10). In this sense, Kingston intentionally alters this myth to allude to her own father, a scholar in China, by describing Tang Ao, instead of Merchant Lin as in the original version, as the victim of the conventional patriarchal Chinese culture; and highlights the emasculation of Chinese male immigrants in America by relocating the site to North America. In Flowers in the Mirror, Tang Ao embarks upon a voyage to visit foreign countries due to disappointment in his academic and political careers; whereas in China Men, the father looks for adventures in the Gold Mountain in order to escape from the depressing teaching experience in China (Gao 60).

It is obvious that Kingston presents her critique of the subjugation and humiliation of Chinese women in ancient China in her reconstruction of the story, but more importantly, she manifests the disempowerment of masculinity Chinese men experience after they move to America as they undergo a process of feminisation. The feminised Tang Ao “wept with pain” and “felt embarrassed” —
an effective indication of the pain, humiliation, and suffering that Chinese men endure when they venture to America (CM 10). The serving-maid image of Tang Ao also reminds us of the stereotypical images of Chinese men as "laundrymen and houseboys" in America (Feng 145). This revised myth foreshadows one key focus of China Men: the deprivation of voices and enforced silence; and hence the denial of rights of Chinese men to speak their minds in America. As King-Kok Cheung has noted in Articulate Silences, "Femininity - a negative quality in the scheme of patriarchal binary oppositions - is imposed on the racial 'other' in China Men" (101) 16. By opening the book with this myth of gender reversal, Kingston also hints that she, as a woman, is trying to enter the Land of Man and gives her narrator, Maxine, the ability to tell men's stories and the capability to exhibit empathy with the Chinese male immigrants, the Gold Mountain Sojourners. She has pointed out one prominent difference between The Woman Warrior and China Men which lies in the narrative point of view: "I think that China Men is a story of a mature, grown person who is able to look at the opposite sex and to know them for themselves. At the beginning of China Men when I tell the myth about the man who goes to the Land of Women ... I become the kind of woman that loves men, and I can tell their story without judging them, or showing just their relation to myself" (Bonetti 36). Through revising an old Chinese legend in "On Discovery," Kingston thus rewrites the Chinese folktale into a new Chinese American form, lays claims on the cultural heritage of Chinese talk-story tradition by rebuilding them in an American context, and foreshadows her mission to claim America through uncovering the stories of Chinese men from their emasculation and deprivation of voices and reviving them from their obliteration in official historical records in America 17. Bearing in mind the importance of this opening revised legend of Tang Ao, I am going to examine
Kingston's metaphorical claiming of America through reconstructing manhood and voice from the emasculation of the Chinese men, which is shown in the self-imposed and enforced silence, and sexual deprivation of Chinese men, destabilising the conventional concepts of "fact," "history," and "centre," and thus adding a new talk-story narrative voice in the American context.

From Baba's silence to talk-stories

While *The Woman Warrior* could be described as more personal as the narrator struggles for her individual voice amid conflicting cultures; *China Men* is both personal and communal in the sense that the author not only gives the voices back to her male forebears in her writing, but also rewrites the history for her family and the Chinese American community: "the fact of alienation and an effort at reclamation ... [take] place on two levels, the individual and the social" (Linton, "What Stories" 37). As Maxine story-talks about her male ancestors in *China Men*, she fills in the silent-gaps that her father, Baba, leaves; and reconstructs the heroic stories of her ancestors and their contributions in the building of America.

In *China Men*, the father's silence prompts the daughter-narrator, Maxine, to retell his stories with her imagination as she is left with a missing space and lack of information for improvisation. Unlike the mother whose stories dominate the landscape of the narrator in *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine's father, Baba, is depicted as a silent subject in *China Men*: "You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China" (*CM* 18). The inaccessibility of, and alienation from, the father is hinted at in "On fathers" in which the narrator and her siblings mistake a man, whom they think looks similar to Baba, for their father. Maxine speculates that Baba does not talk-story because he only wants to focus on
the present moment, “never slipping into the past or sliding into the future” (CM 18). Appearing to have no past memory, the father “refuses to share China with his children” and “erases China from the family’s collective memory” (Huntley, Kingston 141). Young Maxine thinks of Baba’s silence as a punishment to her and her siblings: “Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking. You rendered us invisible, gone” (CM 17).

Enduring the bitter humiliation in order to make a living in America, Baba only vents his emotions and pain via “wordless male screams” in dreams (CM 17). As Goellnicht remarks, “This is not a positive silence but the silence of resignation that signals withdrawal and humiliation, the inability to articulate his own subject position so that he is doomed to the one – that of inscrutable, passive ‘chinaman’ – created for him by the dominant society” (237). His refusal to talk jeopardizes the relation between his daughter and himself; Maxine invents negative possibilities out of the father’s silence: “We invented the terrible things you were thinking: That your mother had done you some unspeakable wrong, and so you left China for ever. That you hate daughters. That you hate China” (CM 17). The father deliberately withholds himself and his stories from the daughter and denies her any knowledge of his history and emotions despite the daughter’s eagerness to uncover her ancestral past.

The estrangement between the father and daughter is significantly resolved when Maxine finds a means of reconciliation with the father by seeking him out and inviting him to participate in her talk-stories and interact with her: “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” (CM 18). With this pronounced statement, Kingston acknowledges the
inaccessibility and unknowability of the father's stories but recognises at the same time, the rendering of room and freedom for her to reinvent the father's stories through her talk-story perspective. As talk-stories provide empowerment to the Chinese women, Kingston, inheriting this tradition from her mother, attempts to shuttle "the monological voice of dominant white history" in America by inviting the silent father to participate in storytelling. Assuming that no one story is correct, she challenges the father to "respond to the anger and love of a daughter". By imaginatively repainting the landscapes of the remote father and retelling his stories, Kingston practically rebuilds the father's voice and identity in the American context, grants him "a linguistically constituted identity in this text", and successfully "translates Baba's terrifying dreamscape of nightmares, swearing, and nightly screams into an intelligible story".

In "The father from China," Baba's life as a scholar-teacher in China and his subsequent disillusioned life after relocating to America are outlined. The intellectual power of the father is observed when he is an infant as Ah Po, Baba's mother, points out his difference to other brothers: "This kind of hand was made for holding pens. This is the boy we'll prepare for the Imperial Examinations". At the one-month birthday party of the father, Ah Po gives him "the Four Valuable Things: ink, inkslab, paper, and brush" and after the examination, he becomes a teacher in the village. Disappointed with the career as a scholar in China and fascinated with the men's stories about the Gold Mountain Heroes, Baba sets out for an adventurous journey to America, leaving his family behind in China. The disappointment of the American life is foreshadowed in the illegal version of the entry of the father: he is trapped in the box as he is being smuggled into the
country. Inside the box, he “began to lose his bearings” and “felt caught” as he imagines the “various futures,” fears, and voices outside (CM 51). As the illegal father sails to America, he begins to lose himself as he is trapped in the “palanquin,” a symbolic image of the entrapment, loss of identity, and emasculation of the father (CM 51). In the legal version of the father’s entry, Kingston makes clear that the high hopes of the father are bound to sink in America. As the father is imprisoned in Angel Island while waiting his turn for entry, he discovers that some people, the earlier adventurers, have written poems and statements on the walls to vent their frustrations. The disillusionment of these earlier silenced Chinese immigrants are evident as the father reads these statements such as “‘This island is not angelic.’ ‘It’s not true about the gold’” (CM 57). The legal father also senses the need to change and adapt as he enters the new environment: when he first discovers that the women are kept a floor above him in the prison, he is horrified and interprets it as a “diabolical, inauspicious beginning – to be trodden over by women,” the thinking of which he immediately dismisses and decides that “for a start in the new country, he would rid himself of Chinese superstitions; this curse would not count” (CM 57). The “humiliation” by the white demons signifies again the emasculation and subjugation the Chinese men are going to suffer in the new environment (CM 57).

Baba, who changes his name to Edison in America, seems to enjoy a mesmerising life free of his past and in the wonders and fantasy of New York as an “all the same” American (CM 65); but the juxtaposition of the father’s life in the Big Apple with the tale “The ghostmate” implies Kingston’s intention to highlight the loss of identity for Baba and his friends after the relocation. In “The ghostmate,” a young man enjoys a paradisal life with a beautiful woman he meets
as he frees himself from his family responsibilities. While indulging leisurely in the tender care of the beautiful woman in her luxurious home and being fed “like an aristocrat” (CM 78), the young man starts to forget about his past life, his unromantic wife, and is reduced to “a zoo animal, a pet” for the beautiful widow (CM 79). He gradually loses himself and though he still remembers his old life, it becomes “like a bedtime story heard as a child” (CM 80) and his family becomes like “black and white portraits” (CM 81). As the young man returns to “reality,” he discovers that the beautiful woman is just an illusory ghost and as he returns to his old life with his family, the tale ends with the conclusion that “Fancy lovers never last” (CM 83). Likewise, the life of Baba in New York emerges as an illusion underneath its superficial carefree and fantastic nature with Baba wearing expensive suits while walking along Fifth Avenue and dancing with blondes with his friends during weekends. In reality, Baba leads a difficult life taking care of chores such as washing dishes and cooking, and working in the laundry shop till late at night. As he is forced back to reality and “reconnected with his past” after his wife settles in America (Simmons 115), Baba’s independent and fantasy life ends with the wife bringing back the traditions of their old life in China to America, such as the tradition of celebrating holidays, and reminding him of the temporality of this kind of life: while marvelling at the wonders of New York, the wife asks Baba when they are going back to China. The illusion of the American life is further highlighted when Baba is cheated out of his share of the laundry shop by his other three friends, who appear to be faithful companions to Baba in America, and is forced to relocate to California with his wife, echoing the ending of the tale of “The ghostmate” that fantasy does not last.

In “The American father,” Kingston further elaborates the father’s depression
and frustration in America and how Maxine sets out to find and learn about Baba, whose silence makes the daughter think that “males feel no pain” (*CM* 245) and her father has “lost his feelings” (*CM* 242). The loss of self of Baba could also be seen in the father’s constant changing of his name in order to avoid getting a record for being arrested: “‘I got away with aliases,’ he said, ‘because the white demons can’t tell one Chinese name from another or one face from another’” (*CM* 236). The adult Maxine recalls how she attempts to seek her father in his secret places, one of those being the gambling house, where Baba works as a manager. Though the nature of this position is not related to his previous status as a scholar and teacher, he manages to link them together: “You had to be a poet to win, finding lucky words from last night’s games” (*CM* 234). After losing his job in the gambling house, the father becomes increasingly silent and sensitive: “He became a disheartened man. He was always home. He sat in his chair and stared, or he sat on the floor and stared. ... He suddenly turned angry and quiet” (*CM* 241). Maxine’s mother, Mama, whom we have met in *The Woman Warrior* as Brave Orchid, becomes irritated and attempts to pull her husband out of the depression. Her remark “[w]hat’s the use of a poet and a scholar on the Gold Mountain” does not help, but highlights the most frustrating and poignant feeling of the father, whose literary achievement is of no use in America (*CM* 241). Kingston links the father to Ch’u Yuan, a famous Chinese poet in the fourth-century and the author of the elegy *Li Sao*, who is banished and exiled. The tale retold by Kingston in *China Men* amplifies the importance of this story to the father: “‘All Chinese know this story,’ says my father; if you are an authentic Chinese, you know the language and the stories without being taught, born talking them” (*CM* 250). As the father’s experience and the story of Ch’u Yuan juxtapose, Kingston once again situates the
father in the category of scholars/poets and highlights the exile experience of the father, whose depression and silence could be interpreted as a result of being heartbroken and the inability of being recognised. As Kingston paints a more comprehensive picture of the father, his angry silence and hatred, exemplified in his “scream and curse” (CM 18), are transformed into the sufferings of an exiled hero.

Kingston’s pressing desire to reconstruct the father’s voice and identity from his lost stories does finally elicit a response from her father (Tom Hong), who writes poetry in the margins of a pirated Chinese translation of China Men his revisions and corrections of the daughter’s narration of his stories. By returning to the literary tradition as a scholar, the father’s silence is broken and his identity as the father and a scholar poet is reclaimed. As King-kok Cheung has noted, this “model of the poet-scholar belies the popular perceptions of Asian men as inarticulate, unromantic, and unimaginative, fit only to become computer nerds, engineers, or kung fu fighters” (qtd. in Ho, HMH 205). In China Men, Kingston has the father-daughter relationship reconciled. The daughter learns that her father shows his concern and love for her: her father has given her a “lucky American name” “after a blonde gambler who always won” (CM 237). After the opening of a new laundry shop, the father’s liveliness returns and starts telling his children stories and sings poems and songs, one of which being a song by Kao Chi, “who had been executed for his politics; he is famous for poems to his wife and daughter written upon leaving for the capital” (CM 249). By connecting Baba to another literary figure, Kingston not only further links the father to the great literary tradition of China, but also transforms Baba from a man who would swear curses on females (CM 18) to a loving man who learns to care for his female relatives.
Reconstructing manhood from emasculation

Besides breaking the self-imposed silence of Baba, Kingston also reconstructs manhood for other founding fathers who are disempowered and emasculated in America. Obvious examples of the emasculation of Chinese male immigrants are their sexual deprivation and delegation to engage in menial works which are supposed to be taken by women. Due to the laws prohibiting Chinese wives to reunite with their husbands and the anti-miscegenation laws, “bachelor society” devoid of women is built up in various Chinatowns in America. The myth of the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy, the two stars who fall for each other but are allowed to meet only once a year, is particularly appealing to Ah Goong as he is homesick and longs for reunion with his family. Possibly out of an intense desire to father children, he is able to locate the couple’s children in the galaxy (CM 130). This Chinese traditional legend gains resonance in his American life as it provides a temporary salvation and reassurance from his loneliness. Unwilling to spend money on prostitutes, Ah Goong vents his pain of sexual deprivation and releases his sexual desire by masturbation: “He took out his penis under his blanket or bared it in the woods and thought about nurses and princesses” (CM 143). But for most of the rest of the time, he is frustrated with his sexual deprivation and ponders about “what a man was for, what he had to have a penis for” (CM 143). Baba and his friends, refashioned with their new English names, on the other hand, spend their money on prostitutes when they are off work and temporarily vent their sexual frustration. Nonetheless, they suffer from another kind of emasculation as they have to carry out domestic and menial tasks which are traditionally the women’s. They run laundry business—serve women of the other race—and have to take care
of menial tasks at home, a symbol of being "metaphorically castrated in the United States" as they are "‘allowed’ to serve the white master through the demeaning work usually relegated to women" (Ling, *Between Worlds* 145). Though the men marvel at the freedom of bachelorhood in which there are "no manners, no traditions, no wives," it is interesting to note that after Baba’s wife comes to America and stays with them, she, an unconventional strong-willed woman in *The Woman Warrior*, naturally takes over all the domestic tasks and they, in turn, willingly relinquish them (*CM* 62).

Kingston de-emasculates the Chinese father and grandfathers by empowering them with sexual claims over the foreign territory and detailedly presenting the heroic contributions they have paid in the metamorphosis of America. As America is portrayed with a powerful female image, possessing sexual claims over the American land is allegorical to the empowerment of men in the patriarchal concept of male-female relation. Ah Goong is metaphorically given sexual control over the foreign land in a scene where he is seized by sexual desire and masturbates:

One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley, not the desire to urinate but sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. He tried to rub himself calm. Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. ‘I am fucking the world,’ he said. The world’s vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley. He grew a habit: whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world. (*CM* 132)

By claiming the territory in a "rape-like" manner, Ah Goong exhibits his control over the environment and the act of masturbation becomes "a kind of sexual graffiti" (Grice, *Negotiating* 186). Ah Goong’s sexual act could also be seen as an
explicit protest to the racist immigration laws that have desexed him and deprived him of the chance of fathering children. Likewise, plagued by the inability to procreate due to the lack of women, Bak Goong manages to allusively impregnate the foreign land by tending the garden and spilling seeds over it: “He filled the trenches and patted the pregnant earth” (CM 105). Taking a further step from Ah Goong’s sexual claim over the territory, Bak Goong’s metaphorical impregnation of the land suggests a paternity claim to the land “on behalf of her China men forebears” (Grice, Negotiating 188) 27. By empowering the Chinese grandfathers in this light, Kingston overthrows the sexual deprivation inflicted upon them and suggests possession of the American land via their marking of territories. In contrast to the stereotypical images of Chinese men who perform “feminine” roles, Kingston paints a picture of the Gold Mountain Heroes in China Men. As the contributions paid by Chinese men in building railroads 28 and cultivating sugar canes have gone unrecognised for a long time, she deliberately re-imagines their lives, credits their efforts paid in America, and thereby subverts this emasculation through presenting their physical endurance and heroic attributes – brave, diligent, responsible, and adventurous. By rewriting part of American history, Kingston carefully lays her claims that her male ancestors are “the binding and building ancestors of this place” (CM 145).

At a deeper level, the emasculation of Chinese men in America is amplified through enforced silence and the deprivation of the freedom of speech that they experience in this foreign country. In traditional patriarchal China, men are the ones who possess the freedom to articulate and have the supreme power in the family where women are expected to keep silent. In contrast to the silence they exhibit in America, men in China Men do talk-story when they are in China. They
spend long hours actively telling their stories in the Gold Mountain to a group of “talking men and listening women,” signifying the power dynamics in China where voice means more power \( (CM\ 44) \). They are eager to talk about their adventures and narrate interesting stories that they have encountered and experienced outside of their village to the Chinese audience \(^{29}\). After they settle in America, the Chinese fathers discover that they are caught in the silence they have demanded from women in China and begin to understand the powerless predicament they are doomed in when they are deprived of the freedom to speak. In the Sandalwood Mountains, Bak Goong is instructed to keep silent in the sugar cane plantations – any speaking or singing would result in whippings. Interestingly, the loss of voice is linked by Bak Goong to the sexual deprivation and lack of female companionship he suffers from: “How was he to marvel adequately, voiceless? … I wasn’t born to be silent like a monk, he thought, then promptly said. ‘If I knew I had to take a vow of silence,’ he added, ‘I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk. Apparently we’ve taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock’” \( (CM\ 101) \). Baba, Maxine’s father, is tricked twice by gypsies due to his inability to muster the necessary English and he endures silently afterwards his wife’s incessant complaints for the lost income. In this sense, the enforced silence of Chinese fathers in America also stems partly from the inability to communicate effectively due to language barriers.

Kingston rescues the silenced Chinese men from invisibility through tracing their journey from enforced silence to articulation and eloquence. Silenced individuals are delighted to recover their abilities to vocal via different means. One remarkable example is Bak Goong, a creative trickster who is fanciful in playing tricks on others, disguises his voice in coughs which are “almost as satisfying as
shouting" to fool his white masters and thus refutes the restrictive emasculated rules (CM 105). Talk-story sessions led by Bak Goong are held after work where groups of Chinese men tell funny jokes and interesting stories to temporarily reside in their elusive voice. Bak Goong, a talk-addict, recognises the importance of talking for the silenced Chinese men and devises a way to vent their emotions – anger, exilic frustration, fears and homesickness – by shouting into a vast ploughed hole and telling the earth their secrets. Besides symbolically reconstructing their voices, Bak Goong also claims possession of the land by suggestively highlighting the invention of this new ritual: "'That wasn't a custom,' said Bak Goong. 'We made it up. We can make up customs because we're the founding ancestors of this place'" (CM 118). In this sense, the "thoughts and feelings of the China men" have "become a part of the American landscape" (Simmons 129) and those planted words would grow and spread to later generations: "they are footprints or traces, as ephemeral as the wind, but they are also rooted in place, making that field ancestral" (Slowik 87). After the shout party, a dramatic change is observed as Bak Goong does not get punished even though he talks and sings at work because the white masters are afraid of the China men’s rebellion – he has gained freedom and is empowered through articulation. The shout party incident remarkably pinpoints the "mass burial" of Chinese men’s voices and their persistence in revolting against this unfair oppression (Cheung, AS 109). Less memorable and significant examples of articulation are Ah Goong’s shouts at the Sierra Nevada sky and Baba’s singings and rumbling over the ironing board (Huntley, Kingston 142). As talking and articulation leads to a self-recognition of personality and establishment of identities, the Chinese father and grandfathers begin to develop their American identities by making a venture to release themselves from the imprisonment of silence – a
"feminine" predicament in the Gold Mountain.

The truthfulness of "fact," "history," and "documents"

Kingston exposes and confronts the precarious nature of "fact" and "history" by presenting multiple versions of a single story and transforming myths in *China Men*. As mentioned earlier, Kingston is nurtured in a familial talk-story tradition that allows malleability and metamorphosis of stories according to the demands of the storyteller and the audiences. In order to maintain the relevance and vibrancy of past stories, storytellers have to recreate and retell them to suit the new and present circumstances. By interweaving the traditional tales into the contemporary Chinese American narrative, Kingston preserves, relives, and revitalizes ancient stories and myths in a new perspective (Huntley, *Kingston* 121). There is a difference between the treatment of myths in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as myths play different roles in the lives of men and women. The myths live and bear importance in the women's lives and thus the myths integrate into the narrative in *The Woman Warrior*; whereas Chinese American men, like Baba, are not aware of the mythic dimensions of their lives and therefore in Kingston’s narrative, the myths separate from the men's stories and are set up alongside the male narrative in interchapters. Kingston describes the narrative structure of *China Men* as "a six-layer cake and the myths are like icing, and the rest are like the cake" (Bonetti 41). The six-layers of the cake are the six principle narratives about the men in her family - the father, grandfathers, uncles, and brother, which are intertwined and embellished with the icing of traditional legends, revision of myths, fantasy, and reconstructions of history.

Kingston rewrites the political history of the Chinese immigrants and
reconstructs an epic for the Chinese Americans through conflating stories with imaginative fantasy and presenting a mythical American narrative of a cultural biography which includes her male ancestors. She carefully pieces together the incomplete and fragmented stories she has heard in childhood and weaves them into a talk-story narrative structure. As the father in China Men deliberately withholds his history from the daughter, Maxine imaginatively recreates the different versions of the journey of how Baba comes to America. She revisits and tests the plausible ways of her father’s entry into the Gold Mountain and wonders “which story is truly her father’s” and “whether any of the stories even approximate the truth” (Huntley, Kingston 123). The illegal father is smuggled into America by hiding in a wooden crate whereas the legal father is detained on Angel Island with other immigrants before being admitted into the country. Maxine, to whom the “true” version is inaccessible, even conjures up magical explanations concerning how her father gains American citizenship. In one sense, the multiple versions signify the plurality of “historical records” and widen the possibility of factuality attained. On the other hand, the various versions of Baba’s entry into America are symbolic as they encompass the diversified possible ways of Chinese immigrants who aspire to create better opportunities for themselves and their families. In this sense, the Baba in “The father from China” becomes a mythic figure that represents all the Chinese fathers who become Gold Mountain sojourners and settlers. Kingston’s intention to develop the father figure as an embodiment of all Chinese American men is already recognised in the second prologue of the book, “On fathers,” in which the children mistake a stranger who looks “almost exactly” like the father “from the back” (CM 11). By highlighting the inner similarity of Chinese men, Kingston elaborates in China Men the stories
of an abundant number of Chinese forebears in America instead of the story of one single man. Likewise, the grandfathers, great-grandfathers, and male relatives in the subsequent chapters are also mythic characters who embody the wider part of Chinese American immigrant story (Grice, Negotiating 184). By using the title of "grandfather" and "great-grandfather" in the text without individually naming them, Kingston not only continues and honors the Chinese way of naming senior blood relatives, but also literally claims their American ancestorship by using their honorific greeting names in the chapter titles of the book. Ownership of the land is signified as Kingston deliberately entitles the chapters in China Men as "The great grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains," "The grandfather of the Sierra Nevada," and "The American father." The characters, Bak Goong, Ah Goong, and Baba, thus become not only the ancestors of Maxine, but also mythically become the archetypical ancestors of the American land.

As part of her project to claim America, Kingston manifests a new set of American myths and destabilises the validity of existing written records by transforming the Chinese legend about Tang Ao and the Western story about Robinson Crusoe. Both stories record the discovery of a new land by a voyager who sets out for an adventurous journey. The transformation of the Tang Ao legend has already been discussed in an earlier part, yet it is worth noting that the two conflicting date reference (AD 694-705 or AD 441) at the end of the revised myth reveals the questionable validity of myth-as-history (Grice, Negotiating 184). Myths, though commonly considered as fictional, carry a considerable weight of cultural and historical representation as people tend to measure them as standard ancient cultural icons: "Such fictions are not literally true, but are in some sense regarded as being true, and as important to society, as Homer had been for the
Greeks” (Watt 191). By exposing and highlighting the changeability of cultural tales, Kingston not only exercises her right as a storyteller, but also questions the factuality of received information that is passed on from generation to generation. The suggestion of Chinese as the earlier discoverer of the American land “upsets European monopolistic claim of ‘discovery’ of the New World” and challenges the authenticity of the Western monologic record of discovery (Feng 146).

In addition to the legend of Tang Ao, the story of Lo Bun Sun – originated from Daniel Defoe’s popular novel *Robinson Crusoe* – is rewritten and transformed from a widely canonised Western text into a Chinese fable. A popular European fiction by Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* is also considered as a modern myth with Crusoe embodying “the new economic, religious, and social attitudes that succeeded the Counter-Reformation; and in the context of developing individualism” and creates mythic meanings probably not intended consciously by Defoe (Watt xv). Similar to the Tang Ao story, the story of Lo Bun Sun is also about the discovery of a new land and the adventures he encounters on the alienated territory. Defoe’s story of *Robinson Crusoe* is chosen mainly for three reasons: first, Crusoe’s adventure and new discoveries on the deserted island exemplify “the ecological development of history” which makes suitable materials for Kingston to allude to the development of the American land (Watt 152) 41; second, the story of Robinson Crusoe was actually first handed down to Kingston as a Chinese talk-story about a man called Lo Bun Sun 42; and third, Robinson Crusoe is a suitable character to be alluded in reference to the Chinese American men’s experience for “the manly independence; the unconscious cruelty; the persistence; the slow yet efficient intelligence; the sexual apathy” (Watt 171). The Lo Bun Sun story, as “a Chinese rendition of an English novel” which resembles Defoe’s narrative, talks
about a Chinese adventurer whose survival strategies keep him alive on the deserted island and eventually lead to the establishment of a colony (Gao 67). By illustrating the exile and sexless experience of the adventurer, Kingston metaphorically alludes to the Chinese American immigrants’ exile experience. The immigrants could only surmount their exiled predicament and survive on the foreign environment with the resources they bring with them, just as Lo Bun Sun survives with the skills from his homeland. Kingston ingeniously plays a Chinese pun on English by translating the first name of Robinson Crusoe to Lo Bun Sun in order to highlight the captivity and suffering the Chinese Americans undergo in America:

Lo Bun Sun worked. He was never idle; never lazy. He farmed the island. There is drudgery in his name: Lo is ‘toil’, what one does even when unsupervised; he works faithfully, not cheating. Lo means ‘naked’, man ‘the naked animal’, and lo also sounds like the word for ‘mule’, a toiling animal, a toiling sexless animal. Bun is the uncle who went to China to work on a commune. And sun is like ‘body’ and also ‘son’ in English and ‘grandson’ in Chinese. Sun as in ‘new’. Lo Bun Sun was a mule and toiling man, naked and toiling body, alone, son and grandson, himself all the generations. (CM 222)

By linking the “son” in English and the sun – “grandson” – in Chinese, Kingston metaphorically signifies “several generations” (Gao 68). The transliteration of the name embodies the image and experience of the generations of Chinese male immigrants in America: they are like toiling bodies who are diligent, work faithfully, and endure the “sexless” bachelor life. This engagement with a Western myth is significant in that Kingston exemplifies her ability to lay claims on the Western literary text as her own heritage 43. Kingston deliberately twists Defoe’s
original story and makes Lo Bun Sun a Chinese character who survives on Chinese
food such as tofu, rice, and bean sauce, and hence a metonymical symbol for the
generations of Chinese Americans who are denied official recognition in the nation
44. She thus portrays Lo Bun Sun as the founding father of the island, celebrates his
right to claim the land, and in turn substantiates the quest of the Chinese Americans
to claim America. By documenting a Chinese man as the coloniser and
defamiliarising this famous European-imperialist story, Kingston remarkably
contests the concept of “origin” 45 and engages in claiming America for her male
ancestors. It is also noticeable that the image of the powerless and emasculated
newcomer in the opening myth of Tang Ao is transmuted into an image of growing
control and mastery of the new land through endurance of hardship, loneliness, and
painstaking labour in establishing the new world (Gao 73).

Kingston further exemplifies her challenge towards the “truthfulness” of
received information by exposing the vulnerability of the truth value of
“documents,” which are supposedly factual and legal. The precarious and uncertain
nature of documents and records is manifested when the burning of documents and
records in a fire in the Hall of Records, where Citizenship Papers and other legal
certificates – “every paper a China Man wanted for citizenship and legality” – are
stored, ironically leads to the convenience of any illegal Chinese immigrants in
America as “Any paper a China Man could not produce had been ‘burned up in the
Fire of 1906’. Every China Man was reborn out of that fire a citizen” (CM 149). In
this sense, the existence of written records or documents, which are supposed to be
bearers of authenticity, could be considered as out of a random chance, implying
the arbitrariness of these documents. Likewise, the illegal version of the father’s
entry to America significantly demonstrates the question of legality “regardless of
his possession of the proper documents" (Neubauer 22). In “Photography and the Status of Truth in Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men,” Teresa Zackodnik examines the truthfulness of photographs in the book and concludes that Kingston’s “plural and contradictory treatment of the photograph parallels the multiple and self-contradicting versions of the histories she presents, exposing and challenging dominant American history as a monologue that has silenced and erased the histories of Chinese Americans” (55-56). In China Men, Kingston appears to demonstrate photographs are a form of document which carry “truth” value but their truthfulness is undermined as their inability to represent the “truth” is exposed. For example, photographs are used to represent the factual accounts of the Chinese men’s “successful” lives in America – the father and his three friends take lots of pictures in expensive suits and send the photos to their families in China, as a proof of their financial success in the Gold Mountain. In reality, however, these men lead a less than satisfactory life in New York, working in laundry for long hours everyday. When Baba’s mother writes to him while he is unemployed for money, he asks for proof that she is still alive before sending money and his sisters send him a new photograph of the mother as evidence. Unlike the father who readily accepts it as a valid proof of the existence of Ah Po, the kids (including Maxine) conjecture that “Maybe she’s dead and propped up,” hinting at her doubt on the “truth” value of photographs (CM 242). The unreliability of photographs as embodying the truth is further emphasized in the railroad photographs in which Ah Goong is absent. Despite the continual effort and contribution of Ah Goong and other Chinese men in the building of the transcontinental railroad, they are excluded from the photographs which are publicized to document the achievement: “While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was
dangerous to stay. The Driving Out had begun. Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs" (CM 144). As the white demons claim that “[o]nly Americans could have done it,” the absence of Chinese American men not only means that they are not accepted as Americans, but also poses a question on the validity of using photographic evidence as a form of authentic received information. In this way, Kingston implies that no one source of information, even if it is printed, can be known to carry the absolute truth.

The question concerning the validity of “pure history” or factual discourse is complicated when Kingston incorporates in the structural centre of China Men an eight-page summary of “The Laws” relating to the legal issues concerning the immigration of Chinese Americans from 1868 to 1978. Though the insertion of an unadorned record of history in the imaginative collage of stories and legends has triggered some criticisms, Kingston justifies the inclusion of historical details by highlighting the necessity of educating the younger generations and releasing her frustration concerning the widespread ignorance of the history of Chinese Americans: “The mainstream culture doesn’t know the history of Chinese Americans, which has been written and written well. That ignorance makes a tension for me, and in the new book I just couldn’t take it anymore” (Pfaff 15). In order to claim America literally, Kingston hopes that her audiences are aware of the difficulties that her Chinese forebears have endured and overcome: “So all of a sudden, right in the middle of the stories, plunk – there is an eight-page section of pure history. It starts with the Gold Rush and then goes right through the various exclusion acts, year by year” (Pfaff 15). Pressing with a desire to acquire a central position and emerge from the “eccentric” role in the American society, reflecting from the father’s inking of “each piece of our own laundry with the word Centre”
Kingston pinpoints its impossibility by putting in the centre of *China Men* the dominant culture’s authorizing voice and the official monological record – “The Laws.” Kingston, however, also articulates the experience, perspectives, and history of the ex-centric and marginalised people with colorful and richly imaginative heroic stories, contesting the truthful status of the historical details that are well known to the mainstream culture. By juxtaposing the official historical version in a “legal language/formal, distanced language” with the vernacular histories of the Chinese male forebears in a “poetic language/the language of feeling,” Kingston makes the readers feel for the characters and successfully endangers the authority and factuality of official history and destabilises the established notion of “centre” and “otherness” (Perry 179). In postmodern writing, history and fiction are “discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past (‘exertions of the shaping, ordering imagination’)” (Hutcheon 89). Linda Hutcheon further points out that “the meaning and shape are not in the events, but in the systems which make those past ‘events’ into present historical ‘facts’” (89). In other words, as the writing of history involves the process of selection and its signification is largely established by the historians, there is a danger of treating “history” as entirely authentic and true; and hence, Kingston takes the liberty in challenging and questioning the “factual” historical record of America. By inserting myths in the existing history, Kingston defamiliarises the genre of history and reinforces it into a mythic context as she jars the two parts together in the book, echoing her intention to continue the mythic writing of Williams. *China Men*, as an ex-centric text itself, serves as a medium for Kingston to illuminate the power of the marginalised Chinese Americans and portray this “otherness” in a positive light, as opposed to
the dominant culture's presentation and perception of it. Instead of writing an objective historical and factual record, Kingston explores a subjective discourse by retrieving the repressed stories of her male forebears and releasing the "unsightly past of American history" (Feng 135). Furthermore, as David Li has remarkably noted, having the male's stories told from a female point of view is "an explicit measure to de-genderize the male-centered history" ("China Men" 496). Kingston's male forebears, therefore, are not portrayed as slaves or "coolies" who only go to America for money, but are presented as heroes who are the founding fathers and ancestors of America, whose contributions to the building of the country are finally authenticated with Kingston's retelling of their histories. As the title of the book, "China Men," a revision by Kingston from the derogatory term "Chinamen," suggests ("I had a shock when I heard it's also named Chinaman's Hat. I had only encountered that slurred-together word in taunts when walking past racists" (CM 90)), Kingston endeavours to paint a new image of Chinese immigrants in America and overthrows the stereotypes of simply viewing Chinese as greedy gold diggers 53.

By manipulating the talk-story narrative strategy in China Men, Kingston manages to claim America by inserting absences and redefining the American historical discourse in a mythic sense to include the voices of her male ancestors. Through exemplifying the Chinese talk-story tradition in an American text, Kingston continues experimenting with the form of talk-story writing, as in The Woman Warrior, and completes her mission in claiming America literally with China Men. The reconstruction of manhood and recovery of voices of Chinese men, and the manifestation of the precarious nature of "fact," "history," and "centre" portray the conditioned limitations that Chinese Americans face and
interrogate the “official” American history that is promulgated in classroom teachings and documentaries. As Elaine Kim has noted, the claiming on America “does not mean disappearing like raindrops in the ocean of white America, fighting to become ‘normal,’” but the invention of a new identity as “part of [the] resistance to domination” (“Defining” 88, 111). *China Men* ends with the story of the youngest brother who enlists in the navy and is sent to Asia for war, despite his pacifist stance in abhorring war. Despite always being identified as the Other in America, the brother decides to enlist in the US navy instead of being a fugitive because “[h]e 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” (*CM* 277). As the brother attends the training in the navy, his commander keeps asking him where he is from, which he considers as “a racial slur” implying that “‘[r]emember you’re not from Vietnam. Remember which side you’re on. You’re no gook from Vietnam’” (*CM* 279). The brother’s insistence on carrying out his duty as a real American does finally pay off. Unlike the male ancestors who have only precarious American identities 54, the Hong youngest brother happily and surprisingly discovers upon his safe return that his background has been legally cleared, and by extension, the status of his immigrant family members: “[t]he government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super-American, extraordinarily secure – Q Clearance Americans. The Navy or the FBI had checked his mother and father and not deported them” (*CM* 291). The brother, whose name includes the word “bridge,” serves as one of “the symbolic bridges between their Chinese-born parents and American culture, between the older immigrants and the American-born generation” (Huntley, *Kingston* 144). With the publication of *China Men*, the Chinese immigrants finally
become Americans and triumphantly mark their territory, both textually and politically, in American history. Instead of simply leaving the identity issue behind, Kingston categorically claims the ownership and citizenship rights of Chinese Americans by completing the shift from the identity of “Chinese-American” to “Chinese American”:

And lately, I have been thinking that we ought to leave out the hyphen in “Chinese-American,” because the hyphen gives the word on either side equal weight, as if linking two nouns. It looks as if a Chinese-American has double citizenship, which is impossible in today’s world. Without the hyphen, “Chinese” is an adjective and “American” a noun; a Chinese American is a type of American. ("Cultural Mis-readings" 99)

She wraps up her talk-story narrative at the end of the memoir by suggesting that she would become a listener who watches for the responses and comments of the younger generations of Chinese Americans and harbor a hope that they will pass on the story, make it alive, and continue to lay claims on the American land.
Notes:

1. In King-kok Cheung's "Re-viewing Asian American Literary Studies" of *An Interethnic Companion to Asian American Literature*, Cheung describes *China Men* as a book "admittedly designed to 'claim America,'" a theme recurrently illustrated by Asian American writers, manifesting their desire to be recognised as Americans.

2. In an interview with Islas and Yalom, Kingston explicitly confirms that the message she tries to convey in her books is to claim America, which means "we're not outsiders, we belong here, this is our country, this is our history, and we are a part of America. We are a part of American history. If it weren't for us, America would be a different place" (25). This is the quotation at the beginning of this chapter as it is an important theme of the book.

3. Frederic Wakeman Jr. notes that *China Men* "is a mixture of myth, history, and recollection": while "the myths seem at first the most striking element," they "become the most perplexing" (207) because "the myths are usually so consciously contrived, her pieces of distant China lore often seem jejune and even inauthentic – especially to readers who know a little bit about the original high culture which Kingston claims as her birthright" (214). Not surprisingly, *China Men* is being criticised by some critics who are familiar with Chinese tales. For example, Qing-Yun Wu mentions that she did find Kingston's "bold rewriting of some Chinese tales ... disturbing" initially (87).

4. For a summary of early reviews and debates on *China Men*, see Skandera-Trombley's "Introduction" on p. 15-16.

5. Linda Kauffman suggests that "perceiving *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* as parts of a whole" could "heighten one's sense of the significance and scope of Kingston's achievement" (223).

6. Talking about the men's stories that occupy the landscape of *China Men*, Kingston remarks that most of them are from women: "'There still are women who take the role of storyteller. The women are not center-stage, but without the female storyteller, I couldn't have gotten into some of the stories. A great many of the men's stories were ones I originally heard from women'" (Pfaff 18).

7. Maureen Sabine undertakes a remarkable study on the intertextuality of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* in her work, *Maxine Hong Kingston's Broken Book of Life: An Intertextual*
8. Pin-chia Feng observes that “the narrator of China Men appears to be more mature and in control of her narrative voice than the struggling adolescent girl in The Woman Warrior” (139).

9. The hyphen in the term “Chinese-American” in The Woman Warrior is significantly removed and the term is changed to “Chinese American” in China Men (p. 60, 61, 87, 261, 286, 287, 289, 300, etc.).

10. Wendy Ho contends that Chinese American men are represented “as passive, effeminate, and docile” in “mainstream culture” and they are “forced to find work in domestic occupations devalued as ‘women’s work’” (197). E. D. Huntley believes that “it was the Chinese cook and the Filipino houseboy who made an indelible impression on the writers and later, film-makers, who immortalized the American West” (45). In addition, Elaine Kim summarises the stereotypes of Chinese men and women as follows: “Caricatures of Asians have been part of America popular culture for generations. The power-hungry despot, the helpless heathen, the sensuous dragon lady, the comical loyal servant, and the pudgy, desexed detective who talks about Confucius are all part of the standard American image of the Asian. Anglo-American writers of some literary merit have used these popular stereotypes, although usually not as a focus for their work: Chinese caricatures can be found in the pages of Bret, Harte, Jack London, Jack Steinbeck, Frank Morris, and other writers about the American west, and even in such unlikely places as Louisa May Alcott’s books for children” (3).

11. In the essay, Sledge denotes the short sections of tales as “‘pure’ talk-story” sections, as a distinction from the “biographies” of the men (147, 152). However, my use of the term “talk-story” is not restricted only to the section of retold legends, but on the entire narrative as well because I contend that the section on the men’s stories also exemplify the essential talk-story elements in presenting multiple points of view in narration and reconstructing their stories testifying to present circumstances.

12. William Carlos Williams identifies Icelandic sagas as early texts of American history and includes them in the American literary tradition. Williams “modifies and expands the American narrative” by incorporating works from outside the mainstream Anglo-Protestant culture into the canon of American literature. By doing this, Williams establishes a space for unrepresented and silenced subjects to surface (Huntley, Kingston 116).
13. A number of critics have cited the original source of the myth of Tang Ao, such as Gao and Goellnicht.

14. In the original story, it was “Tang’s extensive knowledge that saved Lin.” Kingston deliberately depicts the scholar as “a prisoner and ‘slave’” to symbolise “the position of a traditional Chinese intellectual in a foreign land” (Feng 145). Diane Simmons has made a further remark on Kingston’s use of *Flowers in the Mirror* and revision of the tale to make Tang Ao as the victim instead of Lin. In addition to the fact that Tang Ao is a poet scholar, which fits perfectly to Baba’s status in China, Simmons draws parallels between Tang Ao’s daughter, Little Hill, and Maxine in the book, and notes that both daughters seek out to save their fathers. For details on the similarity between Little Hill and Maxine, check Simmons’s *Maxine Hong Kingston* p. 111-112.

15. Debra Shostak comments in her essay “Maxine Hong Kingston’s Fake Books” that “the conventional icons of Chinese femininity – silencing, crippling, grooming – stand for Kingston less as a critique of Chinese conceptions of womanhood (although this is implied) and more as metaphors for the experience of Chinese males emigrating to America, where they were often effectively emasculated by Caucasian-American culture” (61). King-kok Cheung holds a different view in her essay “The Woman Warrior versus the Chinaman Pacific” as she comments that “The opening myth suggests that the author objects as strenuously to the patriarchal practices of her ancestral culture as to the racist treatment of her forefathers in their adopted country” (121). Diane Simmons also remarks that by “focusing on sexual oppression and hinting at the connection between the man who is forcibly feminized and the men who came to the United States, Kingston suggests that the oppression of women by Chinese patriarchalism and the oppression of Chinese men in a racist America feel the same, indeed, are the same” (109).

16. Laurie Grobman shares a similar view: she suggests that reading *China Men* “through an Asian American lens” would see Kingston use “silence as a strategy to emphasize the parallels between the plight of China Men in America and Chinese women throughout history ... a simultaneous critique of white racism and Chinese sexism” (224).

17. Yan Gao contends that with the transformed myth of Tang Ao, “Kingston attempts to disorder and reorder received historical mythoi, both Chinese and American, in order to fill in a blank
18. Wendy Ho contends that the father’s silence and withdrawal results in a creative opportunity for the daughter: “in the inventive space of his silence, she creates the opportunity to tell his story from a daughter’s talk-story view” (201). Amy Ling also notes that the father’s silence results in Kingston’s room for creativity: “Since this parent will not tell his stories, claims no past, wants only to live in the present, Kingston is left to her own creative resources to fill in the gaps” (144). Frederic Wakeman, Jr. regards the father’s “sullen silence” as a permission for Kingston to “claim the right to tell his own story, even if the story is imaginary” (208). Elizabeth McHenry makes a similar observation: “Motivated by the need to know, Kingston’s absolute lack of information from her father about himself and her inability to make him break his silence becomes her most valuable source since it allows her to fill in what she does not know – as she did in *The Woman Warrior* – with her own efforts, her own imaginative and often idealistic versions” (215).

19. Diane Simmons compares the “palanquin” that the father is trapped in to the sedan chair that “is used to carry a bride to her husband’s family”: as “the bride is hidden in layers of veils, her own identity symbolically blotted out and her ability to control, or even see, the path of her own destiny blocked” (113). In this sense, the father is like the bride: as he is trapped in the “palanquin” in the journey to America, he gradually loses control of himself, foreshadowing his loss of self in the Gold Mountain: “As the new bride must take her husband’s family as her own, even though she will always be an outsider there, the emigrant father must take America as his own – ‘Gold Mountain, his own country’ – even though he will always be seen as an alien” (114). In addition to this, I also think the linking of the father and a bride foreshadows the emasculation of the father in America.

20. Qing-Yun Wu has noted how Kingston links Baba to some real historical figures – famous and scholars in old China: “Baba (the father) in *China Men* does three fantastic things when taking the qualifying test for the last Imperial Examination: one is his putting fireflies in a jar to get light for reading; the other two are his hanging his pigtail to the beam and jabbing an awl into his thigh to get rid of sleepiness one night. These three tales are anecdotes associated with real historical figures” (87). Wu goes on naming the three figures as Ju Yin of the Jin, Sun Jing of the Han, and Su Jin of the Warring States and claims that “No Chinese reader will believe that
Baba in *China Men* actually does those three things, even though the narrator relates them innocently with a straight face" (88). In this sense, "a Chinese reader could accept Baba only as an ancestral archetype of Chinese nationality" (88).

21. Linda Ching Sledge recognises Baba as "the most fully realized 'hero' in the work, for he is shown from many sides, as husband, son, 'legal' and 'illegal' father. He is heroic, too, in his ambitions for himself and for his family. ... Even when he fails at his duty as father-provider, and retreats from his family in bitterness, he remains the family's titular authority by virtue of his wife's and children's love for him (*Woman Warrior* depicts the mother as the central figure and myth maker in the children's lives). They respect him even though they do not understand him. His belongings have for them a sacred aura despite their air of poverty and failure" (9).

22. Literacy is important for the father's establishment of identity as Maureen Sabine observes "What made him feel marginalized was not failing to achieve top place on the exams. It was losing the battle of literacy with his Chinese students and then the battle of ignorance with the American immigration officials who classified him as an illiterate 'coolie'" (195).

23. The daughter-narrator in *China Men* has revealed her hope that her father would deny his bias against female: "What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female. 'Those were only sayings,' I want you to say to me. 'I didn't mean you or your mother. I didn't mean your sisters or grandmothers or women in general" (*CM* 18).

24. In 1924, the following law was passed: "An immigration Act passed by Congress specifically excluded 'Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes'. Any American who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; any Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship" (*CM* 155).

25. It is believed that Chinese women "were outnumbered by Chinese men by approximately twenty to one" (*Huntley, Tan* 28) and the majority of Chinese in America before 1949 were " 'married bachelors' who had wives in China whom they saw once every ten or twenty years if they were fortunate" (*Kim, Asian* 97).

26. In the transformation of the legend of Tang Ao, if Tang Ao embodies all Chinese men who experience emasculation in America, the woman ruler who enforces the emasculation embodies America (*Gao* 62). Leilani Nishime has pointed out that sexualisation and feminisation of the
land is “a characteristic of a great deal of the writing about Western expansionism and the Frontier” (271). Helena Grice notes that “the immigrant experience is emasculating is continued when Kingston depicts the Chinese American immigrants responding to the land in female terms by tending a garden” (MHK 57-58).

27. Mary Slowik interprets this part of Ah Goong’s story as a reflection of Kingston’s envisioning of her characters “as characters in a myth” and that it is “her re-working of the primitive fertility story of the sky inseminating the earth” with “the vulgar and elegant” being “joined together in a comic-serious re-enactment of a creation myth” (85). This corresponds to my later comment in the chapter that Kingston’s characters emerge as mythic characters in the narrative.

28. By highlighting the efforts that her forebears have made in building the railroads, Kingston tries to portray Ah Goong “as an ‘American’ by virtue of his toil on the rails” (R. Lee 114).

29. Kingston illustrates one anecdote of men’s talk-story in China Men: “The men talking story, lighting chains of cigarettes, and drinking wine, did not need to sleep in order to have dreams. ‘Let me show you. Let me show you. My turn. My turn.’ Even the ones who had only explored the world as far as Canton and Hong Kong had stories” (45).

30. In The Woman Warrior, the narrator relates talking to having a personality: “If you don’t talk, you can’t have a personality. You’ll have no personality and no hair. You’ve got to let people know you have a personality and a brain” (162).

31. In an interview with Eric J. Schroeder (1996), Kingston says, “The women were in China and had their own society. The men were sailing or travelling and were in Chinatowns, and that was another society. Their stories just fell into two different books” (217). This difference in life experience leads to a different perception of and relation to the ancient myths and stories.

32. E.D. Huntley describes the structure of China Men as follows: “Each of the six major chapters in China Men is paired with one or more intertexts, or inserted minichapters – short tales, myths, vignettes, reminiscences, news items, factual accounts” (Kingston 123).

33. Kingston talks about her flexibility with the recreation of stories in the interview with Jody Hoy (1986) and explains that this flexibility comes from talk-story: “My flexibility with versions came from talk-story, the way I actually heard my mother and their friends telling about how they came to America and what happened. Each time they told a story, they told it differently. The stories change according to personalities, occasions, and listeners” (53).
34. This is how Kingston describes the magical entry of the father: "In 1903 my father was born in San Francisco, where my grandmother had come disguised as a man. Or, Chinese women once magical, she gave birth at a distance, she in China, my grandfather and father in San Francisco. She was good at sending. Or the men of those days had the power to have babies" (CM231).

35. King-Kok Cheung asserts that "Kingston's 'multiple answers' allow for a fuller, and therefore truer, picture of the historical situation than any single factual account can provide" (AS 123).

36. Jeanne Rosier Smith contends that "'On Fathers' destabilizes the notion of 'father' as a fixed, recognizable identity" (Writing Tricksters 45).

37. Kingston talks about naming of blood relatives in China in an interview: "there are some grandfathers in China Men who obviously must have a name just like everybody else, like the names that their parents give them, but I call them 'great-grandfather' and 'great-great-grandfather,' because that's what I actually call them, that's what they were known by in the family. ... I decided to go ahead and use the name 'grandfather' because I thought that all of us see them as ancestors, the grandfathers and great-grandfathers who are like mythical characters of the past golden age" (Islas, Yalom 27).

38. In "Maxine Kingston's China Men: The Family Historian as Epic Poet," Linda Ching Sledge discusses how the book represents "the transmutation of 'oral history' into cultural literary epic" and how the characters emerge as mythic heroes (4). For example, she points out that Ah Goong "bears vivid resemblance to another hero in ethnic American mythology, the steel driving John Henry whose bare-handed challenge of the steam-driven tunnelling machine is matched by Ah Goong's lonely battle against the 'immovability of the earth'" (11).

39. Helena Grice remarks that "Kingston's rewriting of both the Tang Ao Chinese myth and the Lo Bun Sun Western myth serve to literally authorise competing versions of history in her text, as well as the Chinese American claim to America" (Negotiating 185).

40. Helena Grice, however, believes that "myth should be accorded equal validity as a legitimate version of the past as history or autobiography or biography, discourses more commonly supposed to be grounded in 'fact'" (Negotiating 184). Ian Watt's definition of myth is "a traditional story that is exceptionally widely known throughout the culture, that is credited with a historical or quasi-historical belief, and that embodies or symbolizes some of the most basic values of a society" (xvi).
41. Ian Watt explains why the story of Robinson Crusoe "exemplifies the ecological development of history": "Crusoe beings with a casual accommodation of opportunity; he proceeds to a more organized use of caves and walled defenses; and he finally arrives at the notions of the main house, the country retreat, and the specialized storage area. The same stages of human history are exemplified in Crusoe's arrangements for food, tools, and furniture. Crusoe begins as a collector, a hunter, and a fisherman; but he soon turns to pastoral, and later to agricultural, activities. He domesticates wild goats, begins to milk them, and eventually to make butter and cheese. Then he provides himself with a steady supply of cereals. These improvements involve the making of tools, storage vessels, implements, and furniture. Soon he has assembled the most ample stocks of daily necessities and comforts, from spades and pots and sieves, to pestle and mortar, and table and chairs" (152).

42. In the interview with Jody Hoy (1986), Kingston talked about how she knew the story of Robinson Crusoe: "I'd heard the Robinson Crusoe story first as a Chinese talk-story. The Defoe novel had become Lo Bun Sun" (56). In the retelling "The adventures of Lo Bun Sun," Kingston makes it clear that the mother is the one who tells this story: "MaMa repeated exactly what things Lo Bun Sun took from the ship (this was one of the more boring tales she read - no magicians, no beautiful ladies, no knights, or warrior poets)" (CM 221); and the father also participates in the telling: "My father came to listen to this part of the story, and he told it again, retelling the gleaning several times" (CM 223).

43. Helena Grice suggests that "the revision by a 'minority' writer of a dominant cultural myth of origin serves to disrupt claims by that culture of cultural supremacy and to question such a genealogy of origin" (Negotiating 185). David Leiwei Li notes in "China Men: Maxine Hong Kingston and the American Canon" that "Kingston's creative reproduction of the Robinson myth lays bare the device that rationalizes almost all Western colonization, the workings of language and culture that presuppose the inherent supremacy of European civilization and the barbarous wretchedness of the native" (489).

44. Yan Gao has the following observation concerning Kingston's version of the story: "The image of Lo Bun Sun has a collective meaning, referring to all her forebears. In order to make a new home and establish a new identity, they have to separate from their past" (70).

45. As J. Smith has observed, "Defamiliarizing the story forces readers to consider the assumptions
underlying this master narrative of western imperialism" (Writing Tricksters 43).

46. In “Developing Ties to the Past: Photography and Other Sources of Information in Maxine Hong Kingston’s China Men,” Carol E. Neubauer examines the different sources of information Kingston uses in the writing of China Men and determines that for Kingston, “photographs provide information when other sources prove to be unreliable or incomplete” (33) despite the fact that “even these sometimes need interpretation that is not always forthcoming” (34). While I agree to Neubauer’s analysis on the unreliability of other sources of printed information such as newspaper and diaries, I disagree that photographs prove to be more reliable because the taking of photographs and its use and dispatch is largely under the control of the people who take and monitor the use of the photos.

47. The section of “The Laws” has been criticised for “interrupting her narrative with baldly factual statistical material that seems better suited to federal agency reports or historical texts than to a memoir.” Some reviewers considered this section “disruptive, ‘somewhat rude,’ albeit generally informative” (Huntley, Kingston 139). In her review of the book for the Los Angeles Times, Phyllis Quan comments that “the cohesion and vitality of myth of the first half” is lost as Kingston “interrupts the narrative with her section ‘The Laws,’ ‘a somewhat rude but informative overview of the immigration and naturalization policies affecting Chinese people’” (qtd. in Skandera-Trombley, “Introduction” 15). Some American readers get “angry” when they read about “the horrors of U.S. immigration policy” (Perry 179).

48. The narrator, Maxine, is perplexed about the eccentric position the Chinese Americans occupy:

“I want to be able to rely on you, who inked each piece of our own laundry with the word Centre, to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people” (CM 18).

49. Donald C. Goellnicht observes that “when we measure these ‘laws’ against the ‘invented’ biographies of China Men that make up the rest of the text. Paradoxically, the imagined/fictional history proves more truthful than the official version” (233). Leilani Nishime also points out the limitation of official documents (the laws as in printed documents): “This use of official documents also emphasizes the fact that the documents are only available in an already interpreted form, and they do not provide a transparent look into the past. ... Although the documents masquerade as objective, they are not necessarily more true or real than the history we receive through the Grandfathers’ story” (264).
50. Feng calls Kingston’s recreation of the stories of father and grandfathers “counter-history” (137).

51. According to Smith, “the section’s dry, official tone emphasizes the limitations of the history genre” (Writing Tricksters 40). The genre of monolithic history is also subverted as the “talk story mode” in China Men implies that history “is a discovery of many equal stories, not a solo appearance but a choral performance” (Li, “China Men” 497). To sum up, the factuality of “history” is questioned by Kingston in China Men.

52. Paul Veyne calls history “a true novel” because of the “shared conventions” of the two genres: “selection, organization, diegesis, anecdote, temporal pacing, and emplotment” (Hutcheon I 11).

53. Elaine Kim points out that “Kingston says she chose the title exactly because it expresses the difference between the way Chinese immigrant men viewed themselves and the way they were viewed in a racist society. They called themselves Tang Jen, or China Men, while the racists called them ‘Chinamen’” (“Visions” 157-158).

54. The Chinese fathers and grandfathers rely on fake documents to enter America (CM 48) and they are always in fear of deportation: “I’d like to go to China if I can get a visa and – more difficult – permission from my family, who are afraid that applying for a visa would call attention to us” (CM 89).

55. I disagree with Debra Shostak’s comment that Kingston attempts to leave the identity issue behind in China Men: “In China Men, she demonstrates the historical shift from one singular identity (the Chinese father in the first main chapter) to another singular identity (the American father in the final main chapter), a shift that indicates that her family’s experience has passed through hyphenated identity but has attempted to leave it behind” (57).

56. Kingston gives a similar comment through Wittman’s mouth in Tripmaster Monkey: “And ‘Chinese-American’ is inaccurate – as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out – ‘Chinese American.’ ‘American,’ the noun, and ‘Chinese,’ the adjective” (327).

57. The last sentence of China Men is: “Good. Now I could watch the young men who listen” (301).
Chapter 4
Fusion and Literariness: Construction of a Chinese American (Communal) Identity with a “Talk-story” Play in Kingston’s Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book

Maybe the reason I used that word “paradox” or “opposite” is that culturally Chinese and western culture really are so different. ... I don't want to become an American by wiping out all my Chineseness. Nor do I want to stay Chinese and never participate in the wonderful American world that's out there. So instead of destroying part of myself or denying some of reality, to me there has got to be a way to have it all and to do it all. ... I now see that there can be an amalgam, that the next stage is — what do they call it in music? Fusion, yeah.

- Maxine Hong Kingston (Skenazy 156)

Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. ... Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it. His community surrounding him, then, we're going to reward and bless Wittman with our listening while he talks to his heart's content. Let him get it all out, and we hear what he has to say direct. Blasting and blazing are too wordless.

- Tripmaster Monkey (306)

This chapter discusses how “talk-story” functions as an important narrative strategy for the literary creation of Wittman Ah Sing, the Chinese American protagonist in Maxine Hong Kingston’s third major work, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book, published in 1989. In an interview with Timothy Pfaff in 1980 after the publication of China Men, Kingston revealed that she has told all the childhood stories she wanted to tell in The Woman Warrior and China Men and had nothing accumulated in her mind. She felt like she was looking out over a blank ocean and an empty sky and was excitedly watching to see what would come up over the horizon, which was going to be her next book (20). In 1989, this “next book,” Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book, came into print with a generic tag as Kingston’s “first novel,” differentiating it from her two previous memoirs in which she mingles autobiographical and historical facts with fictional and imaginative materials. After waiting for a long time for the muse of the greatest creativity, Kingston’s third work has emerged out of apparent emptiness.

In Tripmaster Monkey, Wittman Ah Sing embarks on his artistic adventure
with an ambition to define his identity as an ethnic Chinese in America through staging an epic and multivocal play in the traditional Chinese talk-story form. Similar to Kingston’s creation of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman’s theatrical production is created out of emptiness – his artistic quest and hence his journey for a self-definition begins as he crosses out every line of his work, throws away the drafts he has written, and ponders on the meaning of the episode of the empty scroll in the sixteenth-century classic Chinese novel *Journey to the West* by Wu Ch’eng-en, the main plot of which concerns the quest of Tripitaka for the sacred texts. In the episode of the empty scroll in *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King, whose Chinese forenames Wu-Kung means “Aware of Emptiness,” together with Tripitaka, Pigsy, and Sandy, after arriving in the West (India in *Journey to the West*) and taking the scrolls from the Indians, discovers on their way back that the scrolls are empty and thinks that they are cheated (*TM 67*). Yet, to Wittman, “the empty scrolls had been the right ones all along” because he is already living in another West – the United States of America (*TM 42*). The episode of the blank scroll is instructive to Wittman’s creativity as he needs new stories for his life in America. Quoting Yan Gao’s remark that “the episode of the empty scroll highlights Wittman’s philosophy of production” as it is from emptiness that Wittman starts to create his theatre as a starting reference (115), this chapter explores how Wittman Ah Sing, a fifth-generation Chinese American, a Californian and graduate of English literature at Berkeley in the 1960s, attempts to construct a Chinese American identity amid his bi-cultural background through staging an epic drama in a talk-story narrative form.

In “Clashing Constructs of Reality: Reading Maxine Hong Kingston’s *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* as Indigenous Ethnography,” Patricia Lin
identifies the "awareness of emptiness" as a postmodern awareness, "where all things deemed 'true' or 'real' are fundamentally human-made constructs" (338). As she has noted, the "dictum" of the postmodern era is "the impossibility of the new, namely that there are no new stories, ideas, or constructs left to be made since all things that can be said or done have so been done" (337). Though my focus is not to approach Tripmaster Monkey as a postmodern text, I would like to elaborate on Lin's remark and point out that the "new" stories that are needed in the creative mind of Wittman Ah Sing are in fact reconstructions of existing narratives – a prominent feature of the talk-story narrative that Kingston employs. As Wittman experiences the sense of alienation as a minority figure in the American society and the exclusion of Chinese Americans in the American literary and theatrical tradition, he is aware of the importance of building a new artistic and cultural form of expression for his community. In China Men, Kingston reconstructs the story of her father as a scholar and poet by aligning him to the category of famous Chinese literary figures, subverting the stereotypes of Chinese simply being gold diggers in America. In Tripmaster Monkey, Kingston further highlights the literary talents of Chinese Americans by making her protagonist a playwright and an artist. Through analysing the "literariness" of the name of Wittman Ah Sing and his theatrical talk-story play, which invokes literary references from both the Chinese and western literatures, I would argue that Kingston claims the American literary tradition 2 by creating a new artistic voice and a collective Chinese American identity through establishing her protagonist Wittman as an artist, while refashioning the Chinese talk-story as a literary and performative art in Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book.

The Book: Tripmaster Monkey – a "Fake" book
Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book is labelled as Kingston’s only work of fiction so far. Unlike The Woman Warrior and China Men, which bear striking autobiographical traces, Tripmaster Monkey is a complete creation and invention — a “fake” book as suggested by its subtitle. Probably because some readers and critics have expected Kingston’s third major work to resemble the mixed-genre narrative structure of the two predecessors, the reception of Tripmaster Monkey, a novel rich in allusions and complex in language, has been rather mixed. Many readers and critics find the book unfathomable and difficult, primarily due to the complexities of the book’s episodic narrative structure and language. The novel draws heavily on resources from a wide range of Chinese and western narratives, both elite and popular, and its narrative shape deviates from the expectations of readers about the “normal” form of a novel. A bewilderment shared by all readers is most probably the “belligerent and brash voice” of Wittman, the hero who is not very much liked by readers and reviewers (Li 67) because he is often “misogynistic and obnoxious by contemporary feminist standards” (Sugiyama 92). Nonetheless, there are a number of critics who give favourable reviews on the book. As Cynthia Sau-ling Wong has noted, the book shows “remarkable artistry and garnered strong reviews” but does not become “a commercial success” (“Sugar Sisterhood” 175). The mixed reception is most likely to be caused by the “difficulty” of this enigmatic text — as David Leiwei Li puts it, the book is Kingston’s “most ambitious work to date” (67). The multi-layered, multi-vocal, and diverse language and narrative structure in the text corresponds to the complex situation Wittman is in as an ethnic minority member in America.

Set in the 1960’s of the American West coast, a period that Kingston considers as “some of the most important years” of her life and as significant in forming “the
country the way it is now," *Tripmaster Monkey* draws on Kingston’s experiences as an English major at the University of California, Berkeley – the protagonist of the book, Wittman Ah Sing, a 23-year-old English graduate of her alma mater who lives in San Francisco at the post-beatnik and early-Vietnam war era (Blauvelt 77). American culture experiences tremendous spiritual, psychedelic, and religious changes in the sixties – the Vietnam War, drug trips, violence, demonstrations and riots, political turmoils, and social movements. It is also the time that Kingston identifies as a dark period in Chinese American theatre as the nightshows were closed and there was no modern Chinese American theatre (Blauvelt 77, M. Chin 101). She senses the feeling of “missing” in that dark and yet interesting period and decides to set *Tripmaster Monkey* in the sixties, a period full of possibilities, after the beatniks and before the hippies (Blauvelt 77). Fascinated with the language breakthroughs and experiments of the sixties, Kingston decides to play with the 60’s slang in the book as there are lots of wonderful and new made-up words, such as the sit-in, the love-in, the be-in, the teach-in, to describe new ways of social and political protest, war and pacifist activities, new visions, Zen rituals, and psychedelic states (Blauvelt 78). Kingston feels that what she has done in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* is to translate the speeches, emotional life, and adventures of the people who live their lives with the Chinese language into a “graceful American language,” and therefore, in *Tripmaster Monkey*, she decides to put aside the Chinese rhythms and plays with modern American rhythms instead, improvising the American language she speaks and hears it everyday (M. Chin 100). Her explicit intention to play with language and slang clarifies the wild and playful language and complexities permeating the narrative, in which pidgins of American English, Cantonese Chinese, and Chinese American, and allusions to their cultural
narratives are noted.

The subtitle of the book, *His Fake Book*, significantly pinpoints the interactive nature of the talk-story aspect of the text and there are two connotations of subtitling it such. Firstly, as Kingston is frequently and even vigorously faulted for her distortion of Chinese sources in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, which are categorised as non-fictions, autobiographies, or memoirs; she playfully labels *Tripmaster Monkey* as “fake,” making it an ironic response to those aggressive attackers. Secondly, and more importantly, subtitling the book as *His Fake Book* stresses the themes of community, cultural continuation and integrity. A fake book is a predominant jazz term, though it could be applied to other forms of music in which improvisation is valued in general, and it is a book of basic tunes, chords, lyrics, and musical notes that the jazz musicians compile and collect for later improvisation. Based on standard melody line in the fake book, the musicians create additional melodies and produce new notes to perform the music in public. Kingston, by writing this “fake” book, intends to “write a prose book with basic plots, suggestions for social action, for trips” and she hopes to “trip the reader out and have them improvise further” (Blauvelt 77). She therefore continues the talk-story tradition as in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* in the sense that she invites and inspires the readers to participate and enact in this dynamic and interactive storytelling, and perform improvisations – revisions, deletions, additions, embellishments – as they like: “I was trying to replicate in text what happens in talk story and in music where you tell your version of the story. I’ve told this far, I’ve told my version, now you go on with it” (Skandera-Trombley, “Conversation” 42).

The subtitle also symbolises Kingston’s ambition to rewrite the American literary tradition by highlighting the artistic pursuit of Chinese Americans through
connecting Wittman’s theatrical production to musicality. Aware of the lack of Chinese Americans’ cultural impact on the mainstream American culture, Wittman hopes that Chinese Americans could revise the mainstream culture like African Americans who weave the jazz and blues culture into the American musical canon as he questions: “Where’s our jazz? Where’s our blues?” (TM 27). He decides that he wants to be the first one taking up the task of making a significant cultural impact: he proclaims that he wants “so bad to be the first bad-jazz China Man bluesman of America” (TM 27). Instead of creating melodious and musical notes in his fake book, Wittman, as in Huntley’s words, takes the literary canon and transforms “himself into a theatrical embodiment of verbal jazz” (Kingston 159). The incorporation of a set of Chinese cultural myths into his theatrical play in an American context signifies the importance of “fusion” for Wittman as he undergoes emotional epiphanies in his journey to sing a Chinese American self. As it emerges, Wittman’s fake book is a collage of a wide range of Chinese and Western literary and cultural myths and icons. As Debra Shostak has noted, there are more than two hundred references to the icons of Eastern and Western culture in the novel and Wittman’s fake book seems to be an embodiment of a mixture of Chinese and Western culture (63). This corresponds to what Patricia Lin has observed: she remarks that Tripmaster Monkey is “a ‘fake’ book” because “it is not a source of original thought, but rather itself a repetition and catalogue of other textual, experiential, and cultural constructs” (343). Just as Kingston who invites her readers to participate in the improvisation of her book, Wittman, presenting his fake book on stage, weaves and revises some of the narratives he has read into the play, and engages his audience in a talk-storied theatrical production for improvisation.
Using talk-story as a narrative mode for Wittman’s literary creation, Kingston asserts the importance of having a form of social art for Chinese Americans. In the sections that follow, I will first explicate the problem of racism and alienation experienced by Wittman, which ultimately drives him to his artistic pursuit in staging an epic play. I will then discuss how Kingston claims the American literary tradition by exploring the literariness of Wittman’s name and his talk-storied dramatic production.

Wittman in the “House of Squalor”: the House of Racism and Stereotypes

Wittman Ah Sing, though removed from his Chinese immigrant ancestors by a few generations, experiences problems of racism, alienation, and stereotyping, as a member of an ethnic minority community in America. As Wittman categorically claims in his one-man show, Chinese Americans are modelled and enslaved specifically by the American culture and their identities are constructed by the stereotypes represented in media: “They’ve got us in a bag, which we aren’t punching our way out of” (TM 308). As a fifth-generation native-born, Wittman’s undeniable American identity is constantly challenged. Because of his un-mistakably Chinese physical appearance, Wittman is not taken seriously by the majority of white Americans even though he possesses speaking, listening, and intellectual capabilities as most Americans do: “The color of his skin ... will mark him ‘Other’ in the eyes of the dominant society despite his considerable Americanization” (Maini 249). He recalls frustrating memories of being frequently asked if he speaks English after he has been speaking it fluently for hours or when people see his face in interviews, though ironically he actually gets those interview opportunities from making phone calls in which he speaks fluent English “like
anybody" (TM 317). He decides that it is because his speaking ability does not go with the face which reflects his Chinese ancestry, and therefore they "don't hear it" (TM 317). When Wittman goes to claim benefits at the Unemployment Office, he is confronted with the general misconception that Chinese people write in "poor grammar and broken English" and they only get "useful" engineering degrees (TM 241). As he talks to the officer there, he is astonished to learn that there is a practice called "the Chinese C" in universities – the professors raise the grades of Chinese engineering majors to a "C" when Wittman, ironically, thinks that this practice means they keep his grade down to a C no matter how well he is doing (TM 241). The officer, noticing Wittman’s dissatisfaction, turns round the situation by concluding that he will "notify employers that you’re a really unusual Chinese, who was able to graduate in the liberal arts" (TM 241). As a Chinese person, he is often questioned about his country of origin. He hates it when people start asking him stereotypical questions like "Where do you come from?" (TM 317) or demanding from him: "How about saying something in Chinese?" (TM 318). To Wittman, this is a dilemma, because either way is not "right" to him: "If you refuse, you feel stupid, and what'samatter, you're ashamed? But if you think of something Chinese to say, and you say it, noises come out of you that are not part of this civilization" (TM 318). Here, Wittman uses the phrase "what'samatter" ironically as he tries mimicking how the Americans think Chinese Americans are linguistically-retarded.

Though Wittman is born and raised in America and is typically Americanised like any white American, he nonetheless cannot overthrow the prevalent marking of him as an "alien" who is unfit in the dominant society. As a liberal arts major and playwright, Wittman is particularly interested in further exploring his talents in this
area. Wittman is therefore astonishingly annoyed when he tries to make significant and serious conversations by conveying his childhood dream of becoming a playwright to a great American Beat writer, who, however, only responds to him by asking whether there is a good Chinese restaurant nearby. Disappointing that the poet is not prepared to provide some advice as a guru, he painfully realises that the comment stems from a peculiar obsession of some white people in connecting the Chinese race with their food. Kingston has critically claimed in China Men that Chinese Americans are excluded both politically and socially, and in Tripmaster Monkey, she extends her frustration by demonstrating the lack of recognition of their artistic and literary talents through explicating Wittman’s frustration as he seeks to become an artist.

The mainstream media play a significant part in reinforcing the stereotypes of the Chinese Americans. Wittman is resentful of the representation of Chinese Americans in movies in which the majority of Americans harbour an enslavement wish and a death wish by making Chinese actors die, making him think that “they use the movies to brainwash us into suicide” (TM 319). These “wish-fulfilment” scenes in the mainstream movies show the media’s intention to belittle Chinese Americans by publicising their fragile and “enslaved” images. Some movies incorporate scenes of having a Chinese man lust after a white girl, but the producers have the Yellow Man kill himself before he could have anything to do with the white angel. According to Wittman, the Chinese’s acting talents are never recognised because they only “have careers of getting killed and playing dead bodies” and they are “shot, stabbed, kicked, socked, skinned, machine-gunned, blown up” again and again (TM 323-324). Wittman’s despair, frustration, and scarring from the racism of the media is shown in the opening pages of Tripmaster Monkey.
Monkey as he contemplates and subsequently dismisses the idea of suicide – a side product from the propaganda of the “death wish” in movies. Wittman expresses his exasperation at being denied an active voice in movies, literature, and public institutions where he is often asked to show proof of citizenship in America. The most critical claim concerning the mainstream culture’s discrimination and alienation is their intention to deny Chinese Americans’ active voice and subjectivity: “They depict us with an inability to say ‘I.’ They’re taking the ‘I’ away from us. ‘Me’ – that’s the fucked over, the fuckee. ‘I’ – that’s the mean-ass motherfucker first-person pronoun of the active voice, and they don’t want us to have it” (TM 318). The mainstream culture, thus, objectifies Chinese Americans and deprives them of individual subjectivities.

Wittman’s feeling of alienation is further aggravated as he discovers that he does not belong to the Chinese community either: in A. Williams’ words, it is a situation of being “twice denied individual identity and agency” (83). His fellow Chinese in Chinatown categorically exclude him by calling him “a whisker-growing man, Beatnik,” because being American-born and educated in the Western canon, he exhibits the complete American-ness of the 60’s American West coast (TM 11). Though Wittman possesses characteristic Chinese physical appearance of black hair, black eyes, and sallow skin and knows Chinatown jargon, he is a foreigner in the eyes of the Chinese people who retain vivid memories of their native China and never let go of their traditional Chinese principles. Wittman, therefore, fails to acquire a sense of recognition from either side and is operating “at the margins” of both cultures: the Americans consider him as an Oriental whereas the Chinese immigrants consider him as an American (Gao 103).

Apart from the alienation from the mainstream culture and his Chinese
compatriots, Wittman experiences an internalised inferiority as he is self-conscious of his status as a "yellow man," an ignored skin colour in the American society. His consciousness concerning his ethnic origin is shown as he tries to distinguish himself from the Fresh-off-the-Boats (F.O.B.) Chinese immigrants whose facial features are similar to his own. As he sees the F.O.B. couple and their kid in the tunnel while he walks past them, he self-consciously distances himself from them and makes derogative or even loathing comments about them in his mind: "The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public. Didn’t know how to walk together. Spitting seeds. So uncool. ... Uncool. Uncool. The tunnel smelled of mothballs – F.O.B. perfume" (TM 5) 13. Aware of the mainstream racist nature of this and frustrated at his lack of power to change the situation, he vents his anger by belittling the immigrant family and making hurtful remarks about them, though not aloud: "he takes it out on them by being nasty to them and not liking them and saying I’m not one of you. Like minority guys who beat up minority women" (M. Chin 95) 14. Wittman’s act here is reminiscent of the portrayal of Dale, an American-born Chinese, in the earlier part of David Henry Hwang’s play FOB (1979), the source for Wittman’s term “F.O.B.” Dale, who is aware that a person of Chinese ancestry in America is marked as the “Other,” projects his frustration and anger on another character, Steve, the FOB of the play’s title, even though Steve is different from most FOB immigrants – he is Westernised through receiving an education in UCLA and assimilating into the American pop culture. Though without good reasons, Dale is eager to express his superiority over the FOBs and projects his prejudices against them, as a way to distinguish himself from them. Just like Dale’s in FOB, Wittman’s behaviour could be explained using Sau-ling Cynthia Wong’s theory of
“racial shadow” – “By projecting undesirable ‘Asianness’ outward onto a double ... one renders alien what is, in fact, literally inalienable, thereby disowning and distancing it” – as noted by Maini (78). Here, Wittman’s behaviour is also reminiscent of what the female protagonist in The Woman Warrior has done: she projects her anger at another Chinese American girl, who is like her double, at school. As Wittman meets a group of Chinese Americans, whom he calls “orientals,” in a conference room, he avoids socialising or associating with them. The act of self-distancing and denial is again noted when Wittman meets Judy Louis, a “very plain” Chinese American girl, on a bus ride (TM 73). Weary of being picked by her as her “fellow ethnick,” Wittman pretends to be Japanese (TM 73). He criticises every aspect of her – her looks, her behaviour, and her speech. As Judy endeavours to make a conversation with Wittman, he imagines her as a “blue-black boar” – punning with the word “bore” (TM 79). Though Wittman denies his Chinese heritage, he is irritated and goes on asking Judy to go “looking for an all-American boy to assimilate with” when Judy complains of the Chinese boys’ lack of social skills (TM 78). This encounter corresponds to what Kingston describes as the relationship between Asian American men and women: “And in real life it’s really bad, just like what’s going on between the masculine critics and the feminine writers. Seventy-five percent of us marry people of other races. We’ll do anything to get away from each other” (Skenazy 145). People of ethnic origins therefore tend to hide away from each other, hoping that this would downplay or even erase their ethnic aspects.

Wittman is also highly sensitive concerning the Chinese belittlement in society. He reacts vigorously to the line “the twinkling little Chinese” in a Jack Kerouac poem and believes that the phrase targets his own “little-ness” (TM 69). He is
practically revengeful and bitter in his imaginative response to the poet: "Listen here, you twinkling little Canuck. What do you know, Kerouac? What do you know? You don’t know shit. I’m the American here. I’m the American walking here. Fuck Kerouac and his American road anyway" (TM 70). The fear of being belittled is reflected in one of his nightmares in which "Blacks and whites ... shake hands over my head. I’m the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked” (TM 308). He is furious as he overhears a group of people telling jokes at a dinner, which he claims are "racist" and "dirty" jokes, just because those people “looked like the kind who entertain one another with race jokes” (TM 214). Growing up in race-conscious America, Wittman has internalised these experiences and acts as over-sensitive and paranoid at times: “The way they drive you crazy is you can’t calibrate your paranoia” (TM 215). His paranoia is more evident from his internal monologue about his white wife, Taña. He tries to tease out “specific racism” even when he makes love to her and is delighted that Taña does not tell him she likes “yellow” skin or “slanty” eyes – the most hateful remarks Wittman hears about his physical appearance (TM 155). He decides that if Taña “turns out to be a freak for orientalia,” he would “kick her out of bed” because she is “not getting any mysterious East” from him (TM 155). In his one-man show, Wittman admits that he is being driven into a “pre-psychotic” state because of the numerous occasions in which people tell jokes to one another but quit when he walks in: “I’m already getting paranoid. I’m wishing for a cloak of invisibility” (TM 316).

Literariness of Wittman Ah Sing

In her endeavour to claim the American literary tradition, Kingston, as in The Woman Warrior and China Men, retells some established stories to create a new
artistic voice. While there are a number of literary references in the text, I will only
focus on Kingston’s use of Walt Whitman and the two classic Chinese narratives,
_The Romance of Three Kingdoms_ and _Journey to the West_, in my discussion of the
relation of literariness to Wittman Ah Sing in this chapter. As my analysis will
attempt to show, in _Tripmaster Monkey_, Kingston makes her protagonist an artist –
a literary self – with an ambition to subvert the existing stereotyped images of
Chinese Americans and establish a cultural form of empowerment for her
community, while at the same time, she demonstrates the possibility of constructing
an artistic self and a communal self through a multivocal literary production. As
Kingston invites readers to improvise Wittman’s fake book, a parallelism is
observed between the fake book and the talk-story tradition, where improvisation
and participation of audience is significant. In the rest of the chapter, I will
approach the literariness of Wittman from two angles: his unorthodox name and his
talk-storied epic theatrical performance.

--- His name: an allusion to Walt Whitman and Wit Man

The literariness of Wittman Ah Sing partly comes from the name’s allusion to
Walt Whitman (1819-1892), the quintessential American poet – “the most
American of the American poets” (Blauvelt 79). The presence of Walt Whitman in
_Tripmaster Monkey_ is discernible from some of the chapter titles of the book, that
are taken or adapted from Whitman’s poetry. In the portrayal of her protagonist,
Kingston deliberately brings in the spirit of Whitman because she is fascinated with
“the rhythm of his language and the freedom and the wildness of it” and “his vision
of a new kind of human being that was going to be formed in this country –
although he never specifically said Chinese – ethnic Chinese also – I’d like to think
he meant all kinds of people” (Fishkin 784). As she aims to create a new kind of American man who has a Chinese complexion and a Chinese last name, she finds Whitman’s egalitarian vision appealing and thus attempts to capture this Whitmanian spirit in Wittman, whose inclusion of people from all races in his play echoes Whitman’s egalitarian principle. The fictional Wittman, a poet and playwright with a passion for theatre, a free-spirited playfulness and independence, is reminiscent of Whitman, whose Leaves of Grass, which exemplifies a prime concern with the founding of a democratic community, is created out of the “emotions, raptures, uplifts” of opera he attended during the 1840s (Baym 1002). In Tripmaster Monkey, the presence of Walt Whitman is manifested not only in himself, but also in a Whitmanian tradition with the presence of his “intellectual and artistic disciples” – namely Allen Ginsberg, Abbie Hoffman, Jack Kerouac, James Baldwin, etc. (Tanner 62). The Whitmanian spirit in Wittman is observed as his mottoes of life practically parallel Whitman’s “principled philosophy of life” (Tanner 64) 18. In this sense, Kingston deliberately portrays Wittman Ah Sing, a Beat poet in the sixties, as a disciple of Walt Whitman, whose visions on the relation between “self” and “community” are greatly influential to Wittman’s theatrical production of a one-man show in the community of audience: “the creation of a democratic community is based on two things: respect for the individual and concern for the social order” (Tanner 68). As Wittman performs his solitary act on stage in the style of talk-stories, he is inventing “selves” not “just for himself, but for the audience to whom (and for whom) he speaks” (Shostak 69). It is because talk-story is by nature a communal act and “is inclusive and democratic, cutting across boundaries of age, literacy, gender, and class” (Maini 258). By performing his play in a talk-story style, Wittman not only forges a sense of
solidarity with his fellow Chinese Americans, but also celebrates and preserves his ethnic culture of oral talk-story tradition. In striking a balance between “self” and “community,” Wittman carefully involves his audience as he seeks for an appropriate way of self-expression. Kingston, therefore, instils the Whitmanian spirit in Wittman, with a hope of rendering him the power to build up a new society, as he absorbs the ideals and principles of the American great poet, whom Kingston admires as one who is “so different from other writers of his time, and even of this time” (Fishkin 784).

The name of Wittman Ah Sing exemplifies a combination of two cultures—according to Huntley, the name is “a linguistic game” (Kingston 162). His first name “Wittman” obviously alludes to Walt Whitman but Kingston deliberately captures the uniqueness of Chinese Americans by spelling those two syllables “kind of funny” (Blauvelt 79). The misspelling, according to Debra Shostak, represents “both the connection to and distance from American culture of this character” (63). Wittman’s mission, then, is to “make” this misspelling part of the American culture and for Kingston, to make Wittman “an American Everyman, not only a Chinese-American Everyman” (Shostak 64). To profess his American-ness, Wittman modulates his Chinese-sound surname into an American one. He proclaims that his unconventional last name is a product of his family’s immigration history:

“I’m one of the American Ah Sings. Probably there are no Ah Sings in China. You may laugh behind my family’s back, that we keep the Ah and think it means something. ... Ah Smith. Ah Jones. Everyone has an ah, only our family writes ours down. In that Ah, you can hear we had an ancestor who left a country where the language has sounds that don’t mean anything – la and ma and wa – like music. ... When his new friends asked him his name, he
remembered that those who wanted him had called, 'Ah Sing.' So he told the schoolmarm, ‘Ah Sing, ma’am,’ and she wrote down for him the two syllables of a new American name.”

In contrast to his previous internalised inferiority and discrimination against the F.O.B.’s, Wittman celebrates his Chinese heritage, historical background, and cultural influence as he boldly and playfully admits that his family name exists simply due to a funny misunderstanding. As he tells his audience that “Ah Sing” is actually a new American surname, he not only urges them to acknowledge the Chinese’s root in America, but also reminds them that in his fight for an American identity he is not letting go of his Chinese heritage, nor destroying his Chinese legacy.

Wittman’s last name “Ah Sing” is also reminiscent of Walt Whitman’s literary presence. In Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” the poet sings his American self with poetic lines: “I sing the body electric” and “I sing the body from top to toe.” The “I sing”’s in these lines are then revived as and punned with Wittman’s last name “Ah Sing” in Tripmaster Monkey. In inventing her protagonist’s name with Walt Whitman in mind, Kingston means to carry on the poet’s tradition in the celebration of “self.” In the book, she attempts to sing Wittman’s “Chinese American self” and celebrates “a Chinese American man from top to toe,” and therefore she writes “his skin, his eyes, the teeth, ears, penis, the chest, hair, toes” (Blauvelt 79-80). Making puns with “I sing,” Wittman’s surname clarifies his ambition to celebrate his identity, his country, his people, and himself, with a voice which is to be heeded. Besides the concern for “self,” Wittman, like Whitman who has a “strong impulse to hold America together” – “the individual and the mass” (Reynolds 307), has a concern for the “community” as well – “Maxine Hong Kingston, like Walt
Whitman, is concerned with the construction of two entities, the self and the community, the requirement in a democratic society that the individual have proper scope for development and that the community have means for furthering social goals" (Tanner 64). Same as Whitman’s idea of a collective “I,” Wittman is not concerned just with an individual self, but a communal self as well. This vision of Wittman is evident as he has an aspiration of building a community with art – a theatrical play with articulating multiracial actors. As an epic poet, Whitman’s “I” takes everyone in to make his “I”, the voice of a “Whit(e)” man; while Wittman makes the theatre a social art, building a social collectivity by giving everyone their own “I”s. The distinction between the “I”s of Whitman and Wittman thus amplifies the change from a “Whit(e)” man’s voice to a collective voice of Chinese Americans, substantiating Kingston’s aspiration to claim America with the voice of a minority member. The building of theatre as a social art also echoes the book’s subtitle, *His Fake Book*, in making specific reference to music – another form of social art that shapes a culture – and the importance of voice and articulation in Kingston’s two previous works, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. “Ah/I Sing” therefore reiterates the significance of voice in re-establishing and reviving the emasculated Chinese American identity. The deflection of “I” as “Ah” in the surname symbolises Wittman’s laying claims on the work of a great American poet. This is also a response to the mainstream culture’s ignorance and deprivation of the subjectivity of Chinese Americans as Kingston ingeniously incorporates the word “I” (though in a disguised form), which represents an individual subjectivity, into the last name of her protagonist. Given that naming is such an important issue for an individual’s struggle for a self-definition and identity, Wittman’s name, a fused product of American and Chinese influences, thus represents his Chinese American
self—an American self fused with Chinese-ness.

“Wittman” could also be read as “Wit Man,” as his mother Ruby Ah Sing and the Flora Dora Aunties call him. While the separation of the first name into two words recalls the verbal and linguistic difficulty of most first generation Chinese Americans, calling Wittman “Wit Man” significantly alludes to Monkey in *Journey to the West* as Monkey is adored as the “Wit Man” who is capable of turning around dangerous situations. Through associating “wit” with literary invention and the trickster figure (the Monkey King as a trickster-saint), the literariness of Wittman is further explored.

In a general sense, the term “wit” denotes intelligence, inventiveness, and wisdom. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, “wit” is used also “for ingenuity in literary invention, and especially for the ability to develop brilliant, surprising, and paradoxical figures of speech” (Abrams 330). In Alexander Pope’s *An Essay on Criticism*, he defines “true wit” as “What oft was thought, but ne’er so well expressed” (ll. 297-298). While “wit” carries a number of meanings in the poem, its connotation on inventiveness, genius, and poetry itself leads to the idea of wit as a literary imagination and creativity. Though Pope’s idea represents a pre-Romantic thought on “wit,” Wittman’s identity as a poet and an artist and his carrying a function of art in *Tripmaster Monkey* are signified.

“Wit Man” is also associated to the trickster figure, whose cleverness, wisdom, and trickery makes them archetypal figures in the myths and folktales of many cultures. In *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, a trickster is defined as “a character in a story who persistently uses his williness, and gift of gab, to achieve his ends by outmaneuvering or outwitting other characters” (7). The word “outwitting” here is significant as it explicitly exemplifies that the trickster is thought to possess “wit”
as one of his characteristics. Some common characteristics of tricksters include “shape-shifting, cross-dressing, disruption, playfulness, and liminality” and a trickster, as the name suggests, is fond of playing tricks on others (Monsma 83). One important definition of trickster put forward by Lewis Hyde is that “trickster is a boundary-crosser” (qtd. in “Tricksters”). In *Tripmaster Monkey*, “a full-blown trickster novel” (J. Smith, *Writing* 49), Wittman is an embodiment of a literary trickster, whose connection to the Monkey King and his boundary-breaking fake book in blurring distinctions between Chinese and western sources, and “real” and “fake” cultural myths as he revises and retells stories while orchestrating his performance is remarkably noticeable. His ability to change and transform with wit, a trickster spirit, becomes a prominent quality in his pursuit as an artist.

Wittman is a new American Monkey King in *Tripmaster Monkey*, as he categorically proclaims to Nanci Lee, “I am really: the present-day U.S.A. incarnation of the King of the Monkeys” (*TM* 33). As part of the novel’s title, “*Monkey*” alludes to the monkey spirit emanating from the classic sixteenth-century Chinese comic narrative *Journey to the West* by Wu Ch’eng-en. This classic, popular, and comic tale of adventures recounts the historical pilgrimage of a seventh-century monk, Tripitaka, in search of the Buddhist scriptures in India, situated at the west of China. The journey is escorted by Pigsy, Sandy, and most significantly the Monkey King (Sun Wu Kung), the hero of the novel who possesses the power of transforming into seventy-two forms in case of danger, travels long distances in seconds, sees through disguised appearances, and tends to challenge forces of authority. The Monkey King is the central character in the novel and is well liked by the readers for many centuries for his fun, humour, energy, trickery qualities, mischief and rebellion, defiance of established authority,
and quest for knowledge. Diane Simmons observes that “While Monkey is most accessible to English readers through translations of the novel, he has been highly visible to generations of Chinese as the central character of traditional stage performances” (144). This is probably part of the reason why the character of the Monkey King lurks in Kingston’s mind as she invents the character of Wittman, a theatre-loving playwright-to-be. As Kingston writes about the sixties in this book, she begins to see that the monkey spirit has come to America – she therefore intentionally has the monkey continuing the journey and emigrating to America in the sixties. She sees the monkey spirit in the Chicago Seven as they were like seven monkeys bringing chaos to the establishment (Blauvelt 78), at the Democratic Convention in Chicago, and on the march to the Pentagon (Seshachari 204) 21. In Yao Gao’s words, “Kingston Americanizes the new monkey or monkeyizes the American” by crossing cultural boundaries in the book (140).

Possessing trickster strategies, Wittman, like the Monkey King in Journey to the West, is presented in a collision of personas to subvert the monolithic concept of a Chinese American identity: he is a graduate, a salesman, a poet, an actor, a playwright, and a theatre director. Capturing the monkey spirit in Wittman sheds light on his resistance to being “made into a static stereotype” – one of the main aims of his non-violent warfare (Deeney 24). Like the Monkey King who possesses the power of transformation, Wittman exemplifies his ability to transform by revisiting the Chinese classic narratives he has read, modifies and renders those texts with an American insight. In Journey to the West, Monkey emerges from a stone egg under the influence of sun and moon. C. T. Hsia argues that with such a creation myth, Monkey’s “discontent with a pastoral mode of life and his ambition to seek power and knowledge can be seen as signs of a conscious striving upward –
from inanimate stone to animal shape with human intelligence to the highest spiritual attainment possible" (134). In this regard, Wittman resembles Monkey in that his quest for a self-definition and identity as a Chinese American stems from his ambition to transform himself from an object (an inanimate stone) to a subject (an animal shape with intelligence) in America:

'We used to have a mighty 'I,' but we lost it. At one time whenever we said 'I,' we said 'I-warrior.' ... 'I-warrior' was the same whether subject or object, 'I-warrior' whether the actor or the receiver of action. ... This word, maybe pronounced 'ge,' was also the word for long weapons such as spears and lances and Ah Monkey's pole and the longsword. This longest stroke must be the weapon. And 'ge' also meant 'fight.' To say 'I' was to say 'I fight.' ... We are the grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior. Don't let them take the fight out of our spirit and language. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I-warrior win the West and the Earth and the universe. (TM 319)

To fight for the "I" which is eliminated by the mainstream culture, Wittman exhibits his Monkey spirit in changing his and his community's position in the society with a metaphorical weapon - his storytelling, play, and speech - to sum up, art. To resurrect the dying Chinese culture, this quest for an "I" has become "a strategy for survival, an endeavor to render visible what is deemed invisible by the dominant society" (Maini 256). In Journey to the West, the Monkey King is able to bounce back against all odds and trials that the gods in heaven beset him with and according to Kingston, his bouncing back "has to do with irrepressible joy and his spirit of fun" (M. Chin 90). She wants to capture this monkey spirit in the sixties in Wittman, who would change the world with "costumes and street theatre" like Abby Hoffman and Allen Ginsberg who are monkey spirits (M. Chin 90). The
monkey spirit, hence, is transplanted from a classic Chinese written text to a present-day American man in Kingston’s creation, whose vision of merging the monkey spirit in both the Chinese and American cultures, with the latter as the continuation, attempts to reconcile the dual heritage in Wittman.

The novel’s main title *Tripmaster Monkey* embodies the trickster spirits from both the sixties American and the sixteenth-century Chinese, in Shostak’s words, the title of the novel “weds the Chinese Monkey to the American hipper tripmaster” (67). While the Monkey King is made the leader of all monkeys because he jumps “through a waterfall to find an ideal home for all monkeys” (Gao 99), an act signifying his daring and ambitious spirit, Kingston portrays Wittman as an adventurous guide in another aspect by titling the novel with the word “tripmaster,” which refers to a prevalent sixties American motif. According to Kingston, “tripmaster” is a new word from the sixties – drug culture was popular then and “tripmaster” refers to the person who guides the drug trippers at parties, makes sure that they are safe, and keeps them from flipping out (Seshachari 204). It is important for the “tripmaster” to guarantee a pleasant “trip” for the trippers, so that he/she enables the “hallucinators to envision calm, peaceful scenes or safely exciting imaginary landscapes” (Huntley, *Kingston* 176) 22. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, the word “tripmaster” is not only to be taken literally as referring to the setting of the novel in the sixties America in which drug culture is prevalent. By labelling her protagonist a “tripmaster,” Wittman becomes a guide in leading his fellow Chinese Americans on their journey towards artistic pursuit and the establishment of a collective identity. The word “trip” provides a reference to art – as a trip is normally taken for pleasure, which means for its own sake, it is similar to art as artists are working on it for its own sake and aesthetic pleasure. As a tripmaster is
expected to trip the hallucinators for a safe journey, Wittman, afflicted with
hallucinations and paranoia as an ethnic minority member in America, trips himself
out of the self-and-media-induced paranoia of belittlement through engaging in a
theatrical journey. Due to the opium war, the Chinese are associated with the use
of opium (drugs) in the American minds (Young 82) and Wittman's role as a
tripmaster subtly suggests a connection of him with both the orient and the West.
Talking about the novel's main title, Kingston envisions a connection between the
two words: "It's the most interesting coincidence that Monkey accompanied
Tripitika to India and, isn't that funny - Tripitika and Tripmaster begin in the same
T-R-I-P? Isn't that odd?" (Seshachari 204). Hence, the "tripmaster" and "monkey"
are brought together in the portrayal of the protagonist. Wittman Ah Sing is the
"tripmaster monkey" in the book as he aspires to take up the task of changing the
American culture with a new form of social art and Wittman manifests himself as a
literary "tripmaster" as he leads his audience into his trip of quest and
enlightenment.

-- His "talk-story" play: A Song of Himself 23

Besides his name, Wittman's literariness comes from his theatrical play - a
revised version of the epic Chinese classic narratives - as it is a product of his
literary creativity. Aiming to break through from the "house of squalor," Wittman
Ah Sing sings a "Song of Himself" by talking-story on the stage. As mentioned
above, Wittman takes up the task of being a tripmaster in leading his fellow men
out of the house of racism and alienation and his way of doing so is to write a
Chinese American play into the fabric of the American West theatrical tradition.
As he travels in the course of defining himself theatrically, he undergoes significant
changes in his attitudes towards others: he has significantly moved from rejecting his Chinese compatriots to accepting and appreciating them. His talk-story on stage aims to achieve three objectives: first, he would like to wage a non-violent "artistic" war against mainstream stereotypes of Chinese Americans with his play; second, he aspires to build a community through art – writing and performing "the writing" on stage; third, he claims his American identity and the American artistic tradition through "fusion" – a pacifist call to solve conflicts against the backdrop of the Vietnam war in the 1960’s. By doing so, he tries to set right the pains of the Chinese Americans – the lack of a sense of community and the non-acceptance by the majority of Americans: “It would pain a true Chinese to admit that he or she did not have a community, or belonged at the bottom or the margin” (TM 10).

Exhibiting and exercising the power of “bee-e-een!” (Cantonese transliteration of the word “transformation”) of the Monkey King, Wittman sets out to change his world, both external and internal, with an epic play which weaves the Chinese narratives he has read into the American context and casts every individual of his acquaintance, regardless of their ethnic origins. In the following section, I am going to explore how Wittman achieves his three aims by analysing selective sections of his play-in-progress in which he retells the classic Chinese narratives in a talk-story form, and his one-man show, a solitary monologue and performance on stage coupled with his individual and communal visions, at the end of the novel. My aim is to show that, through staging his literary creation, Wittman weaves a Chinese American artistic voice into the collective American voice.

As in The Woman Warrior and China Men, Kingston has adopted the talk-story narrative form of discourse in Tripmaster Monkey. Her inclusion of the readers/audience in the narrative is a directly copied version of these classic
Chinese novels which resemble the Chinese talk-story tradition, such as *The Dream of Red Chamber*, *The Romance of Three Kingdoms*, and *Journey to the West*. At the end of each chapter of the classic Chinese novels, the author invokes the readers' curiosity by inviting them to go on to the next chapter to find out what happens next, just as the storytellers would encourage their audience to come back for the next day's stories; and in *Tripmaster Monkey*, this talk-story tradition is highlighted as the author/narrator asks us to move forward: "If you want to see whether he will get that play up, and how a poor monkey makes a living so he can afford to spend the weekday afternoon drinking coffee and hanging out, go on to the next chapter" (*TM* 35) 24. Employing the form of Chinese talk-story, the play that Wittman writes consists of a succession of run-on episodes and lasts for several nights, each night with different scenes, stories, and characters. In his epic drama, Wittman invokes sources from three of China's four great fictional narratives — *Journey to the West*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a fourteenth-century classic narrative about the power struggle of three kingdoms, Shu, Wu, and Wei, for the reign of China in the third century, and *The Water Margin*, another Chinese classic text about the adventures of 108 twelfth-century outlaws. He carefully selects specific portions from the three classic literary texts which could fit into the scheme of his play 25, and modifies and re-creates them to explicate his mission of defining his place in America. By revising and retelling the ancient Chinese stories on an American stage, Wittman forges a connection with his Chinese heritage and metaphorically translates his reservoir of Chinese stories into an American context; and at the same time brings together his diverse community with a combination of "revue-lecture" play (*TM* 288). To perform the play in the style of a one-man show with a multiple-voiced presentation, Wittman also follows the conventional
Chinese tradition of telling stories on the stage as a performative art, thus reiterating his Chinese heritage and cultural tradition.

Enacting a more important characteristic of talk-story tradition, and resembling what Kingston has done in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Wittman appropriates and modifies sections of the three Chinese classical texts in *Tripmaster Monkey* to wage a non-violent war on “the house of squalor” in which he is captured – in his own words, it is “to spook out prejudice” (*TM* 332). In his play, he rewrites and metaphorically translates old Chinese stories and interprets them for the American context. He functions as a tripmaster and trickster in blending and transforming the Chinese resources into a public American play, thus ensuring his multiethnic audience (trippers) not to be hallucinated by the mainstream culture and un-brainwashing them with his artistic talents. In *Journey to the West*, the Monkey King vents his anger at being left out by resorting to war when he knows that he is not invited to a triple-millennial party. Unlike the Monkey King who crashes parties in a violent way, Wittman resolves the conflicts of racism and isolation in the dominant American culture through a peaceful means: he dismisses the idea “that revolutionaries must shoot and bomb and kill” as crazy and that “revolution is not [sic] the same as war” (*TM* 305). A pacifist at heart, Wittman embraces his feeling of insignificance in the circle of white Americans by staging a play that includes everyone he knows: Chinese, Caucasians, and Japanese – “in our theater, we will have regard for all kinds no matter they’re disregarding us” (*TM* 275). He aims to expel racism by including all talented players, regardless of their skin colours because the celebration of artistic talents is the most important: “As playwright and producer and director, I’m casting blind. That means the actors can be any race. Each member of the Tyrone family or the
Lomans can be a different color. I'm including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place" (TM 52). By pulling in a multiracial cast and dispelling racist concerns, Wittman plays to celebrate the multitudes and variations in the American society, and appeals for acceptance and harmony. The three brothers in Romance of the Three Kingdoms are acted out by three people of diversified racial backgrounds 26 and Wittman's insistence on a multi-racial cast amplifies his ideal of establishing solidarity and brotherhood transcending racial categories (Gao 127). He also revises "the Eugene O'Neill/Arthur Miller classic American theatrical tradition with its 'typical' white American family, refusing also to replace it with an all-Chinese American cast" (Smith, "Rethinking" 76). Wittman’s ideal, therefore, is to achieve his mission of warring through "fusion," not "escape" or "expulsion" or "self-isolation." In re-narrating the scene of the three brother's oath-taking at the Peach Garden, Wittman adds the colour of "yellow" to "black" and "white," the colours of the sacrificial animals (a black ox and a white horse) in the original oath taking scene in The Three Kingdoms, to signify racial reconciliation (TM 145-146). The addition of "yellow" to "black" and "white" metaphorically heals Wittman's scar from his nightmare of being overlooked as a little yellow man under the shaking hands of a Black and a white (TM 308) and in Gao's analysis, "all races are reconciled" in Wittman's revised image of commingled colours (128) 27. This, in my opinion, is an obvious exemplification of "fusion" – instead of literally destroying one another, people of different colours could be mingled in harmony.

Wittman introduces an all-American cast in his play and suggests that his audience should remove the ethnic labels on the Chinese in America. He categorically teaches his audience at the end of the play that it is time to move
forward and forget about the “sojourners” generation of Chinese immigrants. He is bringing an “all-American cast” to his play and hopes that his audience would recognise this fact: “We’re all of us Americans here” (TM 327). He asks people to take the hyphen out in the term “Chinese-American” so as to make “‘American,’ the noun, and ‘Chinese,’ the adjective” (TM 327). The terminal shift from “Chinese hyphen American” to “Chinese no hyphen American” has been examined in Chapter 3 about China Men. Here, in Tripmaster Monkey, Kingston tells her readers that the terminal shift is not in itself sufficient to “claim” America because “‘Chinese hyphen American’ sounds exactly the same as ‘Chinese no hyphen American.’ No revolution takes place in the mouth or in the ear” (TM 327). With the proclamation of the “shortcoming” of such a term, Wittman proceeds to “show” – visually – his American side in front of the multiethnic audience. This is an appeal to senses to clarify his American-ness – instead of appealing it through speech and hearing, he appeals through sight – performance and action – on stage.

In addition to the multi-racial ideal, Wittman promotes his anti-war and pacifist position through his retelling of the Chinese narratives in an American theatre, and thereby suggests that martial warring is not an ideal way of resolving conflicts. On the one hand, this reiterates Wittman’s and by extension, Kingston’s anti-war stance; and on the other hand, it shows that the Chinese stories are symbolically contextualised in America. This is also Wittman’s response to the discrimination and stereotypes he experiences as a minority member – he does not resort to violent killing to “heal” his paranoia of being suppressed, like Cho Cho who kills the innocent host family because he is paranoically persuaded into believing that they are planning to kill him; instead, Wittman plans to expel the paranoia through pacifist means (TM 311). The tale of Cho Cho’s atrocious
mistake in killing innocent victims is probably uncomfortable to the white people, as the narrator suggests. With this tale, Wittman implicitly warns the white people of the most horrific consequence that paranoia, induced by their racism and the Chinese people's sensitive self-consciousness, would bring: it "implies that in life a tragedy may result for white Americans if they refuse to lose their wilful innocence" (Gao 136). Therefore, he sets out to do something constructive and non-violent, instead of mutually destructive, to change the situation.

Wittman's ideal of pacifism is evidenced in the modified sections in the classic Chinese war epic, *The Three Kingdoms*. The three brothers in the original narrative of the novel vow to fight for the unification of China but in Wittman's appropriation, the three brothers are united against war and they recite anti-war lines such as "I want to be a dove" and "I'd rather be killed than kill" (*TM* 142). The transformation of the three brothers from their alliance for war into a pacifist engagement corresponds to Wittman's philosophy of waging war against racism through peace and art; and conveys his anti-war stance against America's engagement in the Vietnam war, the time at which *Tripmaster Monkey* is set. Wittman's rewritten version of *The Three Kingdoms*, instead of glorifying the bravery of the war heroes, points sharply to the waste of life in war by focusing on the deaths of the leaders. Those who lose die but those who win also live in constant fits of terror for the rest of their lives. Cho Cho, the ambitious and atrocious emperor of Wei in *The Three Kingdoms* whose kingdom is initially the most powerful among the three, laments the sadness of waste of war in Wittman's reconstruction: "Aiya, I am sad. I wasted my life at war. The ravens fly across the moon; they circle the trees, and find no nest" (*TM* 198). Instead of rejoicing at his victories, the lamentations of homelessness by Wittman's Cho Cho deepens the
theme of pacifism which underscores the entire novel. In the original, Gwan Goong, the heroic warrior and god of war and literature, dies at the traps of Sun Ch’uan, the leader of Wu. In Wittman’s narration, Gwan’s ghost comes back and haunts Sun: the ghost calls Sun “My blue-eyed boy. My red-whiskered rodent,” invoking physical features of the Euro-Americans and reminding the readers of Wittman’s war against racism (TM 284). At his deathbed, Liu Pei, the emperor of Su, echoes Cho Cho’s sadness: “O home-returning powers, where might home be? How to find it and dwell there?” (TM 284). As their lives come to the end, the three leaders who spend all of their lives fighting, finally realise the meaninglessness of war. After the deaths of the main leaders in Wittman’s rewritten epic, the narrator tells the readers that it is not the end of the performance:

Gwan’s grandchildren were gathered to find out: Then what? Gwan Goong has the ability to travel anywhere, crossing back and forth the River of Stars to visit his brothers and his enemies. An ocean-going ship will cross the stage behind a scrim of time, and he will be on it. Gwan Goong on Angel Island. Gwan Goong on Ellis Island. (TM 284-285)

In this way, Kingston ingeniously transports an iconic Chinese literary character to America and re-fashions his descendents as Americans to represent “for Wittman—and Kingston—the ethnic ‘battleground’ of America and the hundred years of struggle over the turf of cultural identity” (Shostak 65). Wittman, a new American monkey, significantly transforms the heroic war epic into a pacifist play by transplanting and translating old Chinese stories on an American stage. Through staging a revised version of The Three Kingdoms, Wittman demonstrates that though the three brothers and Cho Cho are masters of the war, they have lost at the end. In reiterating his pacifist stance, he also makes up his mind that he will not go
to Vietnam or to any war (TM 340).

The retelling of tales, as in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, is one important exhibition of Chinese talk-story form in *Tripmaster Monkey*; yet, storytelling possesses perhaps a more significant role in this novel - it is the strategy through which Wittman founds his identity for himself and his community. Unlike the first generation Chinese immigrants in America who earn a living mainly by physical labour - "sweat and blood" - as in *China Men*, Kingston deliberately suggests that the Chinese's contribution to America is not limited to the building of roads and tunnels, but includes the cultural flourish - artistic and literary areas - as well. She delineates Wittman's family's artistic history in *Tripmaster Monkey* and thus revises the American "all-white" artistic tradition. The theatrical trunk that Wittman's great-great-grandfather brings to America when he first lands on the foreign land becomes Wittman's cultural root and theatrical cradle, in which he aspires to fill with "poems and play-acts" (TM 29). Wittman's parents, Ruby and Zeppelin Ah Sing, are theatrical performers and as Maini has suggested, their portrayals "are totally unlike th[e] image of the 'typical' Chinese-Americans" who belong to the working class and whose only goal in working is making money (248). Unlike most Chinese people who choose "practical" subjects, such as engineering and business, in universities as majors, Wittman opts for a liberal arts education. Getting bored with his job as a sales assistant at a department store, Wittman rebelliously makes a pornographic toy display with a monkey on top of a Barbie Bride doll and gets fired. Being jobless and with no intention of getting another paid but meaningless job, he tries to claim benefits from the Unemployment Office and insists on pursuing his dream of becoming a playwright. By doing so, Wittman shows that he is ready to sacrifice his
materialistic life and thus subverts the belief that all Chinese Americans come to the country solely for money: "The difference between us and other pioneers, we did not come here for the gold streets. We came to play. And we'll play again" (TM 249-250). Staging his play and starting a theatre company on the one hand is a realisation of his dream, while on the other hand, he revives the Chinese theatrical tradition by introducing it to the American audience. Just as he answers the majority of people's racism and stereotypes, Wittman admits that there are indeed some Chinese immigrants in America who have broken laws before, and yet he hopes to overthrow that impression with his art: "But, Uncle, we bad. Chinaman freaks. Illegal aliens. Outlaws. Outcasts of America. But we make our place – this one community house for benevolent living. We make theatre, we make community" (TM 261). Wittman’s remark here also echoes the theme of “marking a place” in China Men to claim the Chinese's contribution to the country. By establishing a theatre, Wittman intends to “introduce” himself and his ignored ethnic group, to a wide audience of all ethnicities, and resurrect the dying Chinese culture and theatrical tradition, which vanishes after the Second World War in Chinatown. Wittman brings scenes from the classic Chinese stories and casts everyone he knows as performers and audience, thus making the Chinese heroes American and making America Chinese (Simmons 159).

Wittman's search for a self-definition through writing is reminiscent of the female protagonist in The Woman Warrior who struggles for her identity and breaks silence through becoming an artistic word-weaver; yet, Wittman takes a step further to “perform” his writing – his play – in front of a large audience to assure making an immediate and dynamic impact on the people and aspires to build up a Chinese American communal identity with the play. As Wittman seeks to build up
an individual identity with his play, he realises that "the ideology of individualism (promoted by the male white power in America) can hardly be beneficial and would isolate him even further instead of giving him a sense of identity" as long as "he is defined by the color of his skin" (Maini 252). He believes that the upholding of individualism in America helps him in no way because it is a predominantly "white" concept: "Since when? A white-boy gang? Two white-boy gangs. White boys don't need a gang because they own the country. They go about the country individually and confidently, and not on the lookout for whom to ally with" (TM 71). He therefore determines to combine his individual search with the quest for a communal identity which is degenerating (TM 255). Wittman is not only concerned about the identity of "self," but that of the "community" as well; just as a similar concern is raised by the American poet for whom he is named 28. It is therefore not only a fight for himself, but also a fight for his people, his community, and his race and he therefore aspires to establish a Chinese American one with his continuous play: "He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it" (TM 306). It is thus an appeal for a communal effort and participation, reiterating and echoing the interactive and collaborative nature of Chinese talk-stories. He deliberately alludes to the one hundred and eight outlaws, who are defiant of the official authority, in The Water Margin to highlight the importance of the Chinese Americans (the suppressed "outlaws" of America) to build a community:

There the stranger, the weird and the alienated make their own country. And have one hundred and seven brothers and sisters. The one hundred and eight banditos, banished from everywhere else, build a community. Their thousands
of stories, multiples of a hundred and eight, branch and weave, intersecting at
the Water Verge. (TM 261) 29

The theatre is then the “Water Verge” for Wittman to promote the communal
identity as theatrical play is a form of social art that involves everyone: “Everyone
came – friends, and friends’ friends, and family. ... They came because what
Boleslavsky said is true: ‘Acting is the life of the human soul receiving its birth
through art.’ Everyone really does want to get into the act” (TM 276). While the
one hundred and eight outlaws are renowned for their loyalty and bravery in
“subverting government policy and taking the law into their own hands,” Wittman
metaphorically follows their footsteps in overturning the fixed categories of
defining people by their race, but in a non-violent way (Huntley, Kingston 172).

Wittman names his theatre company “The Pear Garden Players of America” –
an allusion to the peach garden in The Romance of Three Kingdoms where the three
brothers take their oath and vow loyalty to one another. The name of Wittman’s
company thus implicitly promotes the bond of brotherhood and the importance for
the Chinese Americans of building a community in “A Pear Garden in the West” –
the seventh chapter title in the book (TM 269). Wittman, as he moves from reading
poetry on a bus to performing a theatrical play on stage, generates a creative and
distinctive voice for himself and his race, and builds up a community with this
social art instead of a solitary act; because his physical appearance speaks for itself
when he comes on stage: “By writing a play, he didn’t need descriptions that
racinated anybody. The actors will walk out on stage and their looks will be self-
evident” (TM 34). In staging a play which includes everybody and everything,
Wittman subtly and ingeniously answers the question that one beautiful young girl
asks at the party: “How do you reconcile unity and identity?” (TM 105).
As Wittman trips himself and his fellow Chinese men out of their paranoia with his artistic production, he is internally transformed and begins to appreciate his physical features and personality as a combination of both of the Chinese and American legacies. Wittman thinks that history is “embodied in physical characteristics, such as skin colors” and what makes Chinese so mysteriously inscrutable is their “little squinny eyes” – an obvious physical feature which is different from the Caucasian eyes (TM 312). As Wittman has told Nanci at the beginning of the novel, one of his aims in writing a play is to write a part for her “where audience learns to fall in love with you for your ochery skin and round nose and flat profile and slanty eyes, and your bit of an accent” (TM 27). In this sense, Wittman promotes the importance of appreciating one’s unique self instead of assimilating for the sake of pandering to white ideals. Subverting the dominant racial stereotype of defining one’s individuality with the facial features or skin colours which exclude the “yellow” colour, Wittman declares his looks perfect and that he has “an American face” (TM 314). He even goes further to claim that the famous cowboy movies stars such as Roy Rogers, John Wayne, and Lee Marvin, have Chinese eyes that are similar to his, and triumphantly declares that “we have the eyes that won the West” (TM 314). By claiming his looks American and the American movie stars’ looks Chinese, Wittman significantly invalidates the mainstream Americans’ racial stereotype of differentiating people based on their looks – physical features and skin colours, and proclaims that physical appearance should not be a marker of differences in the American society. He encourages his fellow Chinese Americans to accept and appreciate their distinct Chinese looks and
stop having plastic surgery or putting on false eyelashes; while at the same time, he suggests that his white American fellowmen eliminate the stereotypes that are afflicting the society. By declaring that the looks of Chinese and Americans are similar, Wittman reiterates that they are "allthesame" Americans (TM 282). While Debra Shostak suggests that Wittman's insistence in pronouncing the term "allthesame Americans" reinforces the "linguistic alienation of some Chinese Americans," I propose that the utterance of this term echoes the specific and unique linguistic competency of his tribe and that Wittman views it as part of the precious Chinese heritage which is influencing American culture (67).

Besides physical appearance, Wittman would also like to validate the personalities and inner traits of Chinese Americans who are subjected to stereotypes as being introverted and closed. In an experiment targeted at Chinese Americans who are expected to designate adjectives to separate columns of "Chinese" and "American," Wittman discovers that he assigns the Chinese side "some Star Quality items" such as "Daring," "Laughter," "Spontaneous," and "Easygoing," but the standard answer is that "the American side got all the fun traits" (TM 328). On stage, Wittman tells his audience that he actually possesses traits from both sides (TM 328). Using this lab test as an example, he directly criticises the mainstream Americans' failure to distinguish between Chinese people and Chinese Americans. As a playful and fun-loving trickster hero, Wittman shows that he, with an Asian face and a Chinese last name, possesses some of the "Star Quality items" that are thought to belong only to the Anglo-Americans. He demonstrates himself as a "fused" product of both sides of the cultures and radically demands recognition from the mainstream American culture. To demonstrate that some "Star Quality" could be achieved in a democratic society
inclusive of Chinese Americans, Wittman directs a playful scene of kissing and hugging on stage with his audience to “unbrainwash you from believing anymore that we’re a people who don’t kiss and don’t hug” (TM 329). As Arthur Dong, the filmmaker of Forbidden City, U.S.A., suggests, “We Chinese Americans are not just hard workers, we are not just concerned about the critical issues of Asian Americans, we also have leisure time, have fun” (qtd. in H. Ling 468). On stage, Wittman sings the Chinese American self with a voice informed by his dual heritage and rejects being statically stereotyped.

As Wittman’s byname “Joang Fu” (meaning “Inner Truth”) implies, he has undergone an interior emotional journey to communicate with his external world with “fusion” – the ideal concept in incorporating the Chinese heritage into the fabric of the American literary history. Wittman, according to Jeannie Wang, is a “new China Man” – a person who “does not have to ‘sell out’ in order to ‘fit in,’” and “does not have to deny [his] cultural heritage in order to create [his] individual self identity” (108). Wang’s idea is practically my proposed ideal of appropriating “fusion” as Wittman’s model of identity. Unlike the Hong youngest brother in China Men who participates in the Vietnam war in order to legally claim his American identity, Wittman, a fifth-generation Chinese American, amplifies that “fitting in” is not the only way to claim America as he avoids the draft and demonstrates his anti-war stance unflinchingly. He also significantly demonstrates that integrating peacefully the various identities within himself and with his environment is the key to the establishment of a community of multiplicity. Wittman, like his literary father Walt Whitman, celebrates the creation of “self” and a democratic society – respect for individual minds, thoughts, and actions – completes his inward journey looking for an identity for himself and his race.
Wittman uses stories to re-define his place in American society, to revive and renew Chinese American culture, and hence re-introduce his race and culture to the American people. Only through talk-story as a way to integrate the Chinese past with the American present is he able to construct a Chinese American identity. As Shostak has succinctly observed, when Wittman retells the Chinese resources, the "retelling becomes a mixture of Chinese and Western motifs" as his "memory of the tale is informed by his contact with American popular culture" (64-5). The novel's western/American contextualisation is not only evident in the use of language and slang of the sixties American west and the frequent references to American and British literary and cultural icons, but is also discernable from the obvious presence of Walt Whitman, whose concept of a collective "I" is inspirational to Wittman. Wittman carefully fuses the classic Chinese narratives at the backdrop of America and ingeniously weaves his Chinese tales into the American environment and formulates them as a way to answer the questions which trouble him since he becomes conscious of his identity as an ethnic Chinese in America. As he searches for his identity, he turns from an angry young man who denies his Chinese heritage to a mature grown man who learns to appreciate that part of his legacy. Towards the end of the book, Wittman has been transformed from the disjointed loner who finds his striking Chinese physical features hindering his identification as an American to an integrated self who manages to celebrate his ethnicity, including the physical appearance, culture, and literary tradition, weave them into the American context, and communicate the Chinese American cultural form to the multi-racial audience. The theatre is a platform for Wittman where he can exercise his freedom of speech and tell the stories about himself and his
community in his voice, but is not subjected to the stereotypical gaze of the Anglo-
Americans. With the integration of "self" into the American context, a new and
inclusive community is established to celebrate the Chinese American experiences
and the complexity of identity (Simmons 158). Wittman's free-ranging monologue
about war, peace, racism, and cultural heritage at the end of the play signifies his
ultimate achievement of defining an American identity by singing a "Song of
Himself," and presenting himself as an artist, who masters the trip of self-
identification in the "Journey In the West," a revised title of the novel Journey to
the West because "There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West.
All you saw was West" (TM 308). Hence, he overturns the mainstream Americans'
assumption that Chinese Americans are "exotic" and "inscrutable" and insists on
the importance of expression of a "scrutable" self. As Wang has observed,
"Kingston's characterology of Tripmaster Monkey not only deconstructs the racist
stereotype but, more importantly, reconstructs a positive image of the colored face,
a new American identity with 'Oriental Virtues'" (107). Through Wittman in
Tripmaster Monkey, Kingston again, as in The Woman Warrior and China Men,
demonstrates the importance of identifying a Chinese American self with a
revisionist American mythmaking of Chinese stories, because in Kingston's literary
philosophy, there is no monolithic version of myths and stories and she therefore
exercises her freedom in creating alternative myths through following the
traditional Chinese talk-stories as a written storyteller.

Embodying a monkey spirit, Wittman Ah Sing, the trickster hero of
Tripmaster Monkey, has transformed himself, his community, and the American
theatrical tradition with his talk-stories. As he attempts to integrate himself with
America and the people around him with a retold theatrical version of the war epic
The Three Kingdoms, he realises that he has “bee-e-e-en” into a pacifist with his "word magic" (Wong, Reading 207). Like the female narrator in The Woman Warrior and China Men who uses words and stories as surrogate weapons to engage in literal wars to fight for her voice and recognition in America, Wittman opts for non-violent means in his fight for his identity and has turned miraculously from a “paranoid self” into a “creative self” (Gao 138). As Maini has suggested, “Pacifism does not mean non-action or passivity; neither does it mean to be weak or ineffectual,” Wittman’s or Kingston’s upholding of pacifism should be viewed as active searches for their rights as minority members in the American society. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. has claimed, “the challenge facing America in the next century will be the shaping, at long last, of a truly common public culture, one responsive to the long-silenced cultures of color,” and therefore Wittman, as a tripmaster hippie in the sixties, a time when multicultural literary studies “emerged from social and political movements within the academy,” attempts to reshape the public culture by introducing the form of Sino-centric mode of discourse – talk-stories – to the American people (288-289). In the course of reshaping the American literary tradition, Wittman is transformed from a western-canonical individual whose “initial psychological and intellectual” being is inherited from “reading Shakespeare and British Literature” to a transcended self who appreciates his Chinese heritage and manages to fuse its literature, culture, and tradition into the mainstream American and western culture (Wang 110). As he actively seeks out his lost pseudo Popo, who preserves a “memory village” in her room and is thus a metaphorical representation of the past and old China, Wittman determines to look for his lost self through incorporating the past memories into his present (TM 191). Possessing the trickster and transformative power of “bee-e-e-en” as her
protagonist, Kingston transforms her characters who have eccentric memories from the Chinese heritage into Americans and significantly creates part of another tradition of American literature through weaving the Chinese oral tradition into the American English novel form, and thus introducing the Chinese culture to the American audience. Through Wittman’s expressive act of talk-stories and theatrical production, Kingston trips the readers into her journey in the West, significantly claims an American identity for her protagonist and for herself with an appreciation for their ethnic Chinese cultures, and hence creates a communal identity for her race as she rewrites the American literary tradition, and sings not only the “I,” but the “we” as well. Using the theatre as a public forum for the singing of a collective and socially constructed self, Kingston weaves talk-stories into a form of social art, which is to transcend differences and resistance for members of the Chinese Americans.

With a “we” book as a temporary conclusion, Kingston’s journey of claiming an American identity, a common quest of all the three books discussed, is completed with a deconstruction of the racial stereotypes of the dominant society and a construction of a new model of Chinese American man, meaning both male and female, who determines to change the society through singing and celebrating the “self” and “selves” from top to toe with laughter, fun, and art. The employment of talk-story in Kingston’s texts as discussed from chapters 2 through 4 signifies the author’s intention to create a new artistic voice as she revises and modifies old stories for new meanings, with the “literariness” embedded in The Woman Warrior and China Men more evidently and obviously bringing out in Tripmaster Monkey. As a continual project to claim the American literary tradition, Kingston refashions the Chinese oral tradition into American talk-stories in the three texts. In this sense,
Kingston is like a musician as she improvises upon existing rhythms in a fake book and modulates new melodies by presenting her own fake books, amplifying what she views of an Chinese American “self” and “selves” in the multiracial and multicultural America.
Notes:

1. *Journey to the West* (*Hsi yu chi*) is 100-chapter work of comic fantasy by Wu Ch'eng-en (ca. 1506-82). The novel has a historical basis in the pilgrimage of Hsuan-tsang (Tripitaka) to India and it is recorded that the earlier stage of his journey is full of hardships (Hsia 117). In the novel, Tripitaka, Monkey, Pigsy, and Sandy encounter various adventures and their journey is hindered occasionally by gods, monsters, demons, and other human characters. In this chapter, I will adopt Hsia's translated names of the pilgrims.

2. Yan Gao has pointed out the claiming of American literary tradition in *Tripmaster Monkey* and her concentration is on Kingston's employment of Chinese sources in the book (97). While the use of Chinese materials is also part of my argument, I am framing the chapter on the "literariness" of the protagonist and his talk-story play and examine how his presence provides a new voice to the existing literary tradition in America. In fact, as I have shown, the claiming of literary tradition is not only confined in *Tripmaster Monkey*, but are in all of Kingston's three texts discussed in this thesis, with Kingston making use of talk-story as a literary device and the celebration of arts in those texts.

3. In the interview with Jody Hoy in 1986, Kingston describes her work-in-progress in this way: "I'm working on a novel, and this one is very different. I'm making up everything now. With the other books you could pick out almost any image and it's either cultural or it actually happened. But in the new book I'm inventing everything, so it feels very free in a way, and in another way very difficult, because I don't have boundaries, I could just keep inventing this world forever" (66).

4. In an interview by Paul Skenazy in 1989, weeks after the publication of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston remarks at her disappointment of the initial reception of the book: "The last week or so, I have heard from three or four of my friends who told my husband that they don't like *Tripmaster Monkey*. They think Wittman is very obnoxious. They say, it doesn't feel good to be harangued by a wannabe Berkeley head for hours at a time. They say that there's no feelings, that it doesn't make them cry. I've been feeling a loss of confidence" (140).

5. Western readers who have no knowledge of Chinese literature and the Cantonese dialect comprehend the text with difficulty, as Kingston occasionally plays on the language of Cantonese and alludes to three significant classic Chinese narratives — *Journey to the West*, *The Water Margin* (Yueh hsiao chi), and *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*San guo yian*).
Romance of the Three Kingdoms, and The Water Margin. Chinese readers, on the other hand, are equally uneasy with the extensive references to the British and American literatures and popular cultures in the text, such as the various highbrow and lowbrow allusions to Shakespeare, Chaucer, Yeats, Woolf, Rilke, James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, Walt Whitman, Beat poetry, Romeo and Juliet and West Side Story, etc. For a summary of the negative comments of Tripmaster Monkey, see Huntley p.156-7. For a more extensive list of allusions and references made to the Chinese, British, and American cultures, see Smith’s article “Rethinking American Culture: Maxine Hong Kingston’s Cross-Cultural ‘Tripmaster Monkey’” on p.73 and Lu’s article “Enacting Asian American Transformations: An Inter-Ethnic Perspective” on p.91-92. Jeanne R. Smith suggests that as the novel weaves sources from various cultures and canons, it creates a big impact on American culture and literature as Kingston “challenge(s) the possibility of placing exclusive ethnic labels on her work” (“Rethinking” 73).

6. John Leonard, who gave a positive review on The Woman Warrior in “In Defiance of 2 Worlds,” declares that Tripmaster Monkey could be labelled as a “Novel of the Sixties” (Huntley 155) and considers this first novel of Kingston “more exuberant” than its two predecessors (Huntley 156). Other supportive critics and reviewers praise the display of wit, humour, vibrancy, and rage in the narrative of the book and the portrayal of Wittman as a revolutionary hero in the turbulence of the American society of that time.

7. James Lu describes the subtitle as “a warning label by which readers/critics are challenged to sort out for themselves what is real or fake in a vast world of ambiguity and complexity” (93).

8. In an interview in 1991, Kingston said that Tripmaster Monkey is a fake book, an unfinished book: “I’ll throw out a few things, and you improvise and finish it in your mind and imagination and life, and then also I, myself, will finish it in a sequel” (Perry 170). The sequel of Wittman’s story appears in a section of The Fifth Book of Peace, published in 2003.

9. For the idea of “fusion,” see the excerpt I quote from Kingston’s interview at the beginning of this chapter.

10. I am sub-titling this part of the chapter with Irma Maini’s remark that the “house of squalor” for Wittman is the “house of racism” to exemplify the problem of racism that Wittman experiences as a fifth-generation Chinese American (255).

11. In this chapter, unless otherwise stated, whenever I mention “American culture,” I refer to the
mainstream American culture, the one generally promoted by the media and accepted by a majority of American people; likewise, I take the liberty of referring “American people” to the white or Euro-Americans, because it is how the term is being generally perceived in the society: Wittman says, “They use ‘American’ interchangeably with ‘white’” (329).

12. This issue is raised again in Wittman’s one-man show. The preoccupation with Chinese food is even extended to the reviews of the plays some Chinese people are cast in, which is obviously a subject of complete irrelevancy, and this makes Wittman infuriated: “You like being compared to Rice Krispies? Cut it out. Let me show you, you’ve been insulted. They sent their food critics. They wrote us up like they were tasting Chinese food” (TM 307).

13. According to Maini, by referring to the Chinese family contemptuously as “Fresh Off the Boats,” Wittman has projected his own confusion and insecurities about his identity onto them as he is “ashamed to be associated with such people and wants to distance himself from them” (249).

14. Kingston has talked about this scene in an interview with Marilyn Chin (1989): “There’s that part of him that’s like a mainstream, racist American because he’s got a Mayflower complex, himself. He’s been taught by America that, if you were born here, then you’re a real American. If your people go way back, then you’re a real American. His people do go way back, except that there are a lot of white Americans who will come up to you and say, where do you come from? There is a refusal to understand that an American can look like one of us and doesn’t have to be white. He just doesn’t want to be taken for an FOB” (95).

15. The scene is described as such: “They both looked away; why should they greet each other? (Because your parents and grandparents would have run up yelling to one another and shouted genealogies of relatives and friends and hometowns until they connected up.)” (TM 59). He is sarcastic as he thinks of what the older immigrant generations would do to connect themselves up, and as a fifth-generation Chinese American, he wants to distance himself from his immigrant ancestors and people of the same skin colours.

16. For example, Schueller has noted Kingston’s appropriation of the classic American epic, Moby Dick, in Tripmaster Monkey (“Theorizing” 14) but I have to point out that this chapter is by no means an exhaustive discussion of the literary allusions in this text.

17. The title of chapter 1 “Trippers and Askers” is taken from Section 4 of Whitman’s “Song of
Myself” (1881) in *Leaves of Grass*: “Trippers and askers surround me/ People I meet, the effect upon me of my early life or the ward and city I live in, or the nation” (ll. 66-67); the title of chapter 2 “Linguists and Contenders” is also from the same section in “Song of Myself”: “Backward I see in my own days where I sweated through fog with linguists and contenders,/ I have no mockings or arguments, I witness and wait” (ll. 80-81); chapter 5 is entitled “Ruby Long Legs’ and Zeppelin’s Song of the Open Road,” which is directly taken from Whitman’s “Song of the Open Road”; and chapter 6’s title “A Song for Occupations” alludes to Whitman’s poem of the same name (Huntley, *Kingston* 169).

18. Tanner gives detailed quotations from *Tripmaster Monkey* to explicate Whitman’s influence on Wittman in his essay on p.64.

19. Jennie Wang notes that “Ah Sing may also be named after a China Man, Norman Asing, a naturalized US citizen, who, as early as 1855, served as a spokesman of his people by writing to Governor Bigler of California claiming his identity as an American and protesting against racism and the exclusion of the Chinese in America” (102).

20. Huntley thinks that the name “Wit Man” in English is “a testament to his (Wittman’s) ambition to be a poet, to his linguistic acrobatics, and love affair with words. He is a poet who has the verbal agility to sound like the Beats or like an African American writer” (163).

21. In the late seventies, there was a television programme launched in the U.S. called “Monkey!” which was based on the story of *Journey to the West*.

22. This person, therefore, is an important guide in those parties. For example, in the party scene in “Twisters and Shouters” of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Charley Bogard Shaw is asked to be the tripmaster because of his “articulateness in the midst of revels” (*TM* 102).

23. “A Song of Himself” is a phrase appropriated and revised from the title of Walt Whitman’s famous poem “Song of Myself.” As James T.F. Tanner has noted, Walt Whitman’s presence in *Tripmaster Monkey* could be observed from Wittman Ah Sing, the chapter titles, and the overall thematic thrust of the book (61) and the novel is “a kind of ‘Song of Myself’ delivered from the mind of Wittman Ah Sing” (63).

24. The same invitation appears at the end of chapters “Linguists and Contenders,” “A Song for Occupations,” “The Pear Garden in the West,” and “Bones and Jones” in the book.

25. Different sections of the play are performed to different audiences to suit specific needs: for
example, Wittman performs the story about the marriage of Liu Pei and Lady Sun in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* as a wedding present to his newly-wedded wife Taña. Suyiyama has noted the similarities between the two couples – Liu Pei and Lady Sun, and Wittman and Taña – as both marriages are arranged for “political reasons”: “Taña marries Wittman so that he can be exempt from the draft, and thus, as Lady Sun saves Liu Pei from her brother” (62-63). Wittman also talks-story the cannibal story of Black Li Kwai, modified from episodes of *The Water Margin*, to persuade the old Chinese man at the Benevolent Association in Chinatown to let him stage the play there by enacting “a symbolic revenge on the whites who discriminate against Chinese Americans” (Gao 134).

26. Lance Kamiyama, a Japanese American, plays Liu Pei; Wittman himself, a Chinese American, plays Gwan Goong; whereas Charley Bogard Shaw, a Caucasian American, plays Chang Fei.

27. In Gao’s explication of this scene, she draws references on Walt Whitman’s “Faces” to suggest that Wittman’s retelling of the scene has all the racial colours represented: black, white, red, and yellow: “‘Off the word I have spoken I expect not one – red white or black, all are deific,/ In each house is the ovum, it comes forth after a thousand years’ (Il 58-59)” (128). My interpretation of this scene excludes the colour of “red” because I believe Kingston has this scene rewritten to counter-echo Wittman’s nightmare. Though I agree that racial reconciliation is an important issue in Wittman’s storytelling, his prime concern, I suggest, is still to fight for an equal status for his race – the symbolic “yellow” colour skin.

28. There is, however, a difference between Whitman and Wittman in their notions of a “communal” voice. Whitman, as a poet, has a overpowering voice in the singing of an epic; whereas Wittman’s theatrical ideal attempts to give others their voices (though at the end of the book, the performance Wittman engages in is like a one-man show, he invites the active participation of the audience).

29. *The Water Verge* is another translated name of *The Water Margin*, and in this chapter I adopt the translations used by C. T. Hsia.

30. On another note, Wittman reveals that many of the Chinese American girls have eye operations to slice the eyelids open in order to have a double eyelid fold and he criticises this unnecessary effort in transforming themselves into Caucasian look-alikes and conforming to the western notion of “beauty.”
31. Wittman laments that the Anglo-Americans “wilfully do not learn us, and blame that on us, that we have an essential unknowableness” while at the same time ironically “think they know us – the wide range of us from sweet to sour – because they eat in Chinese restaurants” (TM 308, 310).

32. Wang explicates Wittman’s complete western-ness in her article: “The text of the opening chapter, which lasts some thirty pages, simply contains nothing of Chinese literature or Chinese legend until the last page, when Wittman overcomes despair and depression, gains hope, and begins to search for his origin, his lost self. In other words, there is little of a Chinese origin in Wittman’s initial psychological and intellectual crisis. He had inherited the intellectual disease from reading Shakespeare and British Literature” (110).

33. In doing so, Kingston actualises what she claims in an interview: I think that the highest form of that appropriation is art. In a sense, when I wrote these books, I was claiming the English language and the literature to tell our story as Americans. That is why the forms of the two books (The Woman Warrior and China Men) are not exactly like other books, and the language and the rhythms are not like other writers, and yet, it’s American English. I guess my thought is, “If I can use this language and literature in a really beautiful, strong way, then I have claimed all of it for us” (Rabinowitz 72).

34. Yan Gao describes Tripmaster Monkey as a “he” book (97) but I think it is more like a “we” book as Wittman sings not only himself but aspires to build a communal self and an identity for his community as well.

35. A change in narrative point of view occurs in Tripmaster Monkey. In Tripmaster Monkey, Kingston employs a third-person narration with the voice of an omniscient female narrator, whom the author identifies as Kuan Yin, the Goddess of Mercy in Chinese tradition, who guides the Monkey King’s pilgrimage in Journey to the West. Talking about the narrative point of view in the book, Kingston thinks that there has been “an artistic as well as psychological improvement” on her part, as the strong narrator “I” in her two previous works has totally disappeared from the narration of this novel and she has learnt to write “the Other” (M. Chin 88). She also begins to address the readers directly as “you” or “we,” as she is able to “understand community” (Blauvelt 82). With a reincarnated Kuan Yin as the omniscient narrator, Kingston critiques the Anglo-American white male omniscient narrative tradition of
the nineteenth century by introducing a female omniscient point of view. She considers this as a revolutionary act bringing a big change to the existing literary narration because this is "a narrator who people can see right away is a woman" (Blauvelt 82). By doing so, Kingston creates another tradition of American literature and adds her voice into it. Kingston’s introduction of a female voice amid a male protagonist’s quest for enlightenment signifies the importance of accepting and integrating the masculine and feminine principles of the world. In ancient Buddhism, Kuan Yin is known as a male deity called Avalokiteschvara – an earthly manifestation of the Buddha who was “represented” as a masculine presence” before the Sung Dynasty (Huntley, Kingston 160). Therefore, Kuan Yin is seen as a figure who possesses the psyches of both genders and this is what Kingston tries to achieve as an implied omniscient female narrator in *Tripmaster Monkey*: “when you become a strong woman, you also face the yang ... that’s the other half of the universe. So to me it’s profoundly feminist to write about men, to be able to recreate men characters, and to understand what I previously could not understand” (qtd. in Madsen, Maxine 103). As James Lu has noted, the presence of the female voice of the author and the narrator in "his" book "defamiliarizes the familiar – i.e., it intends to shock whoever assumes that minority women writers in general are good only at producing autobiographies where ‘I’ stands as female” (94). The creation of an artistic voice is facilitated with the introduction of a new narrative perspective.
Yet some of my friends tell me they understand fifty percent of what my mother says. Some say they understand eighty to ninety percent. Some say they understand none of it, as if she were speaking pure Chinese. But to me, my mother’s English is perfectly clear, perfectly natural. It’s my mother tongue. Her language, as I hear it, is vivid, direct, full of observation and imagery. That was the language that helped shape the way I saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world.

- “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan (Fate 273)

In “Mother Tongue,” a short conference apologia written in 1989, Amy Tan remarks that, though many people might consider her mother’s English incomprehensible, it is the language that has shaped her growing up as she “saw things, expressed things, made sense of the world” (Fate 273). In the essay, Tan recalls how once she thought her immigrant mother’s limitation in mastering English had limited her possibilities in life. As the young Tan judged her mother’s language ability with the standard she acquired in her Anglo-American environment, she had the idea that since Daisy Tan, her mother, could not express herself perfectly in English, her thoughts “were imperfect” as well (Fate 274). While terming her mother’s English “broken” or “fractured” makes her wince as the term gives the impression that it was “damaged,” a statement that she does not reckon as true after she has grown up, Amy Tan retells how her attitude concerning her “mother tongue” — the mother’s “broken” English — has changed throughout the years (Fate 274).

In “Mother Tongue,” Amy Tan gives various examples of how her mother communicates with others in English, resulting in her (mis)conception of her mother’s imperfection and the indifference of the people around her, who speak an entirely different sort of English — the standard and perfect kind. To many
Americans, the Chinese English has been characterised by “high-pitched, sing-song tones, tortured syntax, the confounding of l’s and r’s, the proliferation of ee-endings, and the random omission of articles and auxiliary verbs” (Kim, Asian 12). For many years, Tan has acted as her mother’s mouthpiece when dealing with officials and in more serious situations, and she was ashamed of her mother’s “broken” English ¹. However, as Tan matures, the embarrassment and impatience with her mother’s “broken” language turns into a source of inspiration for her creativity as a writer and she sees her mother’s language as the language that has shaped her development – “our language of intimacy” which relates to “family talk” (Fate 272). The Joy Luck Club, published in 1989, is a celebration of the “mother tongue” as Tan incorporates all the different sorts of Englishes she grows up with. Through the insertion of her mother’s language, a language which is deemed marginal and incomprehensible, in a book written in standard English and published in the mainstream Anglo-American cultural environment, Tan deliberately gives “broken” English a new meaning. She transforms it from something detrimental to a positive force which resolves the problematic mother-daughter relationship as the daughter captures the mother’s “intent”, “passion,” “imagery,” “the rhythms of her speech and the nature of her thoughts” in her mother’s specific type of English (Fate 279).

In this chapter, I am going to discuss Amy Tan’s “talk-stories” in her three novels, The Joy Luck Club (1989), The Kitchen God’s Wife (1991), and The Bonesetter’s Daughter (2001), with specific reference to how talk-story facilitates the resolution of the mothers and daughters in the texts and how Tan develops Kingston’s idea of “talk-story” as she makes positive use of “broken” English – a kind of “foreign” literary language within a language created in the texts (Deleuze...
xlvi) – and makes her works more expressive and sentimental, invoking a kind of emotional solidarity between the author/characters and the readers as the inner passion and thoughts of the mother characters are revealed with the creation of a new language. I propose to argue that it is Tan’s development of “talk-story” as a form of “talking-cure” in healing problematic relationships and her creation of a “foreign” language that categorises her works, as differentiated from and contrasting with Kingston’s, more in the popular arena 2. In this sense, Tan rewrites the mainstream American literary canon with empathy and emotional sentimentalism expressed in her mother-daughter stories.

In “Sugar Sisterhood: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” Cynthia Sau-ling Wong explains Tan’s popularity as a result of her compliance with the changing ideologies of the white readers as Tan creates an “Oriental effect” through inserting descriptive and seemingly authentic details concerning Chinese culture and translation (187) and situates the “Amy Tan phenomenon” in “quasi-ethnographic, Orientalist discourse” (181) 3. As Wong gives a number of examples concerning Tan’s use of “romanized Chinese phrase with an appositive explanation” (182) and questions the function of this kind of superfluous detail in Tan, she suggests that Tan’s works submit to the “Persistent Allure of Orientalism” (180) with narrative ingredients which are “temporal distancing” and “authenticity marking” (184). The use of “subtle, minute dislocations of English syntax and vocabulary” which leave an impression “of translation from the Chinese even where no translation has taken place,” according to Wong, indicates the “comforting presence of cultural mediation to the ‘mainstream’ reader” which makes the white reviewers laud the “authenticity of the immigrant women’s diction” (189, italics original). Therefore, the use of “broken” English by the mothers, Wong suggests, reinforces the Oriental
effect that Tan’s works create, accounting for her popularity. While I agree with Wong to a certain extent that some white readers welcome Tan’s works because they conform to the Orientalist codes, I believe Tan’s popularity has a more positive value whether for the white or non-white reader. As there could be many reasons for Tan’s popularity, I do not offer an exhaustive study of her popularity as such but focus on how she remodels talk-story into a popular form of psychotherapy, a kind of “talking cure” as familiar in the American culture, and how she uses “broken” English in a positive way to enhance the expressive-ness of the characters as they tell their stories.

The three novels: *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, and The Bonesetter’s Daughter*

In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English.

- Jing-Mei Woo in *The Joy Luck Club* (40-41)

Mostly I see my mother sitting one table away, and I feel as lonely as I imagine her to be. I think of the enormous distance that separates us and makes us unable to share the most important matters of our life. How did this happen? I feel as if I were suffocating, and want to run away.

- Pearl Louie Brandt in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* (34)

And then I realized what the first word must have been: ma, the sound of a baby smacking its lips in search of her mother’s breast. For a long time, that was the only word the baby needed. Ma, ma, ma. ... A mother is always the beginning. She is how things begin.

- LuLing Liu Young in *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* (228)

*The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan’s debut, hit the Asian American literary field with an immediate success in sales and critical acclaim with almost unanimous positive response in 1989 and she instantly became one of the most famous American writers of Asian descent. Because of the book’s thematic focus on the
mother-daughter relationship and the author’s Chinese-American background, it is always compared to Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. They are described as writings of the matrilineage and as Amy Ling has noted, “Amy Tan’s first novel … is in parts an echo and a response and in parts a continuation and expansion of Kingston’s book” while “less angry in tone, but equally poetic, painful, and often funny” (130). Helena Grice, likewise, has remarked that “Clearly, Maxine Hong Kingston to some extent paved the way for Tan’s success, in so far as her own work popularised the themes of female friendship and filiality, and in this sense at least, both texts appear to be fashioned from the same cloth” (*Negotiating* 66). However, like Kingston, Tan is criticised by some Asian American readers who claim that her book is not authentic about the Chinese American or Asian American culture.

And, just as Kingston has done, Tan defends herself by claiming that her readers should not “choose to interpret her stories as fixed, monolithic ethnographic descriptions of the Chinese or China” because by doing so, they have reduced “her personal fiction into ‘cultural lesson plans’” (Ho, *HMH* 47). In her defence, she rejects having her book relegated into a cultural commodity and claims that *The Joy Luck Club* only represents her unique experience as a specific Chinese American writer.

*The Joy Luck Club* is dedicated to Amy Tan’s mother, Daisy Tan, and to the memory of her grandmother: “You asked me once what I would remember. This, and much more” (*JLC* dedication). Tan captures the emotions and sensations as a daughter, who has once misunderstood her mother and rejected her Chinese heritage. As she writes the book, she discovers that she is not only writing stories about her mother, but also for the mother: “I wanted [my mother] to know what I thought about China and what I thought about growing up in this country. And I
wanted those words to almost fall off the page so that she could just see the story, that the language would be simple enough, almost like a little curtain that would fall away” (Shields 57-58).

*The Joy Luck Club* consists of sixteen interlocking stories about four Chinese immigrant mothers – Suyuan Woo, An-mei Hsu, Lindo Jong, and Ying-ying St. Clair – who cross the ocean looking for a chance of making their lives anew in America, and four American-born daughters – Jing-mei “June” Woo, Rose Hsu Jordan, Waverly Jong, and Lena St. Clair – who are always convinced that their mothers are disappointed in them no matter what they have achieved. The sixteen stories are narrated by four pairs of mothers and daughters in monologues separately, with the exception for the story of Suyuan, who has already died at the beginning of the book and therefore, her daughter, Jing-mei, takes over to narrate her mother’s story, in addition to taking over Suyuan’s place at the mah jong table at the Joy Luck Club. The book employs a circular narrative structure in which the mothers and daughters take turns in telling their stories in four sections – for the mothers, their past stories in China and for the daughters, their American lives and difficulties with their mothers. As the mothers and daughters testify their relationships with one another in their narrations, the mother-daughter bond is examined and reassessed by the readers, who are confronted with the autobiographical voices and the mental spheres of each speaker. The mothers’ stories in the first section, “Feathers from a Thousand Li Away,” and the fourth section, “Queen Mother of the Western Skies” embrace the daughters’ stories in the second and third sections, “The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates” and “American Translation.” This, in my opinion, corresponds to what Tan demonstrates in the book: despite the misunderstanding and conflicts, cultural, linguistic, and
generational chasm, the mothers are always protective of their daughters, who, as they mature, learn of their mothers’ good intents at the end. The love and hate relationship between the mothers and daughters is finally resolved through talk-stories – a kind of therapeutic “talking-cure” 11. The interlocking stories of the mothers and daughters, from the first-person viewpoints of the seven speakers, are not separated but are connected via the circular narrative structure of the sixteen “her stories,” as the “unconnected fragments of life” are “revealed from different but somewhat overlapping perspectives by all the ‘reliable’ narrators” (Shen 111-112). Through the “overlapping” perspectives, two rounds of the same table are demonstrated and a coherent picture is teased out by the reader.

Tan’s second novel, The Kitchen God’s Wife (1991), continues the theme of conflicts between Chinese mother and American-born daughter, yet, instead of four, the book revolves around only one mother and daughter pair, Winnie Louie and Pearl Louie Brandt. The mother, Daisy Tan, again provides the inspiration for the author as Amy Tan agonises over what she should write in the new book. Fed up with people asking her if she is the model for the mother in The Joy Luck Club, Daisy Tan requests her daughter to “write her true story” the next time (Shields 75) 12. The Kitchen God’s Wife, therefore, is a product of the mother’s storytelling – a recurrent theme in Tan’s works, in which Tan tries to capture Daisy Tan’s life, through the narration of the mother in the book, Winnie, as closely as possible 13; and the book, as it emerges, heals the relationship between Daisy and Amy, and bridges their differences as best as possible 14.

Textually, The Kitchen God’s Wife circles around Winnie, the Chinese mother who survives the Second World War, is married to an abusive sadist husband, has lost her three children in China, and leads a new life in America with all her past
secrets hidden; and Pearl, the American-born daughter who is married to a Euro-
American, and is emotionally alienated from her mother as she tries to avoid her
mother's participation in many aspects of her life. In this book, both the mother
and daughter have kept terrible secrets from each other — for the mother, Winnie, it
is her past during World War II in China and more importantly, the identity of the
man by whom her daughter, Pearl, was conceived; whereas for the daughter, it is
her illness of multiple sclerosis that she wants so desperately to keep away from her
elderly mother. Structurally speaking, the novel seems to contain two plots: first,
the frame story on the relationship between Winnie and Pearl, against the backdrop
of contemporary America; and second, the central narrative of a story about a
Chinese woman, Jiang Weili, during wartime in China and how she struggles to
survive and becomes Winnie Louie in America, with all of her past buried.
However, as the mother's narration goes on, the two plots are intertwined, as the
past informs the present and the mother and daughter establish their closeness
through talk-story.

Amy Tan returns to the mother-daughter theme in her fourth fiction, The
Bonesetter's Daughter, which was published in 2001, after her work on the story
about two half sisters in The Hundred Secret Senses (1995) 15. In the ten-year gap,
an important incident happened which left an enormous impact on Tan, making her
review her relationship with her mother: Daisy Tan died of Alzheimer's disease in
1999; and after her mother's death, Tan discovers the real name of her mother and
grandmother 16. Shaped by this significant experience of the mother's death and
the recovery of the mother's true name, it is no wonder that The Bonesetter's
Daughter is primarily about the function and loss of memory, which is related to
Alzheimer's disease, and the importance of naming, both to an individual and to the
family genealogy. The dedication of *The Bonesetter's Daughter* is written: "On the last day that my mother spent on earth, I learned her real name, as well as that of my grandmother. This book is dedicated to them. Li Bingzi and Gu Jingmei." According to Tan, the book is the story of her mother and grandmother: "The heart of this story belongs to my grandmother, its voice to my mother" (Adams 126).

*The Bonesetter's Daughter* is about the difficult relationship between LuLing Liu Young, the Chinese mother who starts to develop symptoms of Alzheimer's disease in her eighties, and her American-born daughter, Ruth Luyi Young, who is a ghostwriter for self-help books. The book is divided into three sections: the first part is told from the narrative point of view of Ruth, though it is told in the third-person, set in California and introduces the readers to the protagonist and her mother, who has started to show signs of fading memories; the second part is a translated version of the Chinese writings of LuLing, who starts to record her life in China as she senses her memory problem, and the story of her mother, Precious Auntie, and is told in the first-person; and the final section wraps up what happen after Ruth reads her mother's writings, learns more about her mother and grandmother, and finds out about the truth at her mother's heart, and the focus of the section has shifted back to Ruth. Like other Tan books, the novel consists of layers of stories which straddle time, generations, and space; while they are individual stories, they also intersect and connect at some points. In the first part, Ruth is characterised as a middle-aged woman who has a career as an editor/writer for self-help books and a stagnant relationship with her partner, Art. She starts to spot signs of dementia in her mother, LuLing, from whom she is fairly distant. Noticing her mother's deteriorating health, Ruth decides to translate the stacks of paper which her mother has written about her life, from Chinese to English, so that
she would know LuLing’s story. The second section is told by LuLing (and read by Ruth), who narrates her childhood in a Chinese village called Immortal Heart and how she lands in America. Within the narrative by LuLing, there is the tragic story of Precious Auntie, who is a nursemaid as well as LuLing’s real mother. As LuLing’s story unfolds, Ruth begins to decipher her mother’s words and behaviour, which she thinks are mysterious and problematic, and the mother-daughter relationship is re-built as the past riddles are solved. The book is also about how the daughter struggles to come to terms with her mother’s Alzheimer’s disease, and the daughter’s realisation that her mother’s loss of memory means she is going to lose a significant part of the family history, meaning part of her heritage. In a broader sense, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* is about two mother-daughter relationships, Precious Auntie and LuLing, and LuLing and Ruth, and together they form the matrilineal genealogy of their family.

The three Tan novels not only share a common theme of mother-daughter relationship, which is problematised by their differences in culture, language, and age, but also give subjective space for the mothers to present their voices, which are complicated by “broken” English, on their own terms, instead of portraying mother figures from the limited perspectives of the daughters. Lori Smurthwaite has termed *The Joy Luck Club* an example of “matrivocal narratives” because it challenges the “subject/object dichotomies and” suggests “the possibilities of the maternal voice, the subject/mother, and sustained mother/daughter connections” (2). In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers and daughters are in control of their subjectivities through the narration in the first-person in almost equal proportions, as half of the book is narrated with the mother’s subjective voices. As it turns out, the mothers’ stories start to branch into the daughters as the daughters learn to
appreciate their mothers.

In this way, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* could be classified as “matrivocal narratives” as well, borrowing Smurthwaite’s term. In a strict sense, *The Kitchen God’s Wife* is perhaps less about the mother-daughter relationship than the mother’s tragic past and enduring strength for survival – of all the twenty-six chapters in the book, twenty-three are in Winne’s voice whereas only three are narrated by Pearl. The mother’s voice, which is deeply affective and poignant as she recounts her tragic past in China, outshines that of the daughter, signifying that the core focus of the book is the mother, whose recollective narrative of loss provides a family record for her daughter to identify with. According to E.D. Huntley, the novel is a “fictional autobiography” of Winnie as it is “a woman’s narrative of her life and experiences” (*Tan* 83). In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the central part of the book is about the two mothers – Precious Auntie and LuLing – and is written in the first-person and as a translated work. The stories of the mothers in many ways have overshadowed that of the daughter, Ruth, whose effort in uncovering the secrets of her family and the real names of her grandmother implies the pivotal role of the mother figures. The mother figures in these works are given subjective spaces: instead of having the mothers remain “in the position of other,” they emerge as figures with subjectivities and influence over their daughters’ lives (*Heung* 26) 17. Towards the end of the books, Tan seems to suggest that the mothers and daughters should work together to reach resolutions and that the mothers are not to be discarded and rejected, not even for the seemingly annoying “broken” English, because the “foreign-ness” in the mothers’ languages brings about the inner passion and emotions in the daughters (and the readers as well), and the mothers’ stories are to be listened to.

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Amy Tan’s talk-story

As the author, Amy Tan has reflected in her novels the problematic relationship with her mother. Tan’s childhood was filled with expectations for success from her immigrant parents and after her father died when she was fifteen, her relationship with her mother soured even more severely. Her mother’s “emotional terrorism” and Amy Tan’s shame concerning the exoticism of the Chinese culture her mother embodies further worsen their relationship (*Fate* 18). After she has grown up and started to write, Tan, however, discovers that her mother and the stories she has heard in the past prove a great source of inspiration and storytelling becomes a communicative tool for easing the tension in the problematic mother-daughter relationship. Through storytelling, Tan weaves fragments of past stories she has heard and production of her own imagination into a coherent fictional world, an indication that she is able to embrace her mother’s Chinese past and her American present, as she enters the “motherland” and appreciates the “mother tongue,” just as the literary characters in her three texts have done at the end.

In chapters 2 through 4, I have explored how Maxine Hong Kingston exemplifies the use of talk-story in her works, *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), in which Kingston’s thematic ambition has turned from a Chinese-American girl’s struggle for a personal voice and identity, to claiming the American land and the American literary tradition through building up a communal Chinese American identity. Kingston has improvised the Chinese oral tradition to experiment with a new form of talk-story writing as the borders of oral and written storytelling intersect and...
create a new set of American myths for herself, her family, and the Chinese American community. She creates the new narrative by incorporating specific “fluid” characteristics of oral tradition, such as multiple points of view in narration, ambiguity, non-linear narration, and most importantly, the revision and retelling of myths and tales, in a written static novel form, and makes talk-story a literary device for her artistic imagination.

As in Kingston’s novels, talk-story is employed by Tan’s characters to link their Chinese past with their American present: it is also a device employed by the characters “for shaping their histories and making coherent sense of the significant events of their lives” (Huntley, Tan 15). Similar to Kingston, Tan’s works (in particular The Joy Luck Club and The Kitchen God’s Wife) make use of the malleability of the Chinese oral tradition. As suggested by Reid, Tan follows the footsteps of Kingston in capturing the fluidity of oral tradition in written narratives by challenging the authority of a single version of story: in The Joy Luck Club, “Tan lets each story stand without designating a ‘true’ or ‘authentic’ narrative, thus allowing each story to ‘challenge the authority’ of the others” (246). In The Kitchen God’s Wife, as Winnie recollects her mother’s story, she practises the kind of talk-story the Kingston narrator practises in The Woman Warrior, as she reconstructs the mother figure through examining a number of hypotheses. In this way, multiple angles are presented to capture the flexibility of oral narratives as the stories of the mothers and daughters are juxtaposed. Yet, in my contention, Tan’s employment of oral elements in her written works is more on a “textual” level, rather than on a “structural” level. By this, I mean that in Tan’s works, it is her literary characters who use talk-story as a narrative strategy — a form of narrative therapy for the problematised relationship and for the mothers and daughters
themselves – whereas Kingston’s storytelling is more on a structural level as talk-story is the basic structuring device for *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* and for Wittman’s dramatic production in *Tripmaster Monkey*. In Kingston, the narrative structure of the book resembles the oral tradition in which stories are revised according to needs and circumstances, while on a textual level the mother bestows information and past stories to the daughter through talk-stories in *The Woman Warrior*. Thematically speaking, the employment of talk-story for Kingston and Tan is also different: while the function of talk-story in Kingston’s works is personal, national, intercultural, and intra-cultural, Tan’s novels primarily shed light on universal themes of family and relationships. On the one hand, the themes of Tan’s novels could be described as less macro and more personal than in Kingston’s; on the other hand, they are more universal because they deal with relationship and generational problems which could have existed in families of different ethnic contexts. In Tan’s texts, the tension between the Chinese American characters and the “larger” mainstream Euro-American society is relatively downplayed. Instead, the tension arising from the cultural differences is basically captured in the mother-daughter relationship – the cultural factor is only one of the factors that contribute to the problems between them – with the Chinese immigrant mothers embodying the minority group in America and the Americanised daughters representing the mainstream and majority group.

In Tan’s novels, the function of talk-story takes on two levels: first and to a lesser extent, the Chinese talk-story tradition finds its way into the written novel form (Tan employs multiple angles of narration to capture the fluidity of oral tradition and defy the authority of a single version of story); and second, talk-story is an important communicative tool between the mothers and daughters since,
through the engagement in this interactive and dynamic activity, they both come to terms with their relationship and their own identities. This is also a reflection of Tan’s personal experience in dealing with her problematic relationship with Daisy Tan: “storytelling enables her to reflect on the issues with which she and her mother have grappled in their own lives – concerns that are familiar in various ways to Tan’s readers, many of whom have struggled with the same concerns in different settings” (Huntley, Tan 17).

**Mother-daughter relationship complicated:**

- overbearing mothers and rebellious daughters

In *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, and The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the Tan mothers and daughters are estranged for a number of reasons: they are brought up in diversified cultures, they speak predominantly different languages, and they are separated temporally and in some sense, geographically. The daughters tend to see their mothers as backward, tale-telling Chinese aliens forever frozen in the patriarchal Chinese discourses; whereas the mothers think that their American-born daughters never learn to appreciate their good intentions and the precious Chinese legacies they try to bestow upon them.

The opening vignette of *The Joy Luck Club* encapsulates the tension, conflicts, and estrangement between the mothers and daughters throughout the entire book. Leaving their unhappy wartime Chinese past behind, burying their poignant secrets in patriarchal China where women’s status is low; the Joy Luck mothers head for America full of dreams and hopes, looking for better lives for themselves and their children in another country, just as the first prologue signifies. In the vignette, a Chinese mother brings along a swan, which was once a duck that “stretched its
neck in hopes of becoming a goose,” as she sails to America (JLC 17). On her journey, the woman dreams of having a daughter in America, who would speak perfect American English so that nobody would look down on her and whose life would be too good to “swallow any sorrow” (JLC 17). She hopes to give her daughter the swan, a creature that has achieved much more than it was hoped for, as a gift and blessing to her daughter, so that she will understand the mother’s good intentions. However, as the woman enters the new country, the immigration officials take away her swan, leaving her with only one swan feather for memory. At the end, as the woman grows old, she looks at her daughter who grows up speaking perfect English and swallows “more Coca-cola than sorrow” (JLC 17). Yet, her dream is only partially fulfilled as, after all these years, she is unable to tell her daughter the story of the swan because she cannot speak perfect American English: “And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English” (JLC 17). The book’s opening fable serves as a metaphorical introduction to the entire narrative of the conflicts between mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club – first, the mother’s unrealistically high hopes for the daughters to succeed in America and hence the mothers’ intrusion on the daughters’ lives with “good intentions” in mind; and second, the misunderstanding between the mothers and daughters due to the mothers’ inability to master the English language.

The mother in the fable is emblematic of the Joy Luck mothers’ unrealistic expectations for their daughters, whom they hope would be like the swan – symbolic of the high hopes and good intentions of the mothers – and would be able to achieve much more: “who is merely a duck but whom the mother wants to see as a swan” (Ling, Between Worlds 133). The mother’s tale is reminiscent of Hans
Christian Andersen’s “The Ugly Duckling,” a story about an ugly duckling turning into a beautiful swan, proving “its superiority to all those which had scoffed and mocked it” (Bettelheim 104). According to Bettelheim, “The Ugly Duckling” is not helpful to a child who listens to it because the child, if being misunderstood and not appreciated, understands that he is not of a different breed to his parents and siblings. The idea which is suggested by Andersen’s fairy tale that “[t]hings are simply fated and unfold accordingly” is not reassuring to a child’s mind (Bettelheim 105). Though the mother does not tell the daughter this tale in The Joy Luck Club, it foreshadows the impossibility of the mother’s achieving her goal and the mismatch between the pair’s expectations. The unrealistic expectation of the mothers turns out to be an enormous source of pressure and “emotional bullying” for the daughters, who only want to go their own ways and free themselves from the mothers’ powerful control (Ho, *HMH* 156). The daughters, therefore, often “feel more misunderstood or devalued by their mothers than loved” and view the mothers as “demanding taskmasters or exotics from some fantasy distance” (Ho, *HMH* 167).

The Joy Luck mothers observe that their daughters are ungrateful for all the efforts they have put into raising the daughters into successful swans, are disappointed, frustrated, and angry, wondering why they have raised daughters who are rebellious. The daughters are like the girl in the prologue of the second section of the book, “The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates,” who does not heed her mother’s advice in refraining from cycling around the corner to avoid danger. The girl asks her mother to tell her the twenty-six bad things that could happen to her; but her mother tells her that the book is in Chinese and she would not understand, and therefore the only way to avoid danger is to listen to the mother. While Stephen
Souris analyses this prologue as an indication that “Chinese mothers can be overbearing in their attempts to protect and control their daughters,” it also aptly illustrates the daughters’ rebellious nature and the problem of communication between the two as coupled with the inability of the mothers to funnel Chinese beliefs into the daughters’ minds (111) 22. The mother’s “controlling and dominant” nature makes the daughter feel that her “individual identity and power are severely threatened” (L. Williams 49).

The problem of miscommunication and misunderstanding due to mis-translation between the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* is aptly epitomised by Jing-mei’s reflection on her relationship with her mother after the mother’s death, thinking that they have never understood each other: “My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other’s meanings and I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more” (*JLC* 37). The issue of language here refers not to literal translation, that is, moving from one language to another; but a metaphorical one, pointing to the problem of misunderstanding because they misinterpret each other’s meanings, whether consciously or unconsciously: the daughter hears less because she does not pay attention whereas the mother hears more because she has harboured unrealistic hopes for the daughter’s success. At the request of the Joy Luck aunties to tell her newly-found half-sisters in China about her mother, Jing-mei is horrified to realise that she knows little about Suyuan:

“What will I say? What can I tell them about my mother? I don’t know anything. She was my mother.”

The aunties are looking at me as if I had become crazy right before their eyes.
“Not know your mother?” cries Auntie An-mei with disbelief. “How can you say? Your mother is in your bones!”

(JLC 40)

Here, the daughter is awed by the fact that she does not know about her mother while the three mothers, seeing Jing-mei, reflect on their relationships with their own daughters and are terrified as well because they see Jing-mei as a reflection of their own daughters, who are “just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America” and who “grow impatient” as their mothers talk in Chinese and fractured English (JLC 40-41). The mothers have sadly realised that their hopes of bringing up their daughters in the “best combination: American circumstances and Chinese character” are completely unachievable as “these two things do not mix” (JLC 254) 23. Aware of the problems of their daughters, the best the mothers could do seems to be to wait patiently overseeing their daughters’ problems helplessly. Hoping for the “best” – as the duck-turned-swan tale implies – is an elusive dream for all the Joy Luck mothers until their daughters are able to truly listen to, and translate, their stories so that they can candidly share their past stories and present problems, and be emotionally supportive to each other.

Jing-mei and Waverly share a similar childhood experience as both of their mothers, Suyuan and Lindo, want their daughters to excel and tend to compare their children with one another. Suyuan has the faith that everything is possible in America and her daughter can be a prodigy. She thinks Jing-mei could be a Chinese Shirley Temple and after seeing that she has not picked the right kind of prodigy in Jing-mei (or it is an excuse made up by a demanding mother), she turns to test her daughter on any talents possessed by other amazing children, whose stories she reads in different magazines. Jing-mei remembers how disappointed her
mother is when she does not get good results on the tests in magazines and how she hates those tests because of “the raised hopes and failed expectations” (JLC 134). Suyuan finally decides that Jing-mei could be a concert pianist and invests time and money to explore this prodigy potential of her daughter. In order to make her daughter successful, Suyuan is willing to sacrifice “materials goods, family, and a personal life” (Ho, HMH 155) and she trades the housecleaning services she provides for Mr. Chong, Jing-mei’s piano teacher, for weekly lessons and a piano for Jing-mei to practise on. However, Jing-mei’s reluctance to “nurture” that prodigy part of herself makes Suyuan angry: she feels insulted as her daughter is ungrateful for her “good intentions.” A public piano talent-show fiasco finally leads to Suyuan’s ultimate loss of hope and Jing-mei’s standing up against her mother’s will. In addition to the serious conflict over the piano playing, Suyuan and Jing-mei have arguments on Jing-mei’s dropping out of school: “maybe just six months ago, we were again having this argument about my being a failure, a ‘college drop-off,’ about my going back to finish” (JLC 37). As a copywriter at a small advertising agency, Jing-mei feels that she falls short of her mother’s expectation: she does not get straight As, does not become a class president, does not get into Stanford, and drops out of college (JLC 142). Unlike Suyuan who believes that her daughter could be anything she wants to be, Jing-mei judges that “I could only be me,” meaning a duck is still a duck, it could never turn into a swan (JLC 142).

A child chess champion and a confident young professional woman as a tax attorney, Waverly is depicted as an opposite to Jing-mei and has been diminishing Jing-mei from childhood to adulthood 24. Though Waverly seems to possess power over Jing-mei, she is powerless when she faces her mother, whom she regards as
her “opponent” with “two angry black slits,” wearing “a triumphant smile” (*JLC* 100): “In her hands, I always became the pawn. I could only run away. And she was the queen, able to move in all directions, relentless in her pursuit, always able to find my weakest spots” (*JLC* 180). Her relationship with Lindo is like a tug of war and she always needs to ponder her next move in order to win. As a child prodigy of chess, she becomes the national chess champion at the age of nine but she is resentful when her mother takes credit for her success and shows her off to others with pride. She therefore quits playing chess as revenge, thinking that she could overdo her mother by stopping the fame and pride, but discovers that she can never win over her mother. Contrary to what Waverly has expected, Lindo answers Waverly’s ungrateful attitude with apathy and ignorance: she no longer hovers around as Waverly practises chess, and stops polishing Waverly’s trophies and cutting newspapers with Waverly’s name. Waverly, therefore, loses to her mother, but not to her chess competitor. Though the adult Waverly seems to have a successful career, is independent and smart, she actually feels insecure deep in her heart and is exasperated that she is influenced by her mother’s criticisms and complaints too easily. She is nervous about breaking the news of her second marriage to Rich to her mother, whom she knows would criticise her choice “until his looks, his character, his soul would have eroded away” (*JLC* 173). Even though she knows her mother’s sneaky strategy, she is powerless and frustrated as she thinks about how vulnerable her feeling for Rich is that her mother’s “suspicions, passing remarks, and innuendos” would ruin her second marriage, just as happened to her first marriage (*JLC* 175). She tentatively tries to promote a good impression of Rich on Lindo’s mind by arranging a dinner in a cosy domestic setting, but unfortunately the dinner does not go well. After the dinner, Waverly seems to look
at Rich differently: “He looked so pathetic. *So pathetic,* those words! My mother was doing it again, making me see black where I once saw white” (*JLC* 179-180).

Though Waverly appears to be assertive and controlling when she is at work, she is timid and powerless when she faces Lindo as her mother’s poisoning words would seep into her life gradually. Though she is able to outsmart Jing-mei in every aspect from childhood to adulthood, her relationship with her mother is equally difficult, tense, and frustrating as that of Jing-mei and Suyuan.

Rose is aware of the power of her mother’s words but still attempts to free herself from the mother’s intrusion. The power of the mother’s words and the rebellious nature of the daughter are reflected in one of Rose’s childhood nightmares. In the dream, Rose was asked to pick a doll from the sandboxes in her backyard and knowing that her mother knows what she is going to choose, she deliberately chooses a different doll: “and my mother, who was not there but could see me inside out, told Old Mr. Chou she knew which doll I would pick. So I decided to pick one that was entirely different” (*JLC* 186). Her desire for autonomy, however, is not without unpleasant consequences: her nightmare ends with Old Mr. Chou, the guardian of a door that opens into dreams according to her mother, chasing her and shouting, at the request of her mother, “’Stop her! Stop her!’ cried my mother. As I tried to run away, Old Mr. Chou chased me, shouting, ‘See what happens when you don’t listen to your mother!’ And I became paralyzed, too scared to move in any direction” (*JLC* 186). The nightmare demonstrates Rose’s inherent desire and the simultaneous dread she has as she attempts to escape from her mother, because she realises that her mother possesses the power to see her inside out. She remembers once her mother has said that she should listen to the mother’s words: “‘You must stand tall and listen to your mother standing next
to you. That is the only way to grow strong and straight. But if you bend to listen to other people, you will grow crooked and weak" (JLC 191). After Rose has grown up, she is frustrated that her mother still tries to make her listen. Avoiding her mother's intrusion, she seeks help from a psychiatrist about her marriage problem instead of her own mother. Unaware of her grandmother’s tragic story in China which has taught An-mei the importance of voice and making decisions, Rose is unable to appreciate her mother’s good intentions and prefers pouring out personal problems to a stranger rather than to her beloved mother.

- “unspoken terrors” and unexplainable behaviours

Even if the Chinese mother is not controlling, the Americanised daughter still feels alienated from her mother. The last pair of the mother-daughter dyads in The Joy Luck Club is Ying-ying and Lena and their relationship is noticeably different from the other three pairs, because Ying-ying never tries to meddle with Lena’s life; instead, Ying-ying maintains an estranged distance from her daughter. As a child, Lena senses the “unspoken terrors” that surround her house and feels that she is watching her mother being “devoured” piece by piece by the terrors “until she (Ying-ying) disappeared and became a ghost” (JLC 103). Lena sees her mother not only as a stranger, but also as a mysterious person who is “displaced” in America and sees “danger in everything” (JLC 105). Though Ying-ying allows Lena a relatively higher degree of autonomy, their relationship is not without problems. The daughter is confused by some of the thoughts that her mother has put in her mind: for example, Ying-ying always warns Lena against some unseen danger without any explanation, leaving Lena consider these warnings nothing but confusions: “I could understand the words perfectly, but not the meanings. One thought led to another without connection” (JLC 106). Like Waverly, Lena is
apprehensive of her mother's ability to see only the bad things: "She can see all this. And it annoys me that all she sees are the bad parts. But then I look around and everything she's said is true" (JLC 151). The adult Lena marries a rich husband and lives in a fanciful house but underneath she is fed up with her husband's insistence on the concept of "equal share" for their household expenses and bitter at his lack of appreciation of her role as both a wife and a partner at their company.

Though she knows her marriage problem, she does not take the initiatives to seek for solutions because in her heart, she treats her marriage to Harold as atonement for her childhood mistake, which was made because of a warning from Ying-ying 26. Lena does not appreciate her mother's ability to forewarn her of danger but thinks that her mother only sees bad things, which pushes her to hide problems from her mother desperately.

In The Kitchen God's Wife, the mother-daughter relationship is complicated because of the presence of an unspeakable horror between Winnie and Pearl - both of them have kept important secrets from each other. The opening sentence of the book by Pearl, the daughter, has set the tone of the book in the middle of an ongoing debate between the mother and daughter: "Whenever my mother talks to me, she begins the conversation as if we were already in the middle of an argument" (KGW 11). The most terrible secret that Pearl has kept from Winnie is her illness of multiple sclerosis, which has been afflicting her for seven years and is gradually eroding her physical health. She has tried to tell her mother about this a couple of times because she knows she has to do it sooner or later; however, every time she tries to do it, she is interrupted by her mother's dominant monologue about various un-connected things. In addition, Pearl's attempt to avoid her mother's intervention in many areas of her life is another reason why she keeps this
a secret. The most important reason, though, is probably Pearl’s intention to forget about her illness and the possible consequences, and get on with her life as normally as possible, though this is something she deems “impossible” (KGW 26). She hopes that other people around her would participate in this “forgetting” and treat her in a “normal” way, as if nothing has happened to her 27. Preventing Winnie from knowing about her illness is an essential step for Pearl to lead a normal life and Pearl admits, “So I never told my mother. At first I didn’t want to hear her theories on my illness, what caused this to happen, how she should have done this or that to prevent it. I did not want her to remind me” (KGW 30). As Pearl reflects on her relationship with her mother, she is saddened to realise that though they are supposed to be close, they are in fact emotionally estranged: “Mile after mile, all of it familiar, yet not, this distance that separates us, me from my mother” (KGW 57).

On the other hand, Winnie has also kept a terrible secret about her past in China from Pearl. As she arrives America, she decides that the past is the past and she would shut her secrets behind a door, keeping them hidden: “When I came to this new country, I told myself: I can think a new way. Now I can forget my tragedies, put all my secrets behind a door that will never be opened, never seen by American eyes” (KGW 71). This is an example of turning a desire for repression into “a necessity of repression” because “remembering inevitably entails pain” (Yuan, “The Semiotics” 153). Winnie is relieved to learn that nobody could chase her in the new country and therefore she could hide her mistakes, regrets, sorrows, and “change” her “fate” (KGW 72). It is not only personal shame that Winnie finds it important to hide: her determination to hide the past is necessitated politically. Winnie speaks of the difficulty she has if she is to explain everything clearly about
her life in China, at a time when China is in such a chaos and politically strained. Winnie reckons that Americans are different: they have only one kind of government and they would not understand, and therefore it is a wise move to forget about what has happened in China—"to shrink all of China into one little island I had never seen before" (KGW 71). Winnie’s experience is shared by a large number of Chinese immigrants in America: "But then China turned off the light, closed the door, told everyone to be quiet. All those people there became like ghosts. ... So I thought I really could forget everything. Nobody could get out to remind me" (KGW 72). While they are pushed into the realm of forgetting, they are also relieved at the same time that "the past is gone, nothing to be done, just forget it" (Adams 76). This is also true for Winnie and Pearl: the physical and spatial distance does facilitate the forgetting, just as what Pearl has thought, she "assumes that forgetting is made easier by not seeing/hearing Winnie" and therefore she "rarely telephones her mother in San Francisco, particularly not for 'no reason'" (Adams 77). The estrangement between the mother and daughter has, paradoxically, arisen due to the same reason: the attempt to forget, with a hope to change the past by deliberately obliterating the unwanted memories.

A mysterious unspeakable truth is hovering around the relationship between LuLing and Ruth in The Bonesetter’s Daughter. The young Ruth has found her mother “permanently unhappy with everything and everybody” as if she has immersed herself “in a climate of unsolvable despair” (BSD 17) and she summarises her mother as “difficult, oppressive, and odd,” even though she admits that LuLing is the person who loves her most in this world (BSD 52). Her dissatisfaction with her life and in particular the relationship with her mother is reflected in her wish to write a book of her own: “Years before, she had dreamed of
writing stories as a way to escape. She could revise her life and become someone else. She could be somewhere else. In her imagination she could change everything, herself, her mother, her past” (BSD 27). Ruth is particularly annoyed with LuLing’s preoccupation with ghosts, curses, and death and she thinks LuLing is peculiar in ways that are different from other Chinese people: “Ruth used to wish her mother were more like Auntie Gal. She didn’t talk about ghosts or bad luck or ways she might die” (BSD 43). LuLing always mentions a mysterious figure called Bao Bomu or Precious Auntie, whom Ruth regards as “the crazy ghost” (BSD 48). Ironically, though Ruth is annoyed with LuLing’s obsession with ghosts, they are kind of connected and communicate well as LuLing mistakenly believes that Ruth could talk to Precious Auntie (the ghost) through sand-writing, a practice that Ruth has learnt after she has broken her arm and lost her verbal power temporarily. Without actually knowing how, Ruth discovers that she possesses the power while talking to her mother through sand-writing, because she could easily get what she wants by this means. As LuLing believes that Precious Auntie is talking to her through the sand-writing of Ruth, she readily carries out what “Precious Auntie” would like her to do, though in fact it is actually Ruth’s wishes or random scribbles. Sand-writing therefore becomes a mysterious and temporary means for the mother and daughter to communicate peacefully as they somehow transform this negative force of mystery and horror into a positive communicative tool.

- the mother’s fixation in China and the daughter’s assimilation in America

The conflict of cultures is an important factor that contributes to the problematic mother-daughter relationships in Tan’s novels. However, it might be an over-generalisation to simply blame the cultural difference as the cause of their problems because it is just too convenient for the American-born daughters to lay
blame on the cultural factor, particularly because the Chinese culture is remote and alienated to the daughters. As Amy Tan has noted, “I chalked up all of her fears to Chinese fears, not generational ones. Anything that was unreasonable, I said was Chinese so I made the culture the scapegoat” (Shields 31). This corresponds to what Jing-mei observes in *The Joy Luck Club*, “I used to dismiss her criticisms as just more of her Chinese superstitions, beliefs that conveniently fit the circumstances” (31). As Smurthwaite has observed, “From the beginning of Jing-mei’s narration in the first chapter, the novel foregrounds the cultural gap between mothers and daughters, but the varied ways that mothers and daughters experience their own cultural identity belie a simple dichotomization of ‘Chinese mothers’ and ‘American daughters’” (107). All the Tan mothers and daughters are individuals with their personal stories, either hidden or forgotten. Nonetheless, their generational gulf is informed by the cultural discrepancies, as the two together complicate an erected wall already blocking the communications between them. In an interview with Katherine Henderson in 1990, Amy Tan explains the mother-daughter relationship in her writing: “the [metaphorical] umbilical cord ... gets stretched over time; whether it’s the mother or daughter who severs it or tries to pull it tighter, part of that is individual and part is cultural” (qtd. in Madsen 66). In this sense, the “individual” or “personal” components in *The Joy Luck Club* – what I refer to as the “domestic” nuances in the book – do indeed have a cultural bearing, signifying that the ethnic context of the book is specific and should not be overlooked. The “personal” is therefore on the one hand, unique, while on the other hand, it interweaves with the “cultural.” Their identities as Chinese Americans have located them in a specific cultural, ethnic, sociohistorical, and generational space, while all the factors are interwoven. Unlike in *The Woman
Warrior, the tense mother-daughter relationship is not caused by the mothers’ Chinese stories – which is what the daughter-narrator protagonist in Kingston’s book experiences. Instead of being confused or scared by the Chinese stories or mysteries, the Tan daughters mostly do not pay attention at all while the Tan mothers also keep part of their past memories as secrets. Though The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife, and The Bonesetter’s Daughter are not predominantly about building relationships amid cultural differences, the cultural gulf between the mothers and daughters is still visible as the American-born daughters endeavour to free themselves from the Chinese influences of their mothers to assimilate to the “mainstream” culture and reject their mothers’ “root” culture.

The mothers in The Joy Luck Club are similar to Brave Orchid in The Woman Warrior in the sense that all the mothers want to leave some sort of Chinese legacy – Chinese stories, traditions, culture, and their family history in China – to their American-born daughters, something that they believe their daughters would be proud of – as symbolised by the swan in the opening vignette, but are all sadly disappointed that the daughters are brought up in ways completely opposite to what they intend. Since they were young, the daughters have been rejecting the Chinese heritage to make themselves American, conforming to the mode which is accepted by the “mainstream” culture, and therefore alienating themselves from their Chinese mothers. Wendy Ho has mentioned that the “stereotypes of Asian women” have seriously affected “the way Chinese American daughters ‘read’ their immigrant mothers and their own ethnic communities” (HMH 165). Victoria Chen, likewise, mentions that “it is no secret that in much of our social discourse and communication practice, the myth persists that what counts as the ‘normal’
standards and criteria for comparing and discussing cultural difference is still the mainstream Eurocentric mode of thinking and doing" (86). Brought up in America, the Joy Luck daughters have imbibed some racism and stereotypes concerning ethnic minorities from the mainstream media. By rejecting the "minority" part in themselves, the daughters believe they would be better off as this would assist their assimilation to the mainstream culture 29. Therefore, the daughters have to free themselves from their mothers and cast off the "minority" or in a stronger word, the "impure," part of their heritages: "they fear the rejections and ostracism they have seen or heard their mothers suffer as immigrant, working-class women of color who did not fit into the culture, discourse, and values of mainstream, middle-class white America" (Ho, HMH 165). For the mothers, the daughters' persistent denial of the maternal experience and subjectivities is probably more disheartening than the denial and suppression from the patriarchal Chinese discourse and the mainstream American discourse.

In an effort to distinguish themselves from their "displaced" mothers, the Joy Luck daughters develop ways to assimilate into the mainstream society. One of the ways that Rose, Waverly, and Lena have opted for is to have Euro-American men as partners, whose appearance and personality are more likely to match the western definition of manhood. The daughters seem to think that marrying a Euro-American man would facilitate their escape from the mother, and the mother culture (Chinese culture), and their entry to the mainstream culture. As Rose has admitted, she is initially attracted to Ted, her husband, because he is different from her brothers and the Chinese boys she has dated and "that his parents immigrated from Tarrytown, New York, not Tientsin, China" (JLC 117). When her mother, An-mei, shows disapproval of this relationship and says that "He is American,"
Rose readily retorts, "I'm American too" (JLC 117). An-mei identifies this Caucasian man as "a waigoren" – meaning a foreigner, someone who belongs to another place and hence an outsider – while Rose identifies him as a comrade and an insider. After Rose marries Ted, their relationship becomes like that of a victim to a hero: "I was victim to his hero. I was always in danger and he was always rescuing me. I would fall and he would lift me up" (JLC 118-119). Rose is a submissive and indecisive wife who lets her saviour-like Euro-American husband make all the decisions for their families because she has the perception that the Americans have better opinions on various matters (JLC 191). As Rose endeavours to immerse herself into the mainstream Euro-centric American world, she has internalised the mainstream culture's notion of inferiority as ethnic minorities and "devalues her Chinese mother's advice" (Ho, HMH 177).

Lena's process of assimilation is less imperative. Born of a Chinese mother and an English-Irish American father, Lena resembles more her Caucasian father and has a non-Chinese last name "St. Clair." Though Lena thinks that her Chinese part is not visible, she senses that she is different from other Caucasian girls at school because she sees terrible and dark things with her Chinese eyes, the part that she gets from her mother. She does not tell others about this mysterious ability, because most people do not know she is half Chinese – when she goes into the street with Ying-ying, people mistake Ying-ying for her maid because of their differences in appearance, signifying the inferior status of the Chinese ethnic communities and explaining Lena's inherent fear of resembling her mother. Lena is very conscious of her difference from other purely Caucasian girls and thus she tries to distinguish herself from her mother: "And my eyes, my mother gave me my eyes, no eyelids, as if they were carved on a jack-o'-lantern with two swift cuts of a
short knife. I used to push my eyes in on the sides to make them rounder. Or I’d open them very wide until I could see the white parts” (JLC 104). By doing so, Lena hopes to get rid of the terrible things she sees with the Chinese eyes, as well as to dissociate herself from her Chinese mother, who is paranoid and mysterious in her eyes.

Jing-mei also attempts to avoid being tagged as an outsider by distancing herself from her mother and the mother culture. When Suyuan insists Jing-mei continue practising the piano after the talent show fiasco, Jing-mei turns vigorously rebellious and decides that she should not listen to her mother anymore, “I didn’t budge. And then I decided. I didn’t have to do what my mother said anymore. I wasn’t her slave. This wasn’t China” (JLC 141). By rejecting the Chinese teaching of obeying one’s parent, Jing-mei denies her mother the opportunity to transmit legacies of Chinese culture in America. Besides, obeying her “displaced” mother would have put Jing-mei in an inferior position, as this reminds her of her status as an ethnic minority in America, the labelling effect that she desperately wants to get rid of. In addition, the mother is always strange and “backward” in dressing and behaviour in the Americanised daughter’s perception: “She and Auntie An-mei were dressed up in funny Chinese dresses with stiff stand-up collars and blooming branches of embroidered silk sewn over their breasts. These clothes were too fancy for real Chinese people, I thought, and too strange for American parties” (JLC 28). Jing-mei groups her mother and the other Joy Luck aunties together as a group of exotic and peculiar women who are unfit in the contemporary world. The “foreign-ness” of the mother and aunties pushes Jing-mei to differentiate herself from them as she tries to assimilate into the “American-feminine” society “quietly” and “smoothly” (Ho, HMH 165-166). When Suyuan tells the fifteen-year-old Jing-
mei that someday she will appreciate that the Chinese part of her is in her blood, Jing-mei is horrified and imagines a frightening picture of what is “Chinese” to her: “I saw myself transforming like a werewolf, a mutant tag of DNA suddenly triggered, replicating itself insidiously into a syndrome, a cluster of telltale Chinese behaviors, all those things my mother did to embarrass me” (JLC 267). The adolescent Jing-mei tends to conclude Suyuan’s strange and embarrassing behaviour as related to the “Chinese” genes; and in order to fit in with her Caucasian friends, she categorically denies any Chinese genes below her skin (JLC 267). In the adolescent daughter’s mind, denying the Chinese part in her blood and therefore rejecting any resemblances to her immigrant mother is the only way for acculturation. The rejection of mother culture and by extension, the mother, is to the daughters, an essential step to fit in and assimilate.

Unaware of the real circumstances in which the mothers landed in America, the Joy Luck daughters fail to appreciate their mothers and view them as subjects of their own because their thoughts are framed within the mainstream Anglo-American society. Jing-mei discards her mother’s past tragic story in China as a “Chinese fairy tale,” a kind of tale that is forever stored in the past which is inaccessible and irrelevant to her modern and contemporary American life (JLC 25). Like Jing-mei, Waverly does not take the stories of her parents seriously. She makes jokes about how Lindo comes to America and Lindo is disappointed that Waverly makes up “Chinese nonsense” and fails to recognise her real circumstances – a story of hardship, struggle, and pain (JLC 259). Ignorant of her mother’s painful struggle to survive through hard work in a cookie factory in America and of how her parents’ love flourishes as they overcome the language problem together, Waverly is like Jing-mei, as both seem to treat their parents’ past
stories of struggle and pain as fairy tales, which are only accessible to them as fantasies. In a sense, it is quite untrue that "fairy tales" are trivial as they are a valuable source of folk culture and are important in "the upbringing of children" if connected to the person who listens to the tales (Bettelheim 6). According to Bruno Bettelheim, for a tale to actually influence a child, it is important that the tale is beneficial and related to the listener in some ways:

...to enrich his life, it must stimulate his imagination; help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions; be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations; give full recognition to his difficulties, while at the same time suggesting solutions to the problems which perturb him. (5)

To the young daughters, their mothers' stories, frozen in old China and unconnected to their contemporary and modern American world, are simply "fairy tales" — a weakened translated term of the German "folk stories" — signifying the imaginative, unauthentic, and fantasy aspects of the story and its audience as children, as the daughters fail to fit in their mothers' stories. Denoting the mothers' stories, which are shaped by folk stories, as "fairy tales" hence trivialises and weakens their significance. However, what the daughters do not realise is that folk stories could also be reassuring for the children as they listen to them; and dismissing the mothers' stories as "fairy tales" would mean missing out important life lessons and reassurance from the mothers.

While the Joy Luck daughters grow up to speak perfect American English to assimilate and socialise into the Euro-centric white American society and the Anglo-American dominant culture, they have to alienate themselves from the "Chinese influences" of their immigrant mothers who embody the Chinese culture, that is, the "lower and minor class" in the society and are thus hindering their
complete acculturation. This alienation from the mother cannot be removed until the daughters finally learn to listen to their mothers’ stories and fully appreciate their mothers’ “good intentions.” Therefore the mothers wait patiently for the day when their daughters would not turn a deaf ear to their cautions, and their past stories of tears and sweat, and when the daughter would learn to connect themselves to their mothers through the stories.

In *Kitchen God’s Wife*, the mother and daughter are alienated both physically and emotionally. Winnie has summed up her relationship with Pearl in this way: “That is how she is. That is how I am. Always careful to be polite, always trying not to bump into each other, just like strangers” (*KGW* 82). Aware of the alienation, Winnie has tried to shorten the distance between her and Pearl by accustoming herself to the American thinking and culture 32. Despite Winnie’s attempt to immerse herself in her daughter’s world, the daughter still sees the mother through the gaze of “Chinese-ness.” Pearl dismisses Winnie’s incomprehensible behaviour as “Chinese,” and attributes their misunderstandings and difficulties in communication to their cultural differences. She reckons spending time with her mother is like spending the “whole time avoiding land mines” and is puzzled why she still gives in to her family obligations, upon the request of her mother (*KGW* 16). Accustomed to the American style of expressive passion, Pearl senses the estrangement as she ponders on her mother’s behaviour after they have not seen each other for a month – unlike the exchange of casual hugs and kisses she would have with Phil’s parents and friends, her mother greets her as if she is a stranger or any casual friend. Unable to understand her mother’s various hypotheses concerning religion, medicine, and superstition, Pearl labels her mother “a Chinese version of Freud, or worse” (*KGW* 29). The Chinese’s reservation in praising their
own children is also frustrating for Pearl: when Winnie learns that Pearl has got a new job, in competition with two other candidates, instead of congratulating her daughter, Winnie demands, “Two? Only two people wanted that job?” (KGW 15). This discouraging comment makes Pearl worried whether she has missed a better opportunity; even though she is basically happy with her job, she is subconsciously influenced by Winnie’s words. Sadly, she never learns to tell her true feelings and frustrations to her mother, but simply lets her mother overshadow her life with criticisms and complaints, just as an obedient Chinese daughter would do.

**Tan’s popularity: “talk-story” as a form of “talking-cure”**

In the tradition of breaking silence that has become one of the shaping myths in the writings of women of color, maternal silence in the novel is transformed from a medium of self-inscription and subjectivity into an instrument of intersubjectivity and dialogue.

- Marina Heung (34)

Only in adulthood can an intelligent understanding of the meaning of one’s existence in this world be gained from one’s experiences in it.

- Bruno Bettelheim (3)

In Amy Tan’s works, storytelling is a means for her characters, mainly the Chinese immigrant mothers, to reclaim their past as a way to shape their and their daughters’ future. As Tan’s familial storytelling culture is basically domestic, she also has her characters pouring out stories in a conversational domestic setting: “Tan creates natural, familial instances of mother-to-daughter storytelling in which women seize an opportunity to speak freely without being censored or stifled” (Snodgrass 164). To the women who are once suppressed and silenced in the patriarchal China and then dislocated due to cultural shock in America, talk-story is an act of empowerment for self-definition as well as a means of preserving their past lives by giving their daughters’ the precious legacy that they have carried over
the oceans. The mothers in *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife*, and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* have told stories about themselves and other people to their daughters in domestic settings (in which their daughters do not pay much attention); yet, they have also kept agonising and horrible secrets of their past from their daughters. Unlike the mother (Brave Orchid) in Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* who uses talk-story mainly as an act of caution, providing information, and preserving culture, storytelling in Tan’s novels has another pragmatic effect: it is the unburdening of secrets of the past that heals the traumatic memories and the problematic mother-daughter relationship. Talk-stories here come off as producing therapeutic effects on the characters, both the mothers and daughters, as through this activity of unburdening secrets, the mothers learn to accept and reclaim their past while the daughters are able to decipher their mothers from a new angle and come to terms with the conflicts with their mothers, thereby solving the problematic mother-daughter relationships which have been tense since the daughters are children.

For the Tan characters, talk-story produces healing effects as they retell their traumatised experiences to their daughters. As Marina Heung remarks, “storytelling heals past experiences of loss and separation; it is also a medium for rewriting stories of oppression and victimization into parables of self-affirmation and individual empowerment,” as the mothers recount their past stories, they are released from the position of silence to creating their voice for self-definition at the same time (34). Burying a large part of their forbidden past, the Tan mothers cannot bring themselves to talk about the past. They are, in some ways, like the soldiers, who, after returning from the war, grow silent and live in such a state of trauma that they, on the one hand, cannot talk about their war experience because
talking about it means reliving the horrible memories; while on the other hand, they would like to hide it from their family members. The repressed memories or experience, therefore, become more and more intimidating as they are buried longer and longer: just as Pearl in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* says, “And now that so much time has gone by, the fact that I still haven’t told her makes the illness seem ten times worse” (*KGW* 30). Perhaps unbeknownst to them, as the characters are released from their trauma through recounting their past, talk-story has actually healed them at that specific moment of retelling as they are finally able to speak about their repressed past. This activity, therefore, is more than just breaking silence, but becomes a kind of emotional healing to the characters.

In this way, “talk-story” is manifested as a form of “talking cure” in Amy Tan’s three novels as her literary characters are emotionally “cured” after “talking” about themselves and their past stories. The term “talking cure” is derived from psychotherapy and in this chapter, I employ the term “talking cure” not as a technical medical term, but loosely as a term referring to the kind of therapeutic effect brought upon through “talking” about things the Tan characters intentionally or unintentionally forget about in their normal lives. Here, Tan has developed Kingston’s term “talk-story” in a more American way as she approaches talk-story as a form of psychotherapy, a popular practice in America, for her characters. In Kingston’s works, she tries to capture the fluidity of the oral tradition as her works’ structural framework; whereas for Tan, talk-story is a main and actual textual substance of the narrative as her literary characters engage in the dynamic activity of storytelling. In this sense, I propose to suggest that one factor that contributes to Tan’s popularity is her modification of the tradition of talk-story (using Kingston’s term) into the form of the western psychotherapy of “talking cure.” After the
characters “talk” about their personal stories and uncover their secrets, not only are their problematic mother-daughter relationships healed, but they are transformed and emotionally cured within themselves as well. Tan has therefore shifted Kingston’s term “talk-story” to the modern American angle, and hence demonstrating the kind of “talking cure” in the characters, which is more internally-focused and thus more appealing to the American audience/readers as it is close to the therapy practice. Whereas in the activity of talk-story in Kingston’s works, the stories are both personal (stories of family members) and impersonal (cultural/historical myths) and are always there as Kingston’s narrators and characters manipulate and modify them in their own ways to suit their own needs; in Tan’s novels, her characters talk about their predominantly personal stories, without external modifications and revisions. In this way, Tan remodels the exotic form of talk-story to a popular mode of “talking cure” psychotherapy.

In *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers are different from Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*, they try to fix their daughters’ problems and thereby resolve the conflicts between them; whereas the daughter-narrator in *The Woman Warrior* has to do that independently by embarking her own talk-story. The reconciliation between the Joy Luck mothers and daughters is achieved as the mothers unburden their secrets of their tragic past, so that the past is released to shape the future. In *The Joy Luck Club*, the reasons for the mother’s unburdening of secrets are pragmatic. The Chinese mothers start telling the daughters their stories after the death of their friend, Suyuan, Jing-mei’s mother, as they fear that their daughters would continue growing into complete strangers, the disheartening truth they see in Jing-mei’s complete ignorance of her mother’s history and personality, and therefore they decide to “talk” to their daughters before it is too late. In addition,
unburdening themselves of the past stories would lead to the daughters’ seeing their mothers not as their opponents, but their best allies who are loving and have their “best” interests in their hearts. Even though the mothers are still talking in a special language of Chinese dialects and “broken” English, they believe that it is the right time for them to release their past stories because it is at that particular moment that the mothers are ready to tell and are confident that their daughters are also ready and would listen to them and would understand. Like the girl who does not listen to her mother’s warning in the prologue of “The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates” and falls off the bicycle just as her mother has predicted, the Joy Luck daughters begin to appreciate that their mothers’ cautions, warnings, and beliefs are not some old-fashioned Chinese superstitions, but are products of the mothers’ love and care. As they endeavour to see their mothers as their contemporaries, they discover that the mothers are not a group of ever-demanding monstrous perfectionists or mysterious Chinese backward women who speak only “broken” English, but are individuals who have a rich history which incorporates the joy and sorrow of their lives. They also realise that their mothers have been right about them and that the mothers are the ones that they should count on – the Joy Luck daughters therefore stop turning deaf ears to their mothers’ words, even though they are not articulated in perfect American English.

The reconciliation between the mothers and daughters is tentatively laid out in the third and fourth sections of the book, “American Translation” and “Queen Mothers of the Western Skies,” as the pairs attempt to re-build their relationships via talk-stories. By “talk-stories,” I am referring to the immigrant mothers’ unburdening of past stories and secrets so that their American-born daughters learn why they are the way they are and are empowered by the mothers’ unravelling of
the past. It also takes place at a specific moment when the talker and the listener are connected in a relational aspect as they engage in an on-going and dynamic activity. As the mothers uncover their tragic past, they are empowered because through recounting their stories, they reclaim the "lost" parts of themselves, as they have consciously or unconsciously forgotten and buried their past when they relocate to America, an alien country in which they have hoped to turn their lives anew. Even so, the reconciliation between the mothers and daughters is not explicitly identified for all pairs in the book, though Amy Tan has deliberately outlined the prospect for their reconciliation through the development of empathy and mutual understanding. To understand the reconciliation of the mother-daughter pairs, the third and fourth sections should be read side by side for a coherent picture. Stephen Souris has pointed out that the Joy Luck mothers and daughters have failed to reach a reconciliation because the "mothers and daughters are speaking into a void, not to each other," and it depends on the readers' participation to form intermonologue dialogics for the mothers and daughters in the text (113). The narrative structure of the book, with the mothers and daughters narrating their stories and internal thoughts separately, does invite Souris's reading of it as a book ending with a failed communication between the pairs. Furthermore, Souris dismisses the occasional use of second person in some of the mother's monologues as "an aside to an imagined audience, not an actual audience" (113). I agree with Souris's points in a certain sense: as the mothers and daughters narrate in separate sections, the responsibility of pairing up monologues with imagined dialogues lies on the readers and hence reconciliation between the mothers and daughters - the candid unburdening of past secrets from the mothers and the appreciation and understanding of the daughters - is not achieved fully in a strict sense. However, I
still intend to argue that the reconciliation between the mothers and daughters is potentially made at the end of the book, because with the mothers’ open intention to speak of their past, and the daughters’ attempt to understand their mothers and view them as someone not to be avoided, it is obvious that all the mothers and daughters have changed in the course of the narrations and have opened their minds to emotionally accept one another and achieve a potential, even if not definite, reconciliation.

In the section of “American Translation,” the adult Joy Luck daughters start to express their true feelings to their mothers and view them as their contemporaries. The section is ironically entitled, as the problem of mis-translation and misinterpretation between the mothers and daughters is first highlighted and then seemingly resolved at the end of the four stories. The prologue to this section outlines its main theme, in which the daughters begin to learn that their mothers have always wanted to bring and multiply their “peach-blossom luck” for better lives (JLC 147). In the prologue, the mother does not only see “bad omens in everything” but is able to envision the “peach-blossom luck” of her daughter through the mirror at her daughter’s new home, whereas on the other hand, the daughter could not see what her mother has seen – the vision of a grandchild – and she sees only her reflection as she looks in the mirror (JLC 147). While the mother is concerned more for the family genealogy and could see through her daughter, the daughter cares only for herself, a result of being nurtured in the individualistic culture of America. The Joy Luck daughters have always found their mothers demanding since childhood, and because the mothers always sound as if they are complaining and criticising, even as adults, they feel that they are failing their mothers. They do not realise that it is because of their mothers’ enduring love of,
and hope for, them that the mothers think they deserve only the “best quality” in the world. For example, Waverly thinks that her mother could criticise her boyfriend because her mother is a complaining and destructive woman who is hard to satisfy but she fails to realise that her mother is so proud of her that the mother thinks nobody is good enough for her. As each short narration by the daughters comes to the end in “American Translation,” the daughters have started to learn that their mothers have always known them best and have their best interests in heart. The mothers are thus reborn anew in the eyes of the daughters, who attempt to release their mothers from the immobilised and stereotypical gaze they have adopted from the mainstream racist American culture and begin to view their mothers as individuals with subjectivities.

In “Four Directions,” Waverly recalls a childhood memory of an emotional tug-of-war in which she loses to Lindo. After Waverly intentionally quits playing chess as revenge but results in Lindo’s apathy, Waverly discovers that she actually longs for her mother’s support and recognition for her talent. She loses much more frequently after her mother stops appreciating her chess talent: “It was as though I had lost my magic armor” (JLC 172). Unbeknownst to her, the “magic armor” is ironically her mother’s mental support and appreciation, which is like a protective shell where she could exploit her potential and be loved. This anecdote partly explains why Waverly is worried about her mother’s reaction to her second marriage: first, she is worried that Rich’s good character traits would erode away under her mother’s critical gaze; and second, she yearns for her mother’s acceptance concerning this important decision of hers. As Waverly finally summons sufficient courage and anger to tell her mother that she has known Lindo’s “scheming ways of” making her miserable, she is surprised to discover
another side of the mother as she looks at Lindo, sleeping on the sofa: “With her smooth face, she looked like a young girl, frail, guileless, and innocent. ... All her strength was gone. She had no weapons, no demons surrounding her. She looked powerless. Defeated” (JLC 180). As she grows alarmed about her mother’s vulnerability, she realises that her perception of her mother has changed within seconds: “it seemed, I had gone from being angered by her strength, to being amazed by her innocence, and then frightened by her vulnerability” (JLC 180-181). Prompted by the discovery of a “new” mother, Waverly tells her mother the news of her marriage, something she could not have done if she were facing the “old” mother — the fiercely-strong and demanding opponent in her life. Lindo and Waverly finally resort to honest talk-stories in which emotions are expressed and exchanged. The daughter realises that she has misinterpreted her mother as a monster who has intentions and hates her future husband while the mother rebuilds a closer relationship with the daughter by telling her the family history which makes the daughter part of what she is now: their clan always knows how to win, corresponding to the “art of invisible strength” taught by the mother (JLC 89). The mother-daughter connection can only be made through the efforts of both sides, though it is fragile, it is blossoming. As the mother and daughter share their genealogy, Waverly peers over the invisible wall between them and sees that her mother has always been there waiting for her: “But in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there: an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword, getting a little crabby as she waited patiently for her daughter to invite her in” (JLC 183-184) 34. Waverly’s story ends with a positive note as the daughter plans to go to China with her mother and her husband for honeymoon with the hope that the three of them would have a
wonderful trip leaving their differences behind, “sitting side by side,” and “moving West to reach the East,” signifying the daughter’s attempt to learn about her mother’s homeland (JLC 184).

Rose lets her husband, Ted, make all the arrangements and decisions regarding their divorce. She seeks counselling from a psychiatrist but her mother, An-mei, thinks she should confide the problem to the mother instead of some strangers who would only make her “hulihudut” and see “heimongmong,” meaning “confused” and “dark fog” respectively (JLC 188). An-mei comments that Rose is “without wood” – bending to listen to too many people and never recognising the fact that “A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you” (JLC 188). Recalling her mother’s words back home, Rose realises that what her mother says is true: though she cannot translate the phrases “hulihudut” and “heimongmong” succinctly in American English, she agrees that she has felt hulihudut and seen things around her as heimongmong recently. With a tendency to neglect her mother’s Chinese advice and opt for the “better” American version, Rose later finds out that there is a “serious flaw with the American version”: “There were too many choices, so it was easy to get confused and pick the wrong thing” (JLC 191). Rose is certain that An-mei would ask her to save the marriage, but it turns out that An-mei only asks her to “speak up,” something that An-mei has learnt from her childhood and her own mother’s tragedy (JLC 193). Without consciously knowing it, Rose begins to adopt her mother’s advice and transforms from a person “without wood” to one with personal will 35. She finally heeds An-mei’s advice in standing up firmly, makes her own decisions, talks to Ted in person instead of outpouring grievances to the psychiatrist and her friends, as she announces to Ted what she wants: “‘You can’t just pull me out of your life and throw me away’” (JLC 196), and discovers that she
is transformed and empowered internally. By speaking up, she subverts the oppression upon her, and she is relieved as she sees Ted confused and scared: “He was hulihudu. The power of my words was that strong” (JLC 196). Acknowledging the power of her words, Rose connects herself to An-mei, whose power of words is also strong, and discovers that they can both possess their powers, which are not necessarily conflicting, but complementary, as listening to her mother’s words is not tantamount to surrendering her own self. “Without Wood” ends with a new harmonious dream of Rose, which is an opposite of her childhood nightmare where she is chased by Old Mr. Chou for not listening to her mother, in which An-mei plants some weeds, in the presence of the cheerful Old Mr. Chou, for herself and Rose, who can now see through the heimongmong, and embrace her mother’s love.

As I have discussed earlier, the relationship between Lena and Ying-ying is noticeably different from other Joy Luck mothers and daughters. Similar to other pairs, Ying-ying and Lena are like strangers to each other, but their alienation is not simply brought upon by the daughter’s intention to get away from her Chinese mother, but is also coupled with the mother’s self-entrapment in the past horrifying memories. Ying-ying’s abnormal silence and paranoia deny Lena the opportunity to develop a close relationship with her. Their alienation is also a result of Ying-ying’s limitation in English, with her husband’s tendency to put words in her mouth and her daughter’s deliberate mis-translation of her words, that Ying-ying is always trapped in her own internal world. Noticing Ying-ying’s mental despair and her father’s inability to help, the young Lena fantasises herself as a rescuer of the mother. In fantasy, she performs a thousand cuts on her mother, who screams and shouts, cries out in terror and pain but survives. She hopes that through this
symbolic death of the mother, she would be able to break Ying-ying’s silence and free her from the trauma. Lena’s imagined fantasy symbolises her hidden yearning to save her mother from sickness and develop a direct relationship with the mother, like that of her neighbours, Mrs. Sorci and Teresa. The child Lena has heard arguments, screams and noises of beatings, from the neighbouring mother and daughter, and has been wondering why Teresa would survive in this terrible relationship; and it is only later that she finds out the mother-daughter pair love each other. After crying for joy with them, Lena still sees bad things in her mind, but she now finds ways to change them. She wishes to empower both herself and her mother by enacting the ability to change the circumstances around them and thus save both of them.

However, as we meet the mature Lena in “Rice Husband,” it seems that the childhood fantasy is still a wish not yet fulfilled. Lena is desperate to hide her unsatisfying marriage from Ying-ying, but her mother, who always has the ability to see through things, in particular her daughter, has spotted bad signs and omens. But then as they spend time together in the new house, Lena discovers that Ying-ying is the only one who knows that she cannot eat ice cream because of a childhood trauma. Ying-ying’s maternal concern is touching, while on the other hand Lena is startled that her husband, Harold, has never noticed she does not eat ice cream. Lena has tried to save Ying-ying from being a living ghost when she is young, but ironically has become one herself in her mother’s eyes. Prompted by Ying-ying’s remarks, Lena, who has got fed up with their marriage based on “a balance sheet” which reminds her of the fake equality in the marriage, starts to reassess her relationship with Harold (JLC 165). However, as she confronts Harold with her thoughts (“Why do you have to be so goddamn fair!”), she becomes
inarticulate and suddenly gets confused as what the argument is about and what she really wants (JLC 164). “Rice Husband” ends with the mother’s question to the daughter about why she does not stop the vase from falling down if she knows that it will:

“Fallen down,” she says simply. She doesn’t apologize.

“It doesn’t matter,” I say, and I start to pick up the broken glass shards.

“I knew it would happen.”

“And why you don’t stop it?” asks my mother. (JLC 165)

The conversation refers to the broken vase on the surface, but both the mother and daughter know they are implicitly referring to Lena’s broken marriage. Weak and confused as she is, Lena’s new insight from her mother produces a less satisfying result than that of Waverly and Rose, as at the end, Lena seems to be enlightened by her mother’s views, but cannot entirely enact her will. After living as a shadow in the marriage with Harold for many years, Lena seems to have lost the very notion of autonomy and independence. Her life is perfect in appearance, with a rich husband, a good career, and living in a wonderful extravagant house in Woodside; yet she is broken and fallen apart inside: “All I can remember is how awfully lucky I felt, and consequently how worried I was that all this undeserved good fortune would someday slip away” (JLC 156). The adult Lena lacks confidence and wonders if she deserves a smart, handsome, and successful husband, and thus she is contented in occupying an inferior role in the marriage, despite its appearance of equality and fairness, and has been in this role for so long that she has lost the power to articulate coherently her own will or protest for things she abhors. Ying-ying’s comment at the end of “Rice Husband” is illuminating for Lena, but the desired result of pushing Lena to save herself is not achieved yet, perhaps not until
Ying-ying has released her tragic past, which I will discuss later in this chapter.

Prompted by the death of Suyuan and the Joy Luck aunties’ request to tell her lost half-sisters about her mother, Jing-mei recollects memories about her mother and reassesses their relationship. Suyuan gives Jing-mei a jade pendant after a crab dinner at the Chinese New Year, in which Jing-mei is humiliated by Waverly’s public hint on her poor writing skills. When Suyuan gives her the necklace after the dinner, Jing-mei thinks that her mother gives that to her as a consolation and making up for the betrayal the mother shows at the dinner. It is only when Suyuan comments on Waverly negatively that Jing-mei knows she has misunderstood her mother: “‘Tss! Why you listen to her? Why you want to follow behind her, chasing her words? She is like this crab.’ My mother poked a shell in the garbage can. ‘Always walking sideways, moving crooked. You can make your legs go the other way’” (JLC 208). Despite Suyuan’s ambition for the child Jing-mei to outsmart Waverly, she has learnt to appreciate her daughter’s “uniqueness” and as the one who, unlike others, would not “want best quality” (JLC 208). In another scene, Jing-mei has the piano reconditioned after Suyuan’s death, and discovers that the song “Pleading Child,” which she has played very poorly in the talent show, and “Perfectly Contented,” another song printed on another side of the page which she has paid no attention to in the past, are two halves of the same song by Schumann. As Jing-mei plays the two songs on the piano, she realises that the songs’ notes come back to her quite easily: “‘Pleading Child’ was shorter but slower; ‘Perfectly Contented’ was longer, but faster” (JLC 144). It signifies that the mature Jing-mei realises that though she once thinks her childhood is sad like a “pleading child,” it is only a short period of her life. She is blinded by her one-sided view in the past and has neglected another brighter side of contentment. It
symbolises Jing-mei's relationship with her mother: "these phrases may appear to be contradictory, but, in fact, they are really two natural and complementary stages of life" (Shen 122). She is perfectly contented as she appreciates her mother's love and forgiveness, signified by the re-offering of the piano, and which survives even after her mother's death. Though it might be too late, Jing-mei is disillusioned to learn that what her mother means by her life's importance is not really the jade pendant, but the mother's words, love, and support. In this way, the emotional chasm between the mother and daughter is bridged as both learn to accept and appreciate each other's differences.

As the Joy Luck daughters attempt to view their Chinese mothers as strong-willed and dignified contemporaries and start to really listen to their mothers' words (for Jing-mei, it is a recollection of her mother's words), they surprisingly find that they are empowered by their mothers, and thus have fought over the constraining gaze of racist stereotypes in America and the patriarchy in China, in which the daughters have frozen their mothers. Though the mother-daughter relationship is not yet solidly re-established, they are willing to open their minds for acceptance across differences and opportunities for reconciliation. After the outburst of emotions and candid expression of personal feelings, the daughters have changed their views on their mothers and are emotionally connected to them. Timing is important for the daughters to understand and comprehend the rich meanings of their mothers' stories as only at moments "after their own sufferings in life" would they be more receptive to "the humble wisdom of the previous generations" and not to treat the mothers' tales as "dead echoes of past acts and events" (Xu 15).

The relationship between the mother-daughter pairs in The Joy Luck Club is
potentially reconciled as the mothers, the other side of the two-way trafficking, start to unburden their past personal stories after a long time of waiting. With a hope of removing the stumbling blocks along their way to reconciliation, the Joy Luck mothers resort to talk-stories to teach their daughters, to empower both themselves and their daughters, and hence re-identify their matrilineal tradition transcending the geocultural gap. The concluding section, “Queen Mother of the Western Skies,” is narrated by the three mothers and Jing-mei. In this section, the mothers wrap up their childhood stories in China, conclude their advice on their daughters’ problems, and reach reconciliation with their daughters, who, after listening to their mothers’ stories, are expected to integrate their mothers’ past to their present. After talking-story with their daughters, the mothers’ past trauma is tentatively healed as they are empowered internally through retelling their stories, and are able to translate their past in China with their daughters, emotionally connect to them, and maintain a family genealogy as well. As the prologue of the section signifies, the mothers learn from their own mistakes and sufferings in the past and wish to teach their daughters “how to lose your (their) innocence but not your (their) hope” in order to stay happy and positive about their lives (JLC 213). The mothers do not intentionally see only bad omens but, as they have learnt lessons from their past, they want to save their daughters from having the same heartbroken sensation, just as the woman in the prologue has said, “Hwai dungsyi, was this kind of thinking wrong? If I now recognize evil in other people, is it not because I have become evil too? If I see someone has a suspicious nose, have I not smelled the same bad things?” (JLC 213). In the prologue, the aged mother is not talking to her daughter, but to her granddaughter (Hwai dungsyi is a term of endearment referring to a little child), the baby girl of her daughter (JLC 213). It subtly hints at the
inability of the mother to communicate with her daughter and therefore she chooses to talk to the baby, whose language ability is not fully developed yet. On the other hand, it also amplifies the mother’s intention to pass on stories not only for her daughter, but for future generations as well in order to maintain a matrilineal tradition. According to Souris, this preface presents “a mother who has a grandchild and who is treated sympathetically: she is self-critical and hopeful for her daughter” (112) because “hope for the future can sustain us in the adversities we unavoidably encounter” (Bettelheim 4). As the Joy Luck mothers have learnt from their own mothers, they would like to leave some precious legacy for their later generations. Lindo has told of her worries at the beginning of “The Red Candle”: “It’s too late to change you, but I’m telling you this because I worry about your baby. I worry that someday she will say, ‘Thank you, Grandmother, for the gold bracelet. I’ll never forget you.’ But later, she will forget her promise. She will forget she had a grandmother” (JLC 49). Though it is too late to change Waverly, she is worried about the disappearance of the familial matrilineal linkage and thus she starts talking-stories. As An-mei has reflected, it is hard to break the matrilineal linkage:

And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up and down, but all going the same way.

(JLC 215)

Therefore, with a view to preserving matrilineage, it is not surprising that towards the end of the book, the Joy Luck mothers and daughters identify their likeness, despite the daughters’ efforts to be different, and tentatively develop their love and
friendship through alliance.

Learnt from her mother, An-mei is horrified by the catastrophic consequences that being silent, meek, and passive may bring. In "Magpies," An-mei recounts her mother's tragic story in China, which teaches her the destructive consequences that could be brought about if one swallows one's tears and sorrows, as her mother has done. An-mei's mother is a widow who is cunningly raped by Wu Tsing, a rich man in Tientsin, and is thus forced to become his concubine to hide the shame, given the few options she has in old patriarchal China. Because of this, An-mei's maternal grandmother (Popo) disowns her and tells An-mei that her mother is a ghost. After the death of Popo 37, An-mei stays with her mother in Wu Tsing's large house, where An-mei learns from a maid about how her mother is forced to become a concubine and to bear a son, who is claimed by a higher-ranking wife of Wu Tsing as her own. Deeply sympathetic with her mother's misery, An-mei is also angry that her mother does not speak up for herself: "I wanted my mother to shout at Wu Tsing, to shout at Second Wife, to shout at Yan Chang and say she was wrong to tell me these stories. But my mother did not even have the right to do this. She had no choice" (JLC 238). An-mei's mother is a typical tragic example of the entrapment of women in China: just like the no name aunt in The Woman Warrior, An-mei's mother's suicide is a silent and yet direct rejection by the dehumanisation of Chinese patriarchy of women, who are valued the lowest and expected to give the most. She deliberately commits suicide two days before the lunar New Year and plans her death carefully as revenge, like the no name aunt who drowns herself and her illegitimate baby at the family well. Though An-mei's mother cannot physically and verbally protest against the unfair treatment and limited space for women in old China, she attempts to render her daughter, An-mei, a stronger spirit.

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by killing her own weak spirit. It is also on this day that An-mei learns not to
swallow her tears and sorrows: she crashes the fake pearl necklace, given by
Second Wife, under her feet; and learns to shout – An-mei is empowered by her
mother’s death and sacrifice as she learns the importance of speaking up and active
agency.

However, from Jing-mei’s narration in the opening story, “The Joy Luck
Club,” An-mei is described by the late Suyuan as a person with “too little wood”
and who “bent too quickly to listen to other people’s ideas, unable to stand on her
own” (JLC 31). This is also the comment that An-mei has made about Rose,
showing that she cannot actively act out what she has learnt on the day of her
mother’s death, at least from the perspective of others. Realising her own
weaknesses, An-mei does not want to pass these characteristics to her daughter.
Seeing that the meek and indecisive Rose squeezes tears and tells a psychiatrist of
her shame about her marriage, An-mei decides that it is time to tell Rose her
mother’s story and the lessons she has learnt because she knows it is the moment
that her past story would sink into her daughter’s mind. By telling Rose her past
story, An-mei hopes to render Rose a strong spirit, like the one she gets on the day
of her mother’s death and thus prompts Rose to speak up and shout at Ted, make
decisions, and not to swallow tears, as her mother once has done. An-mei reasons
with Rose that people in China have no choice, could not speak up and run away,
implying that as her mother’s story is transported to America, it should be
translated with the contextual differences. As Rose starts to appropriate her
mother’s stories across the cultural and emotional chasm, she is empowered by her
grandmother’s tragic story, An-mei’s lessons, and is able to claim An-mei’s past as
part of her own and “shout.”
Ying-ying’s silence is initiated with the abortion of her unborn baby in China, leaving herself with endless remorse and a mental breakdown. She considers it a “shame” and keeps this secret from her daughter in America, where she leads a new life without her chi, the spirit she once has when she is young. Throughout the years, she maintains a superficial and distant relation with Lena, whom she has raised as if watching over her from another shore. As Lena grows up, Ying-ying realises the destructive effect of silence as both she and Lena have lost spirits: “All these years I kept my true nature hidden, running along like a small shadow so nobody could catch me. And because I moved so secretly now my daughter does not see me ... And I want to tell her this: We are lost, she and I, unseen and not seeing, unheard and not hearing, unknown by others” (JLC 67). Upon seeing Lena’s nonchalant attitude towards her falling-apart marriage, Ying-ying decides that it is time to release her secret and release the tiger spirit in Lena: “And now I must tell her everything about my past. It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved” (JLC 242). The feeling of loss and alienation from the family on the Moon Festival when she is four foreshadows the harsh and unsettling realities Ying-ying is to face as a grown-up woman. Her independent and daring spirit is gradually lost over the years because the same emotional turmoil comes back to her many times: “And I remember everything that happened that day because it has happened many times in my life. The same innocence, trust, and restlessness, the wonder, fear, and loneliness. How I lost myself” (JLC 83). Discovering that her first husband from an arranged marriage has committed adultery, she secretly aborts their unborn son as revenge and ends the marriage. Later, she marries Lena’s father, an Anglo-American man who has been courting her for four years, and willingly gives up her chi, a spirit of self-will and “a
willingness to stand up for one’s self and one’s family, to demonstrate something to others” (Walter 22). This is the story hidden from Lena, who sees Ying-ying as a living ghost but is ignorant of why she has become one. As Ying-ying retells her story in interior monologue, she teases her daughter for knowing nothing about her: “My daughter thinks I do not know what it means to not want a baby” (JLC 248). This takes us back to Lena’s narration in “The Voice from the Wall,” in which Ying-ying loses an unborn baby and laments the loss in Chinese, making Lena think her mother has gone crazy. Lena fails to comprehend that there is a much more sharpened grief and guilt inherent in her mother’s words. Because of the silence wrapped around Ying-ying and her predominant belief in a superiority shaped by the mainstream American discourse, Lena’s interpretation of her mother is blinded by her subjective opinions: she thinks of her father as a saviour, who has saved her mother from a poor life in an old Chinese village. Only by knowing Ying-ying’s story would Lena be able to understand that her Irish-English father has had to wait patiently for four years before Ying-ying agreed to marry him when she decides to get rid of her past life and become a wounded animal who has given up its chi. But Ying-ying has made it clear that she is responsible for Lena’s having no chi: “She has no chi. This is my greatest shame. How can I leave this world without leaving her my spirit?” (JLC 252). Through talking-story about her past, Ying-ying wishes to give Lena chuming, the inside knowing of things, so that Lena would be able to see that her mother is a tiger lady, something she could not see with her outside eyes.

Ying-ying is internally transformed and has undergone a process of self-healing as she decides to recount her stories to Lena. As Ying-ying retells her past stories in interior monologue in “Waiting Between the Trees,” it is clear that she
has not talked-story to Lena yet. She is staying in the guest room in Lena’s house when she recollects her past memories and thinks about what she should do to save Lena. Towards the end of the narration of her stories, Ying-ying decides that this is what she will do:

I will gather together my past and look. I will see a thing that has already happened. The pain that cut my spirit loose. ... And then my fierceness can come back, my golden side, my black side. I will use this sharp pain to penetrate my daughter’s tough skin and cut her tiger spirit loose. She will fight me, because this is the nature of two tigers. But I will win and give her my spirit, because this is the way a mother loves her daughter.

*(JLC 252)*

As Ying-ying endeavours to release the tiger spirit in Lena, she also reclaims her own *chi*, and is transformed back to the tiger lady she once was, and re-identifies herself in America. Arriving in America, she is classified as “a Displaced Person” (*JLC* 104), renamed as “Betty St. Clair” in the immigration papers with her given Chinese name “Gu Ying-ying” crossed out, and changed from a Tiger to a Dragon as her husband has put down a wrong birthyear. In this way, Ying-ying has lost her name and identity and becomes a silent and passive American wife. Through talk-story, Ying-ying articulates her story of pain, loss, grief, and rage and resurrects her past experiences to connect to the present. As she recalls her memories, she remembers the wish she would like to tell the Moon Lady on the day when she gets lost: “I remember all these things. And tonight, on the fifteenth day of the eighth moon, I also remember what I asked the Moon Lady so long ago. I wished to be found” (*JLC* 83). Her wish is finally granted, not by the Moon Lady, but by her own acceptance of her traumatic past, her strength to tell her daughter her shame
and guilt, and her maternal love for her daughter who has an empty marriage, something she is able to tell because of her ability to see things before they happen. As Ying-ying’s talk-stories are only in interior monologue, it might be a bit radical to claim that the mother and daughter are fully reconciled at the end. However, it is apparent that the story ends with a sense of hope and anticipation as the mother and daughter attempt to initiate a mutual understanding through honest talk. It is anticipated that with the empowerment of talk-story, Lena would be able to translate her mother’s tragic stories into her present life and thus she could envision her mother in a new light and re-establish the relationship with her mother, whose traumatic experience is healed through “talking cure.”

Lindo recounts her earlier hardship in America to Waverly in “The Red Candle” and “Double Face,” and explains honestly to Waverly the circumstances that have shaped her personality through talk-stories. In “The Red Candle,” Lindo speaks of her strategy to win control over her own life and rise above negative circumstances. Talk-story empowers Lindo to escape from the arranged marriage as she ingeniously contrives a plan to release herself from it without bringing shame to her family. As she tries to negotiate between the external responsibilities as a daughter-in-law in the Huang family and a dutiful wife to the son of the Huangs, and the internal yearnings for freedom, Lindo realises that trickery and cleverness is the key to achieve the feat of not forgetting her self and not shaming her parents. Learning from this, Lindo registers the importance of invisible strength and hidden unseen wind and teaches Waverly how to earn respect from others and survive using the skills of subverting with tact and cleverness – “through minimal energy and force” and exhibiting that skill in chess games (Ho, HMH 177).

In “Double Face,” Lindo retells stories of how she situates herself in America,
amid the problems of cultural and linguistic differences, through strength and scheming. As Waverly takes Lindo to a beauty parlour and the hair stylist makes a flippant remark on the facial similarity of the mother and daughter, which displeases Waverly, Lindo looks at the mirror and marvels at the likeness of the two faces—"The same happiness, the same sadness, the same good fortune, the same faults"—and she is prompted to take a journey back to her past and re-examine her relationship with her daughter (JLC 256). As Lindo retells her story of hardship at the cookie factory and her cleverness in scheming to get Tin Jong to propose to her by inserting a message inside a cookie, she oscillates between addressing directly her daughter and the reader. It looks as though Waverly is "the proxy for the American" readers, who also have misconceptions about the Chinese people, needing to be corrected by Lindo through the talk-stories (Su 146). In retelling her stories, Lindo corrects the stereotypical thinking of Waverly and sets the family historical record right. She also explains to Waverly the hidden wishes she has in the naming of Waverly: she names the daughter after the name of the place they are living at, "Waverly Place," because she hopes that Waverly would remember this as the place she belongs to and after she has grown up and left the place, she would forever remember to take a piece of the mother with her. At the end of this story, Lindo and Waverly marvel at how alike they are as they look at their reflections in the mirror (JLC 265). Lindo realises that she has sacrificed her lineage with her own mother as she loses her Chinese face bit by bit in order to survive in America, however, as the final sentence of this story notes, she thinks that it is still worthwhile as this losing of Chinese face and adoption of an American face connects her to her daughter, Waverly. Through talking-story to her daughter, Lindo celebrates their new-found identification by appreciating the
hybridised selves in them. It is also a means taken by Lindo to initiate a mutual understanding with her daughter, whose complete Americanisation hinders their identifications to each other.

The novel ends with Jing-mei's narration, "A Pair of Tickets," of her trip to China to meet her two lost half-sisters. Jing-mei has never taken her mother's Kweilin story seriously, not until after she finds out that the ever-changing ending of her mother's Kweilin story casts shadows over her own life: "Over the years, she told me the same story, except for the ending, which grew darker, casting long shadows into her life, and eventually into mine" (JLC 21). Suyuan's storytelling serves the purpose of imparting truths to the daughter and the story's ever-changing endings signify that Suyuan deliberately withholds certain information as she is not able to relive the traumatic experience all at once and, she also waits patiently for the time when her daughter would truly understand its significance: the "telling is gradual to accommodate her daughter's ability to understand; at the same time, the remembering is gradual for Suyuan, who must slowly recall the personal and social trauma of her self-punishing silence and guilt" (Ho, HMH 179) 41. Unfortunately, Suyuan does not have time to tell Jing-mei the whole story and thus it remains the daughter's task to tease out the missing pieces of the puzzling picture. As Jing-mei travels with her father to China to meet her lost half-sisters, the "Chinese fairy tale" in the young Jing-mei's mind finally turns into a realistic and poignant story as she finds out more about her mother and realises her mother's love, strength, and power. Jing-mei's father, Canning Woo, retells Suyuan's story to Jing-mei and this storytelling of the father, on behalf of the mother, is prompted by Jing-mei's ultimate-found enthusiasm to listen to her mother's stories. She insists on listening to her father's retelling in Chinese, signifying her final identification with her
mother's "mother tongue" and the motherland, and her willingness to listen with her heart, albeit a bit too late. From her father's recollections, Jing-mei finds out that her mother has given her the Chinese name "Jing-mei" — "jing" means pure essence and "mei" means "younger sister" as in "meimei" — because it embodies her mother's long-cherished wish: "Me, the younger sister who was supposed to be the essence of the others" (JLC 281). The name embodies the hopes of Suyuan, who, plagued with guilt for abandoning her daughters, hopes for the best for Jing-mei, who is "supposed to be the essence of the others" (JLC 281). At the end of the book, Jing-mei discovers the part of hers which is Chinese by looking at her sisters' faces. As they look at a Polaroid photo they take at the airport, the three sisters marvel at how they look like their mother and how familiar they look to one another: "And although we don't speak, I know we all see it: Together we look like our mother. Her same eyes, her same mouth, open in surprise to see, at last, her long-cherished wish" (JLC 288). Here, the mother and daughters are bonded through recognition of facial/physical similarities in them, echoing the reconciliation between Lindo and Waverly when they acknowledge their external likeness in the beauty parlour. Jing-mei's identification with her mother, however, is more powerful in this scene, as the sharing of internal passion between the mother and daughter takes place when the daughter finally recognises her Chinese roots and reunites with her half-sisters, who symbolise the Chinese parts in her and make her identify with her family and her Chinese blood. To Jing-mei, her half-sisters serve the function of a mirror in which she could see through and go into her mother's past. By completing the journey from the West to the East and meeting the lost twin half-sisters on behalf of her mother, Jing-mei completes her mother's dream and reconciles the two worlds and cultures which have been driving them
In Jing-mei's mind, Suyuan is transformed from a distant, critical, and unrealistic mother who bears high hopes for the daughter, to a caring mother with enduring love and strength. Instead of simply replacing her mother at the east corner of the mah jong table at the Joy Luck meetings while unaware of the significance of her mother's life lessons to her, Jing-mei is finally able to reconstruct the Chinese part of herself, identify herself with her mother, the east wing "where things begin," which is also the beginning of her life, and reclaim her mother's past as part of her own (JLC 33).

Jing-mei's reunion with her half-sisters and hence a fulfilment of the mother's wish bears another significance to the other Joy Luck mothers. When Jing-mei learns of her half-sisters being found months after her mother's death from her Joy Luck aunties, the aunties are enthusiastic to help her fulfil her mother's wish (they give Jing-mei the money to travel to Shanghai) and are then disappointed and frightened as they know that Jing-mei knows nothing about her mother, a reflection of their own daughters' ignorance about them. When Lindo refuses to write a letter, upon Jing-mei's request, to her half-sisters, telling them about their mother's death, before Jing-mei embarks the trip to China, Jing-mei admits she does not want her sisters to know about that after she arrives, as then they would think she is responsible for her mother's death as if she has not appreciated their mother enough. On hearing this, Lindo looks satisfied and sad at the same time, "as if this were true and I had finally realized it" (JLC 271). Jing-mei's open admission of not appreciating her mother enough when she is alive recalls Lindo's painful experience with her daughter, who, likewise, does not appreciate her good intentions. Jing-mei is therefore emblematic of all the Joy Luck daughters' ignorance of their Chinese roots and their adherence to the American mainstream.
discourse; whereas her fulfilment of Suyuan’s dream, meaning the daughters’ ultimate acceptance of their mothers as it overrides the patriarchal and stereotypical discourse, and the re-establishment of the maternal bond, embraces all the Joy Luck mothers’ hopes.

Talk-story takes place in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* as Winnie recounts her hidden terrible secrets to Pearl, prompted by the manipulation of Helen, Winnie’s friend from China, who insists that lies have to be got rid of before death. The reason for talk-story here is therefore pragmatic, like the Joy Luck mothers who are prompted by Suyuan’s death and the daughters’ fallen-apart lives. In a sense, the revelation of secrets seems to be a result of what Winnie has said to Pearl at the beginning of the novel, “Pearl-ah, have to go, no choice” (*KGW* 11) 42. The situation of “no choice” contributes to the emotional chasm between the mother and daughter, whose silence is inevitable because “[t]he brute fact of suffering” resists “easy telling,” “pushing them towards silence, not speech,” and has “put a stop to everything” (Adams 76). The mother’s silence is finally broken as she articulates her past sufferings to her daughter and revisit her past as she talks-stories. From time to time, she gives a critique of the Chinese feudal society, the Sino-Japanese war, and her own decisions during that time, signifying memory (and recollection) and judgement are at work as she talks. The third chapter of the novel turns from Pearl’s narration to Winnie’s in which the mother narrates her poignant story in pre-communist China to her daughter. Winnie’s narration extends from chapter three to chapter twenty-four, taking over three hundred pages, whereas Pearl’s unravelling of the secret is only briefly addressed. This signifies that even though the daughter might find her mother a difficult person, without the mother’s story, hers would be a blank as well. While Winnie’s deliberate hiding of secrets is
prompted by her necessity to relocate in America and lead a new life, her ultimate outpouring of secrets also stems from the situation of “no choice.” Dreading what Helen might tell Pearl, Winnie reckons that the best thing to do is to embark on the revelation by herself. On the other hand, Pearl is also persuaded by Helen to tell her mother about the secret of multiple sclerosis as Helen gives Pearl the same deadline as Winnie’s to tell her mother about her disease, as otherwise Helen would tell it to Winnie herself. Similar to Winnie, Pearl is apprehensive of her mother’s reaction if she learns it from other people, as she has imagined that for the seven years she has been afflicted with the illness.

As Winnie retells her story to Pearl, a very important part of her past she recalls is about her own mother, who leaves her when she is six. To the six-year-old Winnie’s mind, her mother becomes a riddle as Winnie tries to “make one whole story” from the gossips, “funny and bad stories, terrible secrets and romantic tales,” about her mother who never comes back (KGW 100). The gaps in her memories, that is, the “loss” part of her memory about her mother, are therefore filled by Winnie’s own speculation: “And this is what I think happened, how my mother came to be the second wife to my father and, later, why she left” (KGW 100). From then onwards, it is Winnie’s reconstruction of a missing mother figure; nonetheless, in Winnie’s retelling, the mother becomes one important maternal forebear – not only in terms of biological genes, but also a spiritual model who defies patriarchy – as Winnie leads her life through hardship and violence, facing the brutal war and sadist husband, and finally, though it might be a little too late, defying patriarchy and striving for a new life by freeing herself from the entrapped marriage.

In Winnie’s speculation, her mother is unlike the typical submissive Chinese
women; instead, she is unconventional, who would have her feet unbound at the age of eight, educated with western thoughts, “smart and clever, quick-thinking,” with a fierce will at heart, is a romantic person, and is an advocate of freedom in love (KGW 101). To Winnie, a Chinese woman of revolutionary mind like her mother is bound to misfortune; but from her retelling, though she probes the possibility of various options of her mother’s story, she seems to prefer the one in which she imagines her mother as a strong woman who stands up for her rights and follows her mind: this version is the longest with most details. In this way, “Winnie’s mother becomes a fairy tale figure, conjured up by her imagination, rather than her memory: she becomes a beautiful mother she never sees nor remembers in the first place” (Yuan, “Mothers’ ‘China Narrative’” 356). The mother’s disappearance comes as a shock to child Winnie and for over seventy years she has tried to avoid retrieving this part of her memories; and this missing mother figure is reconstructed after seventy years of absence, as Winnie recounts this part of her past, she is finally able to relate her mother to herself, reclaim her mother’s past as part of her own. Essentially, this reclaiming of the mother’s past as part of the daughter’s own is a key element in the talk-stories in The Kitchen God’s Wife.

The storytelling of Winnie takes place in a domestic setting and unlike the mothers and daughters in The Joy Luck Club who narrate their stories in separate monologues, which requires the readers’ intervention in connecting them, Winnie is talking to an actual audience as she tells Pearl her stories directly. References to the dynamic interaction between the mother and daughter are evident as the storytelling process is interrupted from time to time, as Winnie stops telling her stories for moments and talks “about the need to go into the kitchen to make more
tea, about how she no longer likes to eat celery, about the burned out light bulb" (Huntley, Tan 82). Being thoroughly Americanised, it is hard for Pearl to understand her mother’s circumstances, which are removed both geographically, culturally, and temporally. Therefore, the mother needs to make some effort to facilitate an easy understanding for the daughter’s sake: Winnie translates terms and contextualises the Chinese circumstances to assist Pearl’s comprehension. As she talks, Winnie also attempts to correct some misconceptions of Pearl, whom she believes has been brainwashed by the American media’s stereotypes. Winnie also invites Pearl’s opinions, critique, and verdict: “You don’t believe me? Did Auntie Helen tell you this story herself? Well, she wanted to. I stopped her. I knew if she told you she would get it all wrong” (KGW 137), or “And now I will tell you when all my luck changed, from bad to worse. You tell me if this was my fault” (KGW 236). The direct talk-story approach opens an important doorway to the mother and daughter’s communication: as the mother talks, the stories are no longer “personal” to the mother only, but become part of the daughter’s as well.

Winnie’s unburdening of secrets proves to be a focal breakthrough for the problematic mother-daughter relationship. Unlike the reconciliation of the Joy Luck mothers and daughters, which are only potentially reached due to the doubt that whether the talk-stories have actually taken place, the reconciliation between Winnie and Pearl is more solidly identified because of the “direct” exchange of words, though the mother dominates the talk-story process. As mentioned above, the “direct” approach allows the audience to raise concerns, questions, and doubts immediately so that the speaker – the storyteller – could clarify, explain, and correct misconceptions anytime he/she wants to. Winnie’s outpouring of secrets creates a positive impact on Pearl, and therefore eases the tension of the mother-daughter
relationship unexpectedly. As Winnie’s narration unfolds, we see a different Winnie, not a critical, demanding mother who is never appreciative as Pearl has thought her to be; but one who loves her children and would like to hide her past from her daughter so that the daughter would not see her weak side and think of her as a bad mother. Pearl knows that her mother is a more complicated individual than she originally perceives – the one-dimensional mother whose “words and actions” reflect only “the peculiarities of an elderly Chinese woman” (Huntley, Tan 100). Winnie’s confession of past stories has an enormous impact on Pearl, who learns that she has always misinterpreted her mother’s words and actions all these years. Inspired by her mother’s courageous confessional talk-story, Pearl then goes on sharing her secret of illness with her mother, partly because she sees that as the right moment to tell her mother, when they are joking at what they should do: to blame everything undesirable about Pearl on Wen Fu, the mother’s horrible first husband in China, because he might well be responsible for half of her genetic makeup.

Winnie, on the other hand, is also transformed through the healing power of self-reflexive talk-story. As Winnie enacts in the retelling through the process of recollection and goes down the memory lane, she is transformed. Because of her determination to forget about the past, her transformation from the Chinese woman Jiang Weili to the American woman Winnie Louie is not complete – it is as if the past never connects to the present, and Weili and Winnie embody two different selves. As Winnie recounts her story to Pearl aloud, she revisits her past and reassesses the significance of certain crucial events in her life, and thus finally learns to accept her past as “Weili” and integrate that to her present American life as “Winnie.” In this sense, through retelling her own story in retrospect, Winnie
ultimately succeeds in translating herself from “Jiang Weili” to “Winnie Louie.”

The unburdening of the news of Pearl’s illness ties the mother and daughter together, as the mother again takes up her maternal responsibility of thinking of ways to cure her daughter, while the daughter is relieved to learn that her mother is always the one she should have counted on as through her mother, she sees that hope is what her mother has left her with. As the book’s narrative structure has suggested, it has turned from Pearl’s narration to Winnie’s narration, predominantly monologues, and finally to the last two chapters, where the mother and daughter are actually “talking.” Upon learning about Pearl’s illness, Winnie’s shock bursts out in furious words and she begins to trace the possible reasons that lead to Pearl’s disease, complains about Pearl’s inability to tend the disease herself, and thinks of possible solutions and theories to cure Pearl. Listening to her mother’s non-stop complaints, things that she hates the most and dismisses as superstitious beliefs in the past, Pearl’s attitude is changed as she realises that her mother’s faith in hope, the “one all-encompassing thing” that the mother believes in and relies on for survival in America, is what the mother wants to give her (Fate 3):

I was going to protest, to tell her she was working herself up into a frenzy for nothing. But all of a sudden I realized: I didn’t want her to stop. I was relieved in a strange way. Or perhaps relief was not the feeling. Because the pain was still there. She was tearing it away – my protective shell, my anger, my deepest fears, my despair. She was putting all this into her own heart, so that I could finally see what was left. Hope.

(KGW 401-402)

On the other hand, Winnie resumes her role as a protective mother. She looks for medicine to help with the disease, including a trip back to China because that is
where she thinks the illness comes from. Although this is superficially a trip for medical reasons, it also signifies Winnie’s completion in identifying herself with her horrible past, which takes place in China, a place that she does not have the courage to look back upon in the past and “a repository of history with haunting memories and extraordinary experiences,” in which her individuality as Winnie Louie is shaped (Yuan, “Mothers’ ‘China Narrative’” 358). Though Pearl still cannot understand her mother fully and there are still confusions between them, the emotional chasm between the mother and daughter is bridged. When Helen asks Pearl to keep Winnie’s going to China for her sake as a secret and asks Pearl if it is a good secret, she agrees that it is not, because she knows what she is agreeing to but because “it feels right” (KGW 409). This is a signification that Pearl finally “understands,” while the word is not to be taken literally, but metaphorically. Her understanding does not come from her ability to decipher her mother’s actions or words or behaviour – the physical level, at which she obviously fails towards the end, but from her emotional association at a psychological and emotional level – while she attempts to translate her mother’s Chinese experiences within the American context.

In The Bonesetter’s Daughter, talk-story is obviously different from that in The Joy Luck Club and The Kitchen God’s Wife because talk-story between the mother and daughter is not verbal, oral, with direct communication; but textual, taking place through written words on stacks of papers. The fact that the written talk-story is a translated version from the original Chinese writing of LuLing further complicates its functionality and effectiveness. There is another story in the written story of LuLing – the story of Precious Auntie, whom LuLing originally thinks is her nursemaid but later finds out is her real mother. Written storytelling is
also employed by Precious Auntie, whose muteness prevents her from talking to LuLing, her daughter, and the problem of written storytelling that readers could select what they want to “hear” by skipping certain sections of the written story causes the tragic suicide of Precious Auntie, and leaves LuLing with endless remorse and guilt. In this sense, perhaps the term “talk-story” is not exactly applicable to the storytelling in this book as the action of “talking” is absent and words only flow in the papers. Nonetheless, I would still denote it as a kind of “talk-story” because there are special reasons why the action of “talk” has not taken place. For Precious Auntie, it is because she is mute; whereas for LuLing, her English is limited and Ruth’s Chinese is weak, leaving LuLing to wait for the moment when her daughter is ready to know about her past. As the readers, LuLing and Ruth, are taken into the written stories of Precious Auntie and LuLing respectively, as if the writers are actually talking to them, the daughter-readers participate in their mothers’ tales. Therefore, the “talking” element is still maintained in this book. After all, all the Tan books incorporating oral stories have come to the readers as written texts and as the readers read the texts, they are drawn into the oral world and become part of it – it is as if the storyteller (writer) is actually talking to the listeners (readers).

Though LuLing does not know Precious Auntie is her mother until after she has died, they have a close relationship when LuLing is a child and they enjoy a private communication because LuLing is the only one in the house who understands Precious Auntie’s “hand-talking” (BSD 4). Therefore, LuLing has to translate Precious Auntie’s meanings for other family members, though most of them do not pay much attention to Precious Auntie as they know the “real” identity of Precious Auntie. Because of the muteness, LuLing is given the space to translate
meanings and in this way, she rewrites and shapes the words and lives of Precious Auntie.

As the written and "mute" talk-story of Precious Auntie unfolds, she is a victim of the patriarchal Chinese society in which woman’s voice is silenced. Her father is a famous bonesetter who uses "bones to heal bones," a familial tradition for nine hundred years that has been passed on to Precious Auntie to preserve (BSD 143). Because of the revenge from a coffinmaker who is denied the marriage proposal, Precious Auntie was orphaned and widowed on her wedding day. After the death of Baby Uncle, Precious Auntie’s groom, she attempts to commit suicide but her suicide is thwarted, leaving an everlasting burnt scar on her face and making her mute. Her pregnancy with LuLing, a result of a pre-marital sex relation with Baby Uncle, makes her stay in the Liu family, but she is denied her maternal identity after the birth of LuLing because there is no marriage to legitimise the pregnancy and her status, and she is therefore forced to adopt the role of a nursemaid to LuLing. Unfortunately, the true story of Precious Auntie comes to LuLing only after she has died. Precious Auntie attempts to forbid LuLing marrying the coffinmaker Chang’s son because the Chang family has caused the deaths of LuLing’s grandmother and real father; unaware of the past, LuLing ignores her. Precious Auntie decides that it is the moment to “tell” LuLing about the real story, but due to her muteness, she can only write the story in stacks of paper. LuLing, however, gets impatient and does not read through the papers to the end, and hence misses the most important revelation of truth: “Your mother, your mother, I am your mother” (BSD 186). Misinterpreting that LuLing shows no concern for her after knowing the truth, Precious Auntie commits suicide, and her death creates an enormous impact to LuLing, who is guilt-stricken in her later years.
The tragedy is a result of misunderstanding and mis-communication, highlighting the limitation of talk-story without the actual articulation of voice and the worst possible consequence that silence could bring upon. It shows that the written form should be brought alive by the presence of a reader as without a reader, the written stories bear no significance. In a way, this is similar to oral storytelling as even with the articulation of a voice, it is important that there exists a listener to actually listen to the oral stories.

Through the soundless – written and translated – talk-stories, the problematic and alienated mother-daughter relationship between LuLing and Ruth is solved. Ruth is able to decipher a lot of mysteries by learning about her mother’s past and the family history, in particular, the matrilineal genealogy. As Ruth reads the story of Precious Auntie within LuLing’s written and translated work, she realises that Precious Auntie is not some crazy ghost as she originally thinks, but is indeed her grandmother. The first impression that strikes Ruth after she has read her mother’s writing is that her mother is not as demented as she has thought: LuLing has remembered some details of her life correctly, such as her date of birth and about her relationship with GaoLing. She then begins to really understand her mother better as the mysteries from her childhood are solved bit by bit: “She understood more clearly why her mother had always wanted to find Precious Auntie’s bones and bury them in the proper place. She wanted to walk through the End of the World and make amends. She wanted to tell her mother, ‘I’m sorry and I forgive you, too’” (BSD 270). Ruth has always thought that LuLing is ridiculous in giving her a name she cannot pronounce properly, but after learning about LuLing’s past, she understands that LuLing deliberately names her after Ruth Grutoff, an American lady who helped LuLing while she was at the orphanage. Not only is her
American name significant, her Chinese name “Luyi,” meaning “all that you wish,” actually comes after another teacher at the orphanage, Sister Yu, whose name is Yu Luyi. Upon knowing this, Ruth is grateful for LuLing’s effort in putting “so much heart into naming her” and feels guilty for hating both her American and Chinese names for most of her childhood (BSD 289). Ruth also understands why her mother has talked about ghosts and the family curse so often: it is not that she is superstitious, but that she is plagued with guilt and shame for what she has done to Precious Auntie: for failing to acknowledge the love of her real mother, and with no available way to atone for her mistakes, she becomes obsessed with the return of Precious Auntie’s spirit and insists on labelling the bad things happening to her or her family as the results of the curse.

Towards the end of The Bonesetter’s Daughter, Ruth is not only reconciled to LuLing, but to her grandmother, Precious Auntie, as well. After learning her grandmother’s story, Ruth takes the initiatives to find out the true name of Precious Auntie, with a hope of reconstructing their family tree. The child Ruth is connected to her grandmother through sand-writing, though for most of the time she only regards the sand-writing as “a boring chore” and takes it as her duty “to guess what her mother wanted to hear” (BSD 100). However, there are also times “when she believed that a ghost was guiding her arm, telling her what to say” because there are times what she has written turns out to be true (BSD 100). The sand-writing becomes a mysterious way for Ruth to communicate with her grandmother as somehow Ruth feels that the ghost of Precious Auntie is guiding her to the right answer.

After Ruth has learnt the stories of her mother and grandmother, and uncovered the “lost” name of Precious Auntie, she is able to claim their stories as
part of her own. Probably due to LuLing's fading memories and the fact that her life story has been written down for sometime already, it is unclear from the book whether the unburdening of secrets has had any significant impact on her. On the other hand, Ruth, as the "listener," is transformed internally. The horrifying image of the "crazy ghost" of Precious Auntie with "long hair, dripping blood, crying for revenge" (BSD 21), who "lived in the air, a lady who had not behaved and who would end up living at the End of the World" — "a bottomless pit where no one would ever find them, and there they would be stuck, wandering with their hair hanging to their toes, wet and bloody" — in the "unlearnt" Ruth's mind has vanished (BSD 69). In the "learnt" Ruth's mind, Precious Auntie is no longer a haunting ghost who leaves a curse on the family, but is a supernatural force and an ancestral voice which provides emotional support and guidance to her. In the epilogue, Ruth senses the spirit of Precious Auntie as she hears, in her mind, that Bao Bomu (LuLing calls Precious Auntie "Bao Bomu") talks to her directly:

"Think about your intentions," Bao Bomu says. "What is in your heart, what you want to put in others." And side by side, Ruth and her grandmother begin. Words flow. ... They write about what happened, why it happened, how they can make other things happen. They write about what could have been, what still might be. (BSD 308)

The grandmother and granddaughter are collaborating to write a book about their stories and their family history. This is, according to Adams, a reinforcement of "the supernatural interpretation of Ruth's 'ghost writing'" (139). I contend that the supernatural force, as sensed by Ruth, means that the grandmother and granddaughter are emotionally connected, despite the fact that they have never seen each other, as knowing the grandmother's story allows Ruth to immerse herself in
her grandmother’s world and realise that their happiness lies “in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all along” (*BSD* 308). It seems that the “words flow” that Ruth senses between her and her grandmother at the end of the novel is more concrete and solid, as if Precious Auntie has emerged from muteness to speech, exemplified by the “romanized, not italicized, speech” (Adams 147). By romanising Bao Bomu’s words at the end, Tan gives the mute woman a voice and the ability to speak, releases her from the silenced position, and substantiates the grandmother-granddaughter relationship, that is, the matrilineal tradition of the family, as the two women can communicate, despite the temporal, spatial, linguistic, and cultural chasm.

Prompted by the “words flow,” Ruth finds her own voice at the end of the novel. She is no longer the translator who transfers other people’s ideas onto a blank page, but is a writer who “had a reason to write for herself,” not only “for others” (*BSD* 307). She realises that the best way to keep memories alive is through language – to write them down and thus cast them in a static form. Her annual inability to speak is mysteriously linked to the “meteor shower” she has seen on the twelfth of August, as LuLing has always reminded her that the shooting stars “were really ‘melting ghost bodies’ and it was bad luck to see them” (*BSD* 11). In this way, Ruth’s muteness is mysteriously connected to Precious Auntie’s, though one is yearly and the other is permanent. After discovering that Precious Auntie’s real name “Liu Xin” means “Remains True,” and that the shooting star is actually not bad luck, Ruth is able to ward off the superstitious belief and realises that her “ability to speak is not governed by curses or shooting stars or illness” (*BSD* 307). At the end, it is her choice to “not talk” and “write” instead. In this way, Ruth also continues the family tradition of being a “doctor”: while her great-grandfather is a
bone doctor, she is a "book doctor" (BSD 27). After learning about the secrets of her mother and grandmother, Ruth "can see from the past clear into the present" as she looks at the photograph of her grandmother, who now has a name, an identity which is attached to her face (BSD 307). As in her previous works, Tan ends The Bonesetter's Daughter with a note of hope and anticipation: Ruth begins to write a new story which is "for her grandmother, for herself, for the little girl who became her mother" (BSD 308). The unburdening of secrets through "talk"-story hence gives voice to the three women spanning three generations: Precious Auntie, LuLing, and Ruth, as through the "words flow," emotions flow between them as well.

Celebrating the "broken" English: "Talk-story" as a kind of "foreign" language

Proust said that great literature opens up a kind of foreign language within the language in which it is written, as if the writer were writing as a foreigner or minority within his own language. This foreign language is not another language, even a marginalized one, but rather the becoming-minor of language itself.

- Daniel W. Smith (xlvi)

In "Mother Tongue," Amy Tan reveals that as she wrote The Joy Luck Club, she had her mother as a reader in her mind and used in the text all kinds of Englishes she had grown up with:

the English I spoke to my mother, which for lack of a better term might be described as 'simple'; the English she used with me, which for lack of a better term might be described as 'broken'; my translation of her Chinese, which could certainly be described as 'watered down'; and what I imagined to be her translation of her Chinese if she could speak in perfect English, her internal language, and for that I sought to preserve the essence, but neither an English
As Tan reckons that she should write for her mother in a way that “the emotions come through and the story comes through and the words are never more important than the story,” she incorporates “broken” English in the narrative and intends “the language of the Joy Luck women to be intensely visual and emotional” which “allow[s] the images’ power to create an intense feeling of intuitive truth” (Ho, HMH 51). In the daughters’ narratives in *The Joy Luck Club*, the mothers speak either Chinese dialects or “broken” English when they talk to their daughters: as Jing-mei observes, the Joy Luck aunties indulge in their own world by speaking “in their special language, half in broken English, half in their own Chinese dialect” (JLC 34). In *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Tan registers similar linguistic differentiations between the mothers and daughters – the mothers endeavour to express with their “broken” Englishes, while the daughters attempt to correct or “translate” them, making them “legitimate” or “communicable.” In *The Kitchen God’s Wife*, Winnie Louie recalls her futile effort at pronouncing Pearl’s job right: “I asked her to tell me what she did again and she wrote it down: ‘A speech and language clinician for children with moderate to severe communicative disorders.’ I practised saying this many, many times. I still have those words in my purse. I still can’t say them. So now maybe Pearl thinks I’m retarded, too” (KGW 82). In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, Ruth recounts how disturbed and annoyed she feels by her mother’s poor English: “The irony was, her mother was actually proud she had taught herself English, the choppy talk she had acquired in China and Hong Kong. And since immigrating to the United States fifty years before, she had not improved either her pronunciation or her vocabulary” (BSD 41). For the mothers, English functions as “an agency of suppression” (X. Chen 114) while in their
daughters’ minds the inability to master it reflects their cultural and intellectual inferiority.

Language is therefore an important metaphor in all of Tan’s three novels discussed in this chapter. As ShuJiang Lu suggests, in *The Joy Luck Club*, “the language of the mothers marks their positioning between two cultures” and “language might be said to be the ground for playing out cultural differences” (107). It is, in short, a ground for battles for the mothers and daughters as they speak different languages, both being “foreign” to one another. In the following part, I offer another interpretation of how Tan’s use of “broken” English in her texts accounts (partly) for Tan’s popularity. Instead of explaining it as a form of Orientalism as Cynthia Sau-ling Wong does, I would discuss how Tan attempts to transform the negative problem of language difficulty and the mothers’ use of “broken” English into a kind of positive force to reinforce the expressive-ness of the novels, and hence capturing the readers’ attention as they develop emotional solidarity with the characters whose inner passions are unveiled.

In the three Tan novels, the kind of language spoken by the Chinese immigrant characters in America could be loosely described as “broken” English, the term Tan uses to demonstrate her mother’s language ability. While the term itself, or to be more specific, the word “broken,” denotes imperfection, there could exist a positive meaning for this word: to break things into something new. In Tan’s three novels, in particular *The Joy Luck Club* in which “broken” English is an important element, the characters either consciously or unconsciously articulate or form expressions in “broken” English, but render them with new meanings, so that the negative term is given a positive meaning. It is useful here to refer to the passage by Daniel Smith I quote at the beginning of this section ⁴⁶, “Proust said that great literature opens up a
kind of foreign language within the language in which it is written, as if the writer were writing as a foreigner or minority within his own language” (xlvi). While the immigrant mothers in Tan’s novels lack the ability to master the English language at the standard of the Anglo-Americans, they manage, in one way or another, to master the English language in their own ways, that is, creating a literary foreignness within the English language itself, and makes the language serve a different function for them, in expression and communication. As Deleuze and Guattari put it: “the terms major and minor do not qualify two different languages, but rather two different treatments of language, two usages or functions of the same language, and link up in a direct manner with the political question of minorities” (xlvi). Hence, for the immigrant mothers, making use of the English language in a new manner, either consciously or unconsciously, enables them to get control of the English language for their own usages. This, on the one hand, makes the book more expressive in a way as it enforces attention through its “awkwardness” or difference from the standard English usage. It also provides convincing examples of how the immigrants actually talk, and thereby renders the “foreign” language the immigrants use an expressive and sentimental element, which, I would argue, partly accounts for the popularity of Tan’s works, because through expressing in “broken” English in a new dimension, their most inner passions and emotions are revealed and, despite the linguistic differences, readers at large would develop a kind of emotional solidarity with the Tan characters.

The term “talk-story,” created by Maxine Hong Kingston in The Woman Warrior, is itself an example of a “broken” English term. “Talk-story” could therefore be considered as a central image or metaphor for the entire book of The Woman Warrior. Amy Tan builds on the pioneering work of Kingston in extending
the use of "broken" English and "talk-story" in her own direction. Just as Tan has written in "Mother Tongue," "broken" English is a central motif of her debut novel, *The Joy Luck Club*, and therefore in this section, my primary focus will be on this book and occasional reference will be made to her other two novels.

The Joy Luck mothers make a lot of mistakes when they communicate in English with their daughters. For example, the mothers often cannot form syntactically correct English sentences. Just take one example in the text: in Waverly's narration, her mother, Lindo says to her: "'Wise guy, he not go against wind. In Chinese we say, Come from South, blow with wind – poom! – North will follow. Strongest wind cannot be seen'" (*JLC* 89). This sentence is grammatically incorrect if we judge it with the standard English sentence structure, and it aptly illustrates how "broken" and incomprehensible the mother's English is in the daughter's perception. To Waverly, what Lindo says is more of a translation of Chinese sentences than "standard" English sentences. It demonstrates that the daughters themselves have participated "in the conscious or unconscious appropriation of Orientalist or imperialist views of their own ethnic community," that is, they regard the Eurocentric perspectives and language as elite and standard (*Ho*, *HMH* 167). This is reasonable as they have been living in an Anglophone country since they are born, while their mothers have undergone the shock of language difficulty. Though the past stories of the Joy Luck mothers are different, they are similar in this aspect: they are always the "displaced" persons in their daughters' eyes because of their inability to articulate in fluent English. The mothers' Englishes are considered "marginal" or "peripheral" as the daughters judge them from the paradigm of "American standard English." The impossibility for the mother and daughter to communicate via a "common" language corresponds
to the second part of the opening fable, in which the mother waits patiently for the
day when she is able to tell her stories to her daughter in perfect American English,
an elusive dream for the mother.

On the other hand, while the mother’s English is never perfect in the
daughters’ narration, their Englishes are not as “broken” as their daughters have
perceived when the mothers narrate their stories – the Englishes they use are
relatively simple and comprised of grammatically correct sentences\textsuperscript{47}. The Joy
Luck mothers’ Englishes are therefore marked by their simplicity and lack of
refinement – this is probably what Tan has described as the “simple” English that
she would use with her own mother. In Karen Su’s contention, Amy Tan
legitimises the mother’s language as she writes her book: “from an ‘American’
point of view, and in ‘American’ contexts the mothers’ speech is still being cast as
‘illegitimate’ English, which is ‘corrected’ when Tan wants to portray them as
speaking a ‘legitimate’ language” (116). Writing the mothers’ stories in perfect
English could effectively “recover” the “history” of these “ethnic minority women”
who are “without subject and power” (X. Chen 114). In addition, this obviously
makes sense from a practical point of view as it is impossible for Tan to write a
whole story in “broken” English. The differentiation between the “legitimate” and
“illegitimate” Englishes hence points to the question of ineffective communication
between the generations who are exposed to different social and linguistic
paradigms. Xiaomei Chen has pointed out that in order for the mothers’ voices to
be heard in America the daughters have to master perfect English to tell the tales,
leading inevitably to a barrier between the mothers and daughters as “the very
process of mastering the English language is often accompanied by the daughters’
resisting and forgetting their mother tongue” (118)\textsuperscript{48}. The daughters’ childhoods
are filled with the mothers’ “broken” Englishes, leaving the daughters with a misleading impression that the mothers’ inability to express themselves coherently means they are not “coherent” themselves. For example, as Ying-ying knows only a little bit of English, Lena enjoys the liberty of lying when she has to translate for her mother the forms, instructions, notices from school, and telephone calls. Ying-ying’s displacement is also seen from her communication with her Caucasian husband, who speaks only a few canned Chinese expressions, by “moods and gestures, looks and silences, and sometimes a combination of English punctuated by hesitations and Chinese frustration” (JLC 106). As Lena could not translate her mother’s words after Ying-ying has lost her baby, she deliberately mis-translates those words to her father to avoid saddening him. Thus, the inability to master the language leads to the difficulty of maintaining a coherent self as others, who are competent in the language, would mis-translate and put words into the person’s mouth. Wendy Ho has noted that it is “personally and politically empowering and heroic for women to tell their stories and attend to each other — not to be decentered objects whose stories are continually co-opted or translated for them or to them by those in power” (“Swan-Feather Mothers” 146). Ironically, the telling of the mothers’ stories is still a “translated” version by the daughters, despite the obvious celebration of the Chinese immigrant mothers’ heroism through their speaking out and breaking of silence.

In addition to the problem of “broken” English, it is also noticeable that the mothers shift from Chinese to English (the “broken” version) very often. For example, when Suyuan scolds Jing-mei for being disobedient, she reverts to using Chinese, which has two ramifications. First, she highlights that obeying parents is a Chinese virtue and second, by shouting in the language that she is familiar with,
Suyuan empowers herself and makes her voice "authoritative" as the "broken" English, which is all she can master, makes her powerless. It is a voice she can barely recognise as her own, signifying a sense of dislocation and displacement. It is unclear from the text whether the daughters are confused because of this shift, but it is apparent that the daughters have to translate between the two languages as they communicate with their mothers and both languages – the Chinese language and the "broken" English language – are not what the daughters are competent in: one is "remote" and "strange" to them; the other one is so imperfect that they have to correct or simply ignore. Though the "broken" English has created problems for the communications between mothers and daughters, Tan has deliberately made it a positive literary attribute for the mothers so that the daughters could regard the mothers' special form of English as a "language of intimacy, a different sort of English that relates to family talk, the language I grew up with" (Fate 272). It is worth noting that the mothers are basically unaware that they are developing a kind of literary language in the texts as it is Tan who develops it, nonetheless, the creation of a new kind of language signifies Tan's resistance to the mainstream stereotypical view in discarding "broken" English as sub-standard and problematic.

One example of Tan's writing of "a foreign language within a language" is observed from An-mei's "broken" English as she convinces Rose not to see a therapist for her marriage problem:

"Why can you talk about this with a psyche-atric and not with mother?"

"Psychiatrist."

"Psyche-atricks," she corrected herself.

"A mother is best. A mother knows what is inside you," she said above the singing voices. "A psyche-atricks will only make you hulihudu, make you
Here, An-mei seems to have developed a “foreign” language for her own use: the word “psyche-atricks,” which is articulated twice despite the daughter’s attempt to correct it, reflects An-mei’s genuine feeling about the kind of therapy offered by the psychiatrists. Although An-mei cannot articulate her true feeling, she articulates it in a tricky way as she puns with the word “tricks” in her “broken” term “psyche-atricks.” As she attempts to discourage Rose from pouring out her problem to a stranger, she ingeniously (or perhaps unconsciously) expresses her stance concerning psychotherapy and thus gives the “broken” term a new meaning usable for herself. To An-mei, who is framed with the Chinese’s belief that “when faced with problems, one can seek advice and comfort from those with whom one is familiar and whom one trusts,” getting psychotherapy from a stranger is strange as “talking cure” should be available from the family members (Tung 30).

In “Without Wood,” Rose recalls that she used to believe everything her mother told her when she is a young child: “She (An-mei) said doors would unlock themselves in the middle of the night unless we checked twice. She said a mirror could see only my face, but she could see me inside out even when I was not in the room” (JLC 185). While it seems to be an intrusive image, it signifies the mother’s belief that she is entitled to see through her daughter, as the “broken” phrase “inside out” means that not only the “inside” of the daughter is seen, but that she is being turned over and exposed. Rose recalls An-mei’s words as a warning and the choice of words by An-mei to make it a “foreign” phrase illustrates her conscious possession of power over her young daughter and her controlling instinct as a Chinese mother. Attempting to escape from her mother’s “inside out” scanning power, Rose mischievously diminishes An-mei’s power by confusing her mother.
with other people’s thoughts: “sometimes I filled my mind with other people’s thoughts – all in English – so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw” (JLC 191). To escape from the controlling mother, Rose seems to think that going to the “English” (language) space is a refuge for her. However, what Rose does not know is that, her mother has internalised the use of “broken” English as a tool for self-empowerment and made it a positive attribute for herself.

Likewise, while Waverly might find it shameful that her mother could not pronounce her name correctly but says in public, “This my daughter Wave-ly Jong,” Lindo might have another meaning in mind here (JLC 99). In the mother’s mind, her American-born daughter is not easily controllable and is as unsettled as “waves.” As the mother speaks the daughter’s name, she unconsciously makes it sound like “Wave-ly,” implying her daughter’s character. Ying-ying tells her sister-in-law that Lena works as an “Arty-tecky” (architect) and while the term “Arty-tecky” resembles a poor pronunciation of “architect,” it unveils the inner perception of Ying-ying towards Lena (JLC 243). The word “arty” means showily or pretentiously artistic; the part “tecky” puns with the word “tacky,” meaning something in poor taste or cheaply pretentious. Therefore, Ying-ying’s use of the word “arty-tecky” implicitly refers to her criticism of Lena’s living in big house but everything in there “is for looking” (JLC 243). To the mother, it is a kind of evasive pretentiousness as the persons living in the house are leading fallen-apart lives.

In addition, while “joy luck” is not a word that exists in the American daughters’ minds, the mothers have created it and given it a special meaning that helps them survive through difficult moments. The term “joy luck” does not make
any sense in English and is thought up of by Suyuan when she is in China during the wartime. Because of the misery and unsettlement of the outside world, Suyuan decides to gather three other women every week to have fun and celebrate their good luck if they are still alive: “And each week, we could hope to be lucky. That hope was our only joy. And that’s how we came to call our little parties Joy Luck” (JLC 25). It is also during those parties that the women tell the best stories they have in order to create a sense of hope for the future, and after Suyuan relocates to America, she continues this Joy Luck practice with the Joy Luck aunties. Unaware of the story behind it, the American daughters do not find the term “joy luck” of any special significance, and dismiss it as any other “broken” English terms spoken by their mothers. However, it actually bears a greater significance in their lives than they have thought as it is through these “joy luck” parties that their mothers endure the hardship in America, either out of cultural shock, language difficulty, or past trauma, and it provides an emotional support to sustain them till the moment when they are ready to tell their stories to the daughters. In this way, the mothers have given the term “joy luck” an extra significance by making it “foreign”-like and attempt to transfer it to their daughters through talk-stories as it is a Joy Luck tradition to talk-stories: “Oh, what good stories! Stories spilling out all over the place!” (JLC 24). While the daughters might think that the mothers’ “broken” English terms mean nothing but reflect their incompetence in the English language, Tan has made the mothers get in charge of the meanings of the “broken” words they speak, and thereby celebrates her mother’s “broken” English by writing it into her published book, giving it an extra expressive sentiment, making a positive use of the “foreign language,” and validating the mothers’ use of imperfect English.

The evolution of “foreign-ness” within a “foreign language” is less observed
in *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, but language is also an important theme in both novels. From time to time, Pearl and Ruth recall the language problem they have with their mothers. While Pearl has a decent job as a speech and language clinician, it is ironic that she seems to possess no power over her mother’s language use. Pearl is supposed to act as a corrector to “clean up” the language used by others (let’s recall Winnie’s struggle to articulate Pearl’s job title and nature correctly), her job’s extra power is undermined by the narrative structure of the whole book, as Tan deliberately provides Winnie with a poignant and affective voice as she narrates her story, which is central to the entire book. On the other hand, Pearl is described as a relatively uninteresting and insignificant character in the book, whose existence cannot be complete and whose life would be a blank, as suggestive of the book’s narrative structure, without the mother’s voice.

In *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the problem arising from language use is not imperative, and as LuLing’s story is presented to Ruth in a translated version by Mr. Tang, who is competent in both Chinese and English, there is no problem with LuLing’s “English” in her “talk”-stories. Yet, linguistic difference is still an important factor that contributes to the alienation between the mother and daughter when they “actually” communicate. Ruth recalls her mortification as LuLing shouts for her in public and pronounces her name wrongly as “Lootie.” Ruth also mixes up the signs of LuLing’s fading memory with her poor language skills: “Recently, though, Ruth had some concerns that her mother was becoming not forgetful, exactly, but careless. She would say ‘ribbon’ when she meant ‘wrapping paper,’ ‘envelope’ when she meant ‘stamp’” (*BSD* 42). Tan also draws upon her personal experience of pretending to be her mother on telephone calls: “But this was the worst part: Being the only child of a widow, Ruth had always been forced
to serve as LuLing’s mouthpiece” (BSD 41). As Ruth is a ghostwriter for self-help books, which means, she works as a shadow editor/writer for the authors as she attempts to transfer their meanings to blank pages, LuLing interprets her daughter’s job of “ghostwriter” as meaning that she is able to talk to ghosts. Unaware of what LuLing is really talking about, Ruth regards this as yet another example of her mother’s incompetence in English. However, while it is true that LuLing might not have the slightest idea of what a “ghostwriter” means, she has indeed given it another meaning, based on her personal experience of obsession with the ghost of Precious Auntie. Ironically, while Ruth is writing for self-help books which are forms of “talking cure” to the readers, she cannot enact it with her own mother, whose past is hidden from her until the time comes that Ruth is ready to reclaim her mother’s personal story. The term “self-help” could also be interpreted with two meanings: while the primary one means “helping yourself,” there could exist a secondary one meaning “helping yourself to have a self” — an important theme in the Tan novels discussed in this chapter. “Self” is related to “identity” and hence the founding of “self” means the founding of “identity,” and this corresponds with the popular culture’s concept of what the later generations of immigrant families are striving for. I disagree, therefore, with the suggestion that some Asian American popular texts’ location of the “problem” of Asian America as “contained” in a “family struggle between first and second generations, primarily between mothers and daughters” has “reprove[d] the lessons of a late twentieth-century self-help culture in its sensational uncovering of tragic secrets and promotion of healing through the universalizing love shared by mothers and daughters” (Simpson 291). Instead, I would argue that the generational struggles and the resolutions in the mother-daughter relationships in Tan’s novels, examples
of popular Asian American texts, have indeed reinforced the popular notions of
self-help culture and emotional healing through unburdening of secrets.

It is noticeable that in The Bonesetter’s Daughter, the “words flow” between
the grandmother and granddaughter, and mother and daughter, is complicated by
the temporal separation as well as the linguistic translation. In a strict sense, talk-
story between Precious Auntie and Ruth is three levels removed from the direct
talk-story, as used by Winnie in The Kitchen God’s Wife: first, the story of Precious
Auntie is revealed in written words, not through oral stories; second, Precious
Auntie’s story is recorded through the recollection of LuLing; and third, Precious
Auntie’s story is being “talked” to Ruth through written translation from Chinese to
English. Similarly, LuLing’s story is only made comprehensible to Ruth through
the written translation of Mr. Tang, “a famous writer in China” (BSD 261). Due to
Ruth’s poor capability in Chinese, LuLing’s story, written in Chinese, has been left
untouched in her drawer for five to six years, even though she realises from
LuLing’s “awkward nonchalance” that the pages are “important” (BSD 14).

Sensing her mother’s memory problem, Ruth decides to pay attention to what her
mother wants to tell her in the pages so that LuLing could take her “through all the
detours of the past, explaining the multiple meanings of Chinese words, how to
translate her heart” (BSD 131). In Tan’s text, it is obvious that Mr. Tang’s
translation approach is preferred because what we readers are reading is supposed
to be Mr. Tang’s translation work: “Mr Tang’s model of translation is ultimately
privileged, not least because he, rather than Ruth, translated LuLing’s life story. He
also completed this task in two months, whereas she is seen struggling for an hour
to translate one sentence” (Adams 144-145). Mr. Tang aims for a non-transliterate
approach because he wants “to phrase it naturally, yet ensure these are your
mother's words" (*BSD* 261). His approach is to capture the essence of LuLing's emotions in her story and express them in a concise and adequate way so that Ruth and her descendants can have the record of the family history. The fact that Mr. Tang falls in love with the writer, LuLing, as he translates her life story, is highly suggestive of the reaction of reading. Though it is unlikely that a reader would fall in love with the writer as one reads, Mr. Tang's being drawn into the writing of LuLing symbolises a kind of relationship between the "talker" and "listener" being developed through talk-stories. In this sense, it highlights the sentimental sensation which evolves through the written talk-story in the book. As the daughter is drawn into the world of the mother and becomes a reader of the main text herself, the story becomes more sentimental and expressive to her.

The word "sentiment" or "sentimental" has been a pejorative term in modern culture denoting "an excess of emotion to an occasion, and especially to an overindulgence in the 'tender' emotions of pathos and sympathy" (Abrams 284), "mawkish self-indulgent and actively pernicious modes of feeling" (Bell 2), and for many of the modernist writers "sentimentality was both a past to be outgrown and a present tendency to be despised" (Clark 2). The association of women with sentimentality makes women writers responsible for "the domination of the sentimental" and the twentieth-century "mass culture dominated by consumerism and emotional appeals," (Clark 3) and in this sense, the whole of twentieth-century becomes rather "diseased" (Clark 4) as "(t)he sentimental undermines the serious" in literary criticism (Clark 3). Modernist critics view mass culture as "a feminized enemy" which is both "powerful and dangerous" (Clark 5). The modernists' exclusion of "everything but the forms of high art" and their anti-sentimental value seems to suggest that the invoking of emotion, sympathy, and feeling would
deprecate the literary (artistic) value of a text (Clark 6). The connection of the mass culture, sentimentalism and women writers relegates both popular and women's writings to a kind of low-grade product without much literary value. However, there has been a shift in the academic world in the use of the negative and derogative word "sentiment" or "sentimental." Since the mid-1980s critics have started to give positive significance to the sentimental. It shifts to designate "sentiment" as a kind of sensation evolved in the process of reading a literary text as readers develop on emotional understanding of the stories which grip them. When I use the word "sentiment" or "sentimental" in this chapter, I am referring to the emotional response and solidarity that is invoked and developed from the readers as they read Tan's fictions. As a fictional work is "about someone else" and "allows a forgetfulness of the reader's self even as the feeling is being imagined within the reader's own emotional resources" (Bell 7), a reader's emotional response to a particular literary text is not necessarily related to his/her own experience or existing mode of thinking (as for example, Orientalist in an code). Therefore, I attempt to analyse Tan's popularity through the emotional solidarity experienced by readers as they "feel" for the characters in Tan's texts as they talk-stories and use "broken" English to express themselves.

I end this section with a quotation from the end of The Bonesetter's Daughter, as Ruth reflects on what she has learnt from the stories of her grandmother and mother:

After all, Bao Bomu says, what is the past but what we choose to remember? They can choose not to hide it, to take what's broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal. They know where happiness lies, not in a cave or a country, but in love and the freedom to give and take what has been there all
As the Tan daughters attempt to immerse themselves in their mothers’ past stories and claim them as part of their own, they begin to change and start to take whatever is given by the mothers, even if that is in “broken” English. In this sense, the daughters have internalised “broken” English as not only part of their mothers’, but part of their own identities as well. In doing so, the “broken” English spoken by the mothers, which was once disturbing and a cause of shame for the daughters, becomes no longer a problem but a positive attribute for the mothers, who, through making a different and creative usage of the English language, that is, the “foreign” language, reveal their most inner expressive emotions and passions, which are going to last as the daughters are absorbed in them. Inserting the mothers’ “broken” English into her texts, Tan invests them with an extra power and expressiveness.

Conclusion

It is important to note that the mothers and daughters preserve their differences at the end of the three novels as they attempt to achieve a mutual understanding and a construction of the maternal bond. As Bella Adams notes, the reconciliation between the Joy Luck mothers and daughters is brought about by “preserving difference” between them in order to bring “mutual benefits” (70). At the end of *The Joy Luck Club, The Kitchen God’s Wife*, and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*, the Chinese mothers and American-born daughters are different in many aspects: the form of English they speak is different, the cultural practice they adhere to is different, and their mode of thinking, being shaped by the Chinese patriarchal and American mainstream respectively, is also different. They are able to identify and
bond with each other not because they could achieve sameness amid differences, but because they could translate their differences into positive motivations. As Amy Tan approaches the “broken” English of her mother, she transforms it from a problem hindering the mother-daughter communication to a positive form that the daughter is proud of. A form of emotional empathy is envisioned as the mothers and daughters unburden their personal stories and feelings, as a form of “talking cure” or healing therapy to their problems. Despite the apparent differences between them, they discover that as they talk and unburden secrets, not only the words flow between them, but the passion and emotion flow as well. As Amy Ling puts it, “If the old ways cannot be incorporated into the new life, if they do not ‘mix’ as Lindo puts it, then they must nonetheless be respected and preserved in the pictures on one’s walls, in the memories in one’s head, in the stories that one writes down” (*Between Worlds* 141).

In other words, the mothers’ stories are “emotionally translated” to the daughters, despite the fact that they are still driven apart by different languages, cultures, and social realms – the mothers still cannot speak perfect English whereas not all the daughters have learnt to appreciate their Chinese heritage and the Chinese culture which have shaped their mothers. Wendy Ho has proposed that one predominant question in the communication problem between the Joy Luck mothers and daughters is “how to pass their women’s standpoints and stories in a language that is not embedded in patriarchal, capitalist, and imperialist discourses and institutions” (171). She questions if there are experiences of the women which could not be translated or spoken in either English or Chinese because no mother or daughter can master both languages well. This is essentially true for *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* as well. Echoing Ho’s viewpoint in
doubting the possibility of effective communication between the mother-daughter pairs due to the language difficulty, I would suggest that the development of empathy is more important for the mother-daughter reconciliation than of a language commonality. Things could be left unsaid because there is no common language to convey meanings from one side to another; however, an understanding which is established through emotional solidarity is more likely to outlast the one with verbal “articulated” explanation, as emotional rapport transcends differences, be they social, historical, cultural, linguistic, and intellectual, and overrides constraints of patriarchal discourses. “Talk-stories” hence become the Tan women’s language—a discourse which is identified and enacted through the ability of “emotional translation” across vast differences among the mother-daughter pairs. As I have discussed in the previous section, it is perhaps even more emotionally expressive for the daughters to take what the mothers have to say in “broken” English because in “broken” English, the mothers might well have revealed their genuine feelings and thoughts as they make a positive use of the foreign language. The narrative in sub-standard English is hence strategic itself as it works as mediation between the mothers and daughters and becomes a new creative language for the women (and Tan as well). Therefore, as I have said earlier, the mothers start unburdening their personal stories even though they cannot speak in perfect American English and the language barrier is not an absolute barrier hindering the communication between the mothers and daughters. There is a scene in “Rice Husband” in The Joy Luck Club in which Lena’s husband discovers that Lena does not eat ice cream after they have been living together for many years:

“Who’s ready for dessert?” he (Harold) asks, reaching into the freezer.

“I’m full,” I say.
“Lena cannot eat ice cream,” says my mother.

“So it seems. She’s always on a diet.”

“No, she never eat it. She doesn’t like.”

And now Harold smiles and looks at me puzzled, expecting me to translate what my mother has said.

“It’s true,” I say evenly. “I’ve hated ice cream almost all my life.”

Harold looks at me, as if I, too, were speaking Chinese and he could not understand.

“I guess I assumed you were just trying to lose weight … Oh well.”

(JLC 162-163)

The husband is astonished to know the “truth” and looks at his wife with bewilderment, as if they are separated by a language barrier. This scene symbolises the daughter’s alliance with her mother as she identifies herself with the mother’s “broken” language and gains “power literally through her mother’s ‘native’ language, even though everyone is speaking English in this scene” (Su 123). As Tan celebrates her mother’s “broken” English, their relationship is symbolically “cured” as well.

Blaming the language differences might then be a misplacement of the real problem – both the mothers and daughters do not tell because both parties are not ready, as the mothers realise their stories would fall on deaf ears, and the daughters cannot make themselves available for the stories yet 53. The mothers therefore have to patiently wait for the moment when it becomes necessary for them to tell, or when they are confident that the stories would branch into the lives of their daughters as their Chinese stories of the past finally bear significance for their modern American daughters. As I have briefly mentioned in this chapter, for an
effective storytelling to take place between generations, it is necessary that both parties are ready to tell and listen. The mothers might want to forget about their traumatic experience, or have the trauma delayed as they avoid reliving them in their memories, and intentionally bury part/whole of their past until at a certain time later when they are able to assemble the traumatic experience in the form of stories, which are spelt out in a coherently meaningful way. It is possible that the mothers use the form of stories to connect a random recollection of experience which they are in possession of, and shape it in a coherent story-form to the daughters. The woman in the opening prologue of *The Joy Luck Club* waits patiently for the day when she can tell her coca-cola daughter in perfect American English and readers are therefore being unconsciously led into believing that the problem of language is the reason the mothers do not tell their stories earlier on. However, as the book unfolds, it is obvious that the mothers do tell their stories in “broken” English (the kind of expressive English they use), denoting that the mothers are actually already in possession of a certain kind of “language” that they would use to tell their stories to their daughters. For the mothers, it is possible that the mode of expression (the form of stories) and the readiness to tell (implying the existence of a ready-to-listen audience) are more important than getting their experiences told in the “correct” language and in this sense, “language” has become the alibi of mutual “readiness.”

As the mothers attempt to talk-story, it is important that there exists a listener who is ready to listen for without this, the telling of stories would remain insignificant. Therefore, the daughters’ readiness to listen at the particular moment of the mothers’ storytelling is essential for the stories to exist significantly and in the novels I have discussed in this chapter, it is at the point when the adult
American daughters encounter crisis and changes in their lives – for Jing-mei, it is the death of her mother and the prospect of meeting her half-sisters in China; for Rose, it is her imminent divorce; for Waverly, it is her second marriage; for Lena, it is her falling-apart marriage; for Pearl, it is her revelation of her illness to her mother; and for Ruth, it is the fading memories of her mother – that there exists an internal need for the daughters to finally listen to the mothers’ stories. While the daughters are usually drawn to external things such as career and love in their lives, they would like to turn inwards and ask for the inner meaning of lives and it is at this particular moment that they turn to the stories shaped by their mothers’ experience. In this sense, there is a double-ness of communication at work as it is important to have the co-presence of the mother’s readiness to tell and the daughter’s readiness to listen: what “an oral tradition encodes” can only sustain with the fluency of both “the composer” and “the audience” (Foley 15). In order to have the stories effectively transmitted from the mother to the daughter, it is necessary that these three elements are present: the dialogic action of talking and listening, the stories, and the readiness of both parties; and the three elements together form the relationship between “talk” and “story,” further establishing “talk-story” as a dynamic and interactive term of speech. Whether it is prompted by readiness or necessity to tell and listen, timing, that is, to have the stories told at a specific moment of time, is particularly important for an effective storytelling to take place and this corresponds to a prominent component in the oral tradition – the spontaneity of oral elements as “[e]very storytelling event occurs only once in time and space” (Georges 319) – and establishes Tan’s works as a remodelled form of Kingston’s “talk-story.”

As Karen Su has observed, “the metaphor of translation is employed widely
these days as a short-hand for cross-cultural exchange,” the mothers and daughters in Tan’s literary texts succeed in translating the Chinese past, represented by the mothers, to the American present, represented by the daughters, as they are reconciled through attempting to understand and accept their differences (13). Even though the mothers and daughters still speak predominately different languages and are divided in their cultural upbringing, or in Hamilton’s words, the daughters’ “comprehension remains flawed, partial, incomplete” as it is impossible for the mothers to translate their “worldview(s) into ‘perfect American English’” (144), empathy is built up between them through talk-stories, as they finally realise that their mothers are always in their bones. Using talk-story as an emotional therapy and “talking cure,” the Tan mothers and daughters are united spiritually as the daughters’ stereotypes about their mothers and the Chinese culture are “deconstructed” and the mothers’ silence and invisibility are broken. Recovering and resisting the histories of “silence and oppression” that the mothers suffer from and transforming them into “a legacy of strength,” Tan suggests that this effort should be carried out collaboratively by both the mothers and daughters (Adams 30).
Notes:

1. Amy Tan recalls an occasion in which she pretends to be Mrs. Tan (her mother) and calls her mother's stockbroker at the mother's request: "I had to get on the phone and say in an adolescent voice that was not very convincing, "This is Mrs. Tan." / My mother was standing in the back whispering loudly, "Why he don't send me check, already two weeks late. So mad he lie to me, losing me money." / And then I said in perfect English on the phone, "Yes, I'm getting rather concerned. You had agreed to send the check two weeks ago, but it hasn't arrived."/ Then she began to talk more loudly. "What he want, I come to New York tell him front of his boss, you cheating me?" And I was trying to calm her down, make her be quiet, while telling the stockbroker, "I can't tolerate any more excuses. If I don't receive the check immediately, I am going to have to speak to your manager when I'm in New York next week" (Fate 274-5). Tan goes on telling how embarrassed she was and how flabbergasted the stockbroker was as her mother, the real Mrs. Tan, shouted at his boss in the New York office in her "broken" English the next week.

2. The categorisation of Amy Tan as a writer of the popular literature is self-evident, particularly after she has moved "into the popular genres of 'kid lit' and 'chick flick'" (The Moon Lady and The Chinese Siamese Cat) (Adams 9). My discussion, however, takes in a more than self-evident analysis of how Tan develops "talk-story" as a form of "talking cure" in her novels as distinct from Kingston's use of "talk-stories."

3. Wong uses the term "sugar sisterhood," deriving from the phrase "sugar sister" (tang fie) that Winnie uses to tell Pearl how she and her cousin, Peanut, call each other in The Kitchen God's Wife (KGW 154, italics original) to signify "the kind of readership Amy Tan has acquired, especially among white women, through acts of cultural interpreting and cultural empathy that appear to possess the authority of authenticity but are often products of the American-born writer's own heavily mediated understanding of things Chinese" (181). According to the Chinese kinship system, tang fie is a term used to describe an elder sister in the paternal line of the family and according to Wong, Tan has misinterpreted it as "a friendly term of endearment, to be assumed at will when two girl cousins feel close to each other" (181).

4. Wendy Ho questions the over-generalisation of attributing Tan's success simply to the Oriental effect particularly since "the specific research with audience receptions has not yet been
5. The reasons behind Tan’s phenomenal success could be numerous. For example, Tan herself has noted that some of the readership for *The Joy Luck Club* “are comprised of baby-boomer women of varying backgrounds going through mid-life changes and phases”: “I [Tan] think I wrote about something that hit a lot of baby boomer women whose mothers have either just recently died or may die in the near future. They felt that their misunderstandings, things that had not been talked about for years, were expressed in the book. There are so many mothers I know who gave the book to their daughters, and daughters, who gave the book to their mothers, and marked passages of things they wanted to say” (Ho, *HMH* 49). Cynthia Sau-ling Wong has remarked that Tan’s texts “have a little bit of something for everyone” and open up various contending interpretive possibilities (“Sugar” 191). Wong also mentions other possible reasons for Tan’s popularity such as Tan’s good writing and her subject matter which could be placed in “the tradition of matrilineal discourse” at the time when feminist movement is at strength (176). Wendy Ho also gives numerous examples of how the Chinese American female readership identifies with *The Joy Luck Club* (*HMH* 50-54). Some Asian American female readers have identified the “pleasures of recognition” when reading Tan’s texts as Tan’s works have impacts on their personal lives (152). This corresponds to what Janice Radway remarks on women’s reading of romances: “[t]his form of interaction between two parties who are established as equals creates the illusion of a spontaneous, unmediated communication between individuals capable of telling and receiving a story about themselves whose meaning is not only unambiguous but already known by both parties because they have ‘heard’ it before” (198, italics original). It “resemble[s] the myths of oral cultures in the sense that they exist to relate a story already familiar to the people who choose to read them” (Radway 198). In this sense, these literary texts are “selected, purchased, constructed, and used by real people with previously existing needs, desires, intentions, and interpretive strategies” (Radway 221).

6. *The Joy Luck Club* was the longest on the list of *The New York Times* hardcover bestseller list, won the Bay Area Book Reviewers’ award for new fiction and the Commonwealth Club Gold Award for fiction (Ho, *HMH* 44), was shortlisted for the National Book Award for Fiction and nominated from the National Book Critics Circle Award (Huntley, *Tan* 11-12). In 1993, the book was turned into a movie, directed by Wayne Wang and Tan wrote the screen adaptation.
and was one of the film's producers. No doubt, the popularity of this book was further enhanced with the success of the film and *The Joy Luck Club* has been translated into several languages, reaching in 1997 a record sales of over 4.5 million copies (Ho, *HMH* 44).

7. Some Asian American critics also attack her for catering for white readership, because, as Tan believes, "her fictional work constructs a sense of a less than perfect China past through the memories and experiences of the Joy Luck women and because she discusses sexism within Chinese culture" (Ho, *HMH* 47). The portrayal of an exoticised Other is one reason for the attack on Tan's pandering the white audience: "a number of critics and readers think that Amy Tan writes stories about a tantalizing, mysterious, and romanticized Old China or an exoticized Other" (Ho, "Swan-Feather Mothers" 139).

8. For more about the criticism of Tan's pandering to white fantasies of the Orient, the books' authenticity and representative-ness, and Tan's defence, see p. 47-48 in Wendy Ho's *In Her Mother's House*.

9. The creation of this book was prompted when Amy Tan thought Daisy had a heart attack and was going to die. As she anxiously called the hospital to find out what had happened to her mother, she recalled once her mother asked her what she would remember if her mother died and sadly admitted that her mother was right in criticising her for knowing little of her. She promised herself that if her mother lived, she would listen to her stories carefully and learn about her mother's past and everything. In "What I Would Remember" in *The Opposite of Fate*, Amy Tan recalls this incident in fuller detail. She recalls what she has promised to God as she dialled the number of the hospital and waited to be transferred to the nursing station in intensive care: "‘If my mother lives, I will get to know her. I will ask her about her past, and this time I'll actually listen to what she has to say. Why, I'll even take her to China, and yes, I'll write stories about her …’" (358). After her mother got out of the hospital, Amy Tan took her to China and started writing *The Joy Luck Club* after returning from the trip. The love-hate relationship with the mother is aptly identified as Tan recalls her trip to China with her mother: "I endured three weeks of being with her twenty-four hours a day. Three weeks of her giving me her expert advice, criticizing my clothes, my eating habits, the bad bargains I made at the market. I hated it and I loved it. And when I returned home, I began to write stories about her life" (*Fate* 359). The love-hate sensation of the daughter towards the mother is illustrated in the
mother-daughter pairs in *The Joy Luck Club*. From the trip to China, Amy Tan saw Daisy in a new light. She used to think that "being Chinese in America made her (Daisy) a difficult person" because people did not understand her English, but then she discovered that her mother got into arguments with Chinese people as well and it has more to do with her mother's personality (Shields 55). She also developed a sense of belonging to China as she landed on the Chinese soil and discovered "how Chinese I was by the kind of family habits and routines that were so familiar" (Shields 55).

10. As Amy Ling has noted, "the book itself is concerned more with a simple bifurcation along generational lines: mothers, whose stories all took place in China, and daughters, whose stories are being lived in America; mothers who are possessively trying to hold fast and daughters who are battling for autonomy" (*Between Worlds* 131).

11. I am going to discuss in more detail the "talking cure" in talk-stories in Tan's novels in the next section.

12. Amy Tan has drawn numerous materials and references from her mother in writing up *The Joy Luck Club*, but Daisy Tan "is not the cornerstone of the book" (Shields 75).

13. Amy Tan has changed some of the details of her mother's life "for reasons of plot and drama" as she writes (Shields 75-76). For example, Daisy Tan lost the custody of her three daughters, who were born in China, and had to leave them behind as she rejoined Amy Tan's father in America; whereas in *The Kitchen God's Wife*, Amy Tan has the three children, two girls and a boy, of Winnie in China killed off, making Winnie's story more tragic.

14. Before Amy Tan started writing this book, she knew little about her mother's life in China and believed that her mother was not affected by the Second World War. However, at another time, Daisy mentioned that there were times when she had to flee to the city gates to avoid the frequent bombings in the city, and Amy was left baffled at her mother's inconsistency. Getting a clarification from her mother, Amy learnt that her mother said she was not affected by the war because she was not killed. Learning this, Amy Tan was astonished and she decided to capture the difference between "her mother's view of what was important in life — surviving the near-breakdown of civilization — versus Amy's own, upper-class American outlook" in her new book (Shields 75). It seems that the mother and daughter have been living in two complete different worlds, divided by a complete lack of understanding from the daughter, who has never listened...
carefully and paid enough attention to what her mother has said.

15. *The Hundred Secret Senses* is about the sisterly bond between two half-sisters, who have problems similar to the Chinese mothers and American-born daughters, because they are culturally divided. However, Bella Adams acknowledges that Tan has not really abandoned the matrilineal narrative in *The Hundred Secret Senses* (126). Tan’s latest fiction, *Saving Fish from Drowning*, was published in 2005, and it shows a departure from her previous preoccupation with women, and the theme of mothers and daughters.

16. As she wrote her mother’s Chinese obituary while her mother was on deathbed, Tan astonishingly realised, from her older half-sisters, that she has always remembered her mother’s Chinese name wrongly as Li Ching. Only upon the death of her mother did she know that her mother’s real Chinese name was Li Bingzi and that her grandmother’s true name was Gu Jingmei. Tan felt strange when she knew that, as even though she had been trying to capture the lives of her mother and grandmother for the past fifteen years, she had not even got the basics right. On the other hand, she was energized by the revelation and decided to get back the new manuscript she had placed with the publisher and rewrote it all over again, “practically from beginning to end” (Shields 83), with “the steadfastness of grief” (Tan, *Fate* 96). It is because Tan reckons that her mother’s death did change her view and open a new landscape for the story: “It was as though the whole essence of the book changed when they died” (Shields 83).


18. In an interview for *Detroit News*, Amy Tan has noted that “culture and immigrant experience is just a part of what she writes about” and she has “had women coming up to me and say they’ve felt the same way about their mothers, and they weren’t immigrants” (Shields 88). David Leiwei Li has also suggested that Tan departs from her fellows (Maxine Hong Kingston and Bharati Mukherjee) in that she “manages to limit the trials and tribulations of her characters to the genealogical family, apparently independent from the larger society” (*Imaging* 111).

19. Wendy Ho suggests that Tan “subverts and re-interprets the traditional image of swans by applying it to the silenced and intimate pairings between women” as in traditional Chinese stories, swans “symbolize married, heterosexual love” (“Swan-Feather Mothers” 150). It shows
that Tan does not “wish to focus on the master narratives of patriarchy, but to focus instead on the powerful stories of love and struggle between mothers and daughters, between women in China and in America” (“Swan-Feather Mothers” 150).

20. As Wendy Ho has pointed out, learning from their lessons in China, the Joy Luck mothers “want daughters who will be bolder, more self-assured women; who are independent from their husbands; who will have good jobs, status, and voice; who feel their own merit” (HMH 155). In short, the mothers want their daughters to achieve what they are denied in old patriarchal China.

21. Gloria Shen suggests that the swan is “emblematic of both the mother’s new life in America and, more important, her past one in China, an experience the mother wants to communicate to her daughter” (115-6).

22. Stephen Souris also remarks that “If the first preface prepares us to be sympathetic towards the mothers, this second preface prepares us to be sympathetic towards the daughters as we read each monologue against that preface as a backdrop” (111).

23. For example, Ying-ying St. Clair laments the estrangement from her daughter, Lena: “when she (Lena) was born, she sprang from me like a slippery fish, and has been swimming away ever since. All her life, I have watched her as though from another shore” (JLC 242).

24. In Jing-mei’s description, Waverly seizes every opportunity to show off her success and exhibits her power over Jing-mei. After Jing-mei’s talent show disaster, Waverly says to her matter-of-factly, “You aren’t a genius like me” (JLC 140). After twenty-five years, Jing-mei discovers that Waverly is still the same old self who always complains, criticises, and insults her with sneaky remarks. She is described as a self-centred and arrogant person who is unmindful of others’ feelings: Jing-mei is exasperated when Waverly openly criticises her hair stylist and hints that she might not be able to pay a higher price for a better stylist during dinner. She decides to confront Waverly, asking for payment for the free-lance work she has done for Waverly’s law firm, but only encounters more shame and embarrassment as Waverly implies that the firm does not pay her because her writing skills are not up to standard. Jing-mei lacks the weapon to fight back as Waverly continues diminishing her from childhood to adulthood.

25. An-mei, on the other hand, is dismayed that her daughter does not come to her for help and acts so indecisively on the marriage problem: “She cried, ‘No choice! No choice!’ She doesn’t know. If she doesn’t speak, she is making a choice. If she doesn’t try, she can lose her chance
forever” (JLC 215).

26. When Lena is eight, her mother warned her that she would marry a bad man with pock marks in the future if she leaves rice on her bowl. She misinterprets her mother’s warning and thinks of a neighbour boy whom she hates so much that she wishes him dead as her future husband. The boy dies in his teens and Lena thinks she has caused his death and she believes that she is destined to marry Arnold, the boy who is dead, and therefore she marries Harold: “I still feel that somehow, for the most part, we deserve what we get. I didn’t get Arnold. I got Harold” (JLC 155). Ying-ying’s warning of having a rice husband thus becomes a source of horror for the child Lena, who is so confused that she cannot relate cause and effect clearly, even as an adult.

27. Pearl is offended as her cousin treats her with extra kindness: “Kindness was a reminder that my life had changed, was always changing, that people thought I should just accept all this and become strong or brave, more enlightened, more peaceful” (KGW 26).

28. Winnie explains the chaotic situation in China of that time: “It was too confusing to explain over and over again: who was related to whom, which half brother by which marriage, what year this happened according to the Chinese or the Western calendar, what happened to that sister-in-law, why we changed our minds so often about the Japanese, the Kuomintang, and the Communists” (KGW 71).

29. Amy Tan has recalled her childhood efforts “to assimilate into white America” in a number of interviews and her ways of doing so include “‘whitening’ her facial features, albeit unnecessarily by pegging her nose, along with choosing the most desirable and readily available aspects of mainstream American culture, including convenience food, fashionable clothes and make-up” (Adams 7).

30. Wendy Ho remarks that Jing-mei’s ways of “knowing about mother or China replay the imperialist fantasies, myths, and reveries which seem to set China and women’s position in China in nostalgic ahistorical narratives and images, and which do not allow her to access the more complex and rich histories about China and Chinese women” (HMH 166-167).

31. Bruno Bettelheim remarks that “[i]t is unfortunate that both the English and French names for these stories emphasize the role of fairies in them – because in most, no fairies appear” (26). Marina Warner describes “fairy tale” as a “derogatory term” implying “fantasy, escapism,
invention, the unreliable consolations of romance" (19).

32. As Winnie tries to explain to Pearl and Phil and her granddaughters about the hierarchy of Chinese deities, she adopts an Americanised explanation and describes the Kitchen God's position as "like a store manager, important, but still many, many bosses above him" (KGW 53). After she has told them about the story of the Kitchen God, Phil reckons that the Kitchen God is like Santa Claus, but Winnie dismisses his metaphor and says that he is "More like a spy – FBI agent, CIA, Mafia, worse than IRS," using American terms to contextualise the Chinese deity (KGW 55).

33. Sigmund Freud's friend, the physician and physiologist, Josef Breuer, had a patient called Anna O. Anna suffered from hysteria and during her treatment, it was discovered that when she was under hypnosis, she would talk about things she could not remember in a conscious state and afterwards her symptoms were relieved. This is called the "talking cure," or what the patient herself referred to as "chimney-sweeping" (Gay 68).

34. By this, it shows that Waverly comes to understand that in all these years, she has projected some imagined fears about her mother and made both her own and her mother's lives miserable.

35. For example, as Ted pushes her to sign their divorce papers, Rose bellows: "You mean you were doing monkey business with someone else," echoing An-mei's hypothesis and choice of words, which Rose has previously dismissed as impossible and funny (JLC 194).

36. Jing-mei feels that she is betrayed by her own mother as Suyuan seems to back up Waverly's critical comment: "'True, cannot teach style. June (Jing-mei's English name) not sophisticate like you. Must be born this way'" (JLC 206).

37. At Popo's deathbed, An-mei's mother returns despite the harsh attitudes of her family and cuts her meat from her arm to make a soup for the dying Popo. The child An-mei regards this as "how a daughter honors her mother. It is shou so deep it is in your bones" – this symbolises how the mother and daughter are bonded and explains how An-mei's love for her mother flourishes, though her mother disappears from her home when she is very young (JLC 48).

38. To Ho, talk-story is a "critical form of consciousness and agency" discovered by Ying-ying, which is able to free "her to reclaim her relationship with her daughter and with herself" (HMH 181).

39. Lindo names her first son "Winston" because she wants to raise a son "who would win many
things, praise, money, a good life” and the second son “Vincent,” sounding like “win cent,” as she thinks they have not had enough money at that time (JLC 265).

40. Lindo reflects on her two faces, the Chinese face and the American face, as she looks at the mirror: “I think about our two faces. I think about my intentions. Which one is American? Which one is Chinese? Which one is better? If you show one, you must always sacrifice the other” (JLC 266).

41. Ben Xu explains the ever-changing endings of Suyuan’s Kweilin story as a result of “suppressed” memory: “These stories, in the form of memory, test Suyuan’s ability to forget. These stories are her symptomatic records of a traumatized soul making a desperate effort to push back the memory of the tragic loss of a husband and two baby daughters during the war” (7).

42. When Helen asks her to tell all of her secrets to Pearl because there is no point in bringing the secrets to the grave, Winnie is exasperated and dreads what would come out from Helen’s mouth if she does not tell Pearl about them herself. There is also a practical side to this unburdening of secrets: as Wen Fu, Winnie’s intolerable first husband, is dead, there remains no opportunity for him to chase Winnie over the ocean and therefore it is basically “safe” to disclose past secrets at that particular time. In addition, there is nothing to lose in recollecting the hard life in China because “that’s very popular now, nothing shameful in that” (KGW 80). After realising that she has been wrong in accusing Pearl of not loving her father, Winnie decides to unburden all her past secrets to Pearl before Helen does that for her, regardless of the possible consequences that Pearl might get suspicious and would not believe her anymore.

43. As Winnie recounts her story, she makes it clear that she does not want Pearl to have the version from Helen: “I don’t know why I am talking so much about Helen. This is not a story about her, although she is the reason why I have to tell you my story. If she told you this story, she might say I did not try hard enough to have a good marriage. Let me tell you, I tried” (KGW 197).

44. Bella Adams has suggested that in The Kitchen God’s Wife, “Chinese marriage” is represented as “a form of physical and psychological enslavement for women, whether mythical (the Kitchen God’s wife), fictional (Winnie Louie), or, indeed, factual (Daisy)” (27). Besides Wen Fu, Tan’s “male characters generally function more marginally” and Adams notes that this is Tan’s “critique of patriarchy, in both China and America” and has thus situated Tan “in an
Asian American feminist tradition" (27).

45. For example, Pearl finally understands why her mother slaps her face furiously when she shouts that the man in the casket is not her father at Jimmy Louie’s funeral; it is because she has spoken the darkest secret in her mother’s life aloud, that Jimmy is really not her biological father, but Wen Fu, her mother’s horrible first husband in China, is. She understands that the lack of maternal advice and guidance in Winnie’s life leads Winnie to become a protective and interfering mother, using words from *The Joy Luck Club*, it is the mother’s “good intentions” and love that are going to last.

46. It is important to note that Smith is a translator of Deleuze’s idea here.

47. Karen Su contends that “When the mothers narrate their own sections, their speech is in simple grammatical English, or it is a little more sophisticated when representing their ‘Chinese’ speech in translation” (115-116). The mothers’ sentences are like these: An-mei Hsu says, “When I was a young girl in China, my grandmother told me my mother was a ghost. This did not mean my mother was dead” (*JLC* 42); Lindo Jong says, “I once sacrificed my life to keep my parents’ promise. This means nothing to you, because to you promises mean nothing” (*JLC* 49); and Ying-ying St. Clair says, “For all these years I kept my mouth closed so selfish desires would not fall out. And because I remained quiet for so long now my daughter does not hear me” (*JLC* 67).

48. Xiaomei Chen has pointed out that while the daughters do “acquire political and linguistic power their mothers never had: the power of production and reproduction of knowledge in a society that is still very discriminatory” by telling and recording the mothers’ stories in perfect English, this acquired power also “simultaneously deprives them of the status they shared with their illiterate mothers on earlier occasions” (118).

49. As the Joy Luck mothers have observed, “They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English” (*JLC* 40-41).

50. Wendy Ho has remarked that the “reductive classification” of the stories of Kingston, Tan, and Fae Myenne Ng as “sentimental” and “emotional” has placed these writers “in danger of being trivialized or ignored by ‘high culture’ or academic discursive communities that devalue women’s culture or mass popular appeal as non-intellectual and non-political” (*HMH* 55).
51. For a list of works on this subject matter, refer to p. 4-5 in Michael Bell’s *Sentimentalism, Ethics and the Culture of Feeling*.

52. It is worth noting that Maxine Hong Kingston also uses “broken” English in her texts from time to time, most noticeably in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. However, her use of “broken” English or pidgin English is mainly observed as to orientalise the Chinese immigrants in America and thus distinguish them from the Chinese Americans, who want to distance themselves from the alien immigrants (Ma 112). For example, at the beginning of the book, Wittman meets an immigrant family and he describes them as such: “Following, staggering, came the poor guy’s wife. She was coaxing their kid with sunflower seeds, which she cracked with her gold tooth and held out to him. ‘Ho sick, la. Ho sick,’ she said. ‘Good eating. Good eats.’ … On Granny’s head was a cap with a pompon that matched everybody’s sweaters. The whole family taking a cheap outing on their day off. Immigrants. Fresh Off the Boats out in public” (5). Here, the insertion of translation and pidgin English “heighten(s) the foreignness of the immigrant object, to distance the perceiver who masters English from the immigrant who mangles it” (Ma 114). While claiming that Kingston intends to orientalise Chinese immigrants with the use of pidgin English seems to be a negative comment, I would rather suggest that her use of “broken” English is to reflect a realistic picture of the immigrants’ language problem. Nonetheless, the usage of “broken” English here is hence different from Tan’s, which indeed celebrates the mothers’ inability to master English, as reflected from the allocation of abundant space for articulating the mothers’ subjectivities in all the three Tan novels discussed.

53. In “Feng Shui, Astrology, and the Five Elements,” Patricia Hamilton interprets the miscommunication between the mothers and daughters in *The Joy Luck Club* as a result of the daughters’ inability to understand the “cultural referents behind their mothers’ words” and a difference in the world views and belief systems of the mothers and daughters in addition to the language problem: “What is needed for any accurate translation of meanings is not only receptiveness and language proficiency but also the ability to supply implied or missing context” (126). While I agree with Hamilton’s points as it is impossible to leave out the linguistic and cultural differences in the discussion of the mother-daughter relationships in *The Joy Luck Club* (and *The Kitchen God’s Wife* and *The Bonesetter’s Daughter* as well), I would like to expand the discussion and argue that the readiness to tell and listen is another important
factor that complicates the mother-daughter relationships in Tan's novels and relate it to the spontaneity of oral tradition.

54. For example, Wendy Ho has blamed the language barrier as the reason for why the mothers do not tell their stories to their daughters: "[t]he proud Joy Luck mothers do not want to be put into a subordinate position next to their educated, middle-class, career-oriented, English-speaking daughters. They do not want to sound coarse, uneducated, or alien to daughters who do not understand their Chinese or their native 'hillbilly' village or regional dialects" (HMH 171). She notes that the "English language can become a race and class signifier that divides the daughters from their Chinese immigrant mothers" (HMH 171).
Chapter 6
Conclusion: Stories that Never End

Storytelling, the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community, constitutes a rich oral legacy, whose values have regained all importance recently, especially in the context of writings by women of color. She who works at un-learning the dominant language of “civilized” missionaries also has to learn how to un-write and write anew. And she often does so by re-establishing contact with her foremothers, so that living tradition can never congeal into fixed forms, so that life keeps on nurturing life, so that what is understood as the Past continues to provide the link for the Present and the Future.

- Trinh T. Minh-ha, Woman, Native, Other (148-149)

In the proceeding chapters of textual analysis, I have studied the concept of “talk-story” as a narrative structure and theme in the fictions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan, and examined how talk-stories function to connect the past with the present and future, as they illuminate new meanings in new contexts. For the two writers, talk-stories serve not only as a means for articulating experience for “between world” characters amid the forces of racism, sexism, and classism, but also provide them an opportunity to attest their connections with their Chinese heritage by making Chinese oral tradition a strong feature in their works. By structuring their literary texts around stories and storytelling to illuminate personal and socio-political themes, Kingston and Tan demonstrate that this dynamic and interactive activity is not only confined in domestic-familial sites and should not be dismissed as trivial chatter by women, but is a social act of bonding and could be used to contest the dominant culture which is predominantly white and male-oriented. The dialogic relationship between tellers and listeners is a prominent feature of an oral tradition and this leads to a continuous motion of retelling stories. Both Kingston and Tan modify their talk-stories based on this important characteristic, expanding and establishing it as a discourse that empower their literary characters as they seek for specific means of expressing their struggles,
viewpoints, concerns, anger, sorrows, sufferings, and joy under limited conditions. In retellings, these characters interpret past stories under the present – present as at the retelling – circumstances, hence situating the stories under a specific socio-historical and political moment: “even if the words of the story are identical to a previous telling, the historical and social moment implicated by the telling is always unique and unrepeatable” (McHenry 247).

In chapter 2, I have analysed Kingston’s role as an artistic word-weaver who weaves stories from various sources in her text and produces a fabric informed by both her Chinese and American heritages. Interestingly, Tan has used the image of a “quilt” to describe her writing: “It is a crazy quilt ... pieced together, torn apart, repaired again and again, and strong enough to protect us all” (Fate 266) and Bella Adams has studied Tan’s works with reference to the figure of a quilt and its emphasis on “text/tissue/weave” threading Tan’s texts, contexts, and intertexts (1). Adams has noted that “talk-story” in Tan’s works is not only “intergenerational,” but “intertextual” as well – “‘beginning’ with The Woman Warrior and ‘ending’ with The Joy Luck Club” (27). In this sense, both Kingston and Tan “Americanise” (as noted by Wendy Ho, the word is not used “in its usual meaning of assimilation or Anglo-conformity, but in the sense of transformation and democratization” (HMH 112)) the Chinese talk-story in their fictions, but in different ways, with Kingston blazing the trail and establishing talk-story written forms within the culture and Tan reworking it into a more popular mode. While Kingston models her written works on the Chinese oral tradition and talks-stories at a structural level (a narrative theme and technique) so that her books are talk-stories themselves; Tan’s talk-story is mainly on a dramatic level (a narrative theme), as effectively devising a new literary language; that is, to a large extent, it is her
literary characters who talk-stories for empowerment and emotional healing, and she develops Kingston’s “talk-story” closer to the western sense of “talking cure” in psychotherapy. The talk-story tradition thus functions differently as it interacts with the mainstream discourse: for Kingston, Chinese talk-story is Americanised into a form of literary art in an artistic realm as her works experiment with a new form of artistic creation; whereas for Tan, Chinese talk-story is modelled as an emotional therapy as her works initiate the sentimental sensation of empathy in the popular arena.

In “‘Sugar Sisterhood’: Situating the Amy Tan Phenomenon,” Cynthia Saulting Wong describes The Joy Luck Club as a book straddling “the worlds of ‘mass’ literature and ‘respectable’ literature, stocking the shelves of airport newsstands as well as university bookstores, generating coffee table conversations as well as conference papers” (175). At the end of the essay, Wong notes the relatively unclear place of Tan in the Asian American canon: “there has been some academic interest in The Joy Luck Club (less so for The Kitchen God’s Wife), but hardly comparable in amount and intensity to what The Woman Warrior generated” (202). In a later article, Wong makes a further brief comment on the popularity of The Joy Luck Club: “Made up of stories about four mother-daughter pairs, it is less taxing to read than The Woman Warrior; it also appeals to a wide spectrum of readers by drawing upon a number of popular discourses in the 1980s, including those related to the recovery movement, yuppie life, and liberal pluralism” (“Chinese” 51). Picking up the former comment by Wong, Helena Grice delineates the difference between the two novels: “Tan’s novel is something of a lowbrow cultural version of Kingston’s” (Negotiating 66). She further notes that while “Kingston’s preoccupation with the mother-daughter dyad is but part of an extensive meditation
upon intercultural and intra-cultural understanding, Tan’s concern with mothers and daughters is the predominant focus” (*Negotiating* 66). In addition, Grice suggests that despite the “tight structure,” Tan’s novel “lacks the formal complexity and elegance of *The Woman Warrior*, with its palimpsestic narration, polyvocality, and shifting cultural registers” (*Negotiating* 66).

These comments by Wong and Grice seem to place Tan as a weak “literary sister” of Kingston, even though today there exists much increased academic interests in Tan’s works (more so with *The Joy Luck Club*), with the “Amy Tan phenomenon” consistently “scrutinized by scholars in essays, dissertations, journal articles and books” and *The Joy Luck Club* a canonised work in university courses (Adams 158). Though Wong and Grice base their observations mainly only on *The Woman Warrior* and *The Joy Luck Club*, it is generally true that Tan’s works are relatively less strong in artistic value (style of narration is easier to follow and word choice is not complicated) and her themes are rather domestic (mothers and daughters, family and relationships), as opposed to Kingston’s thematic focus encompassing personal, national, cultural, and political nuances (struggling for self-definition, claiming America and literary tradition), with a higher literary value (complex narrative structure with allusions to various western and Chinese literary and cultural sources). Tan’s predominant focus on mother-daughter relationship conveniently marks her works as women’s writings and the tendency for these works to end “sweetly” on happy notes “invoke[s] ‘a strong sense of personal connection’ among women in the UK, the US, Hong Kong and, presumably, in the twenty or so countries it appears in translation” (Adams 36). Tan’s popularity among female readers and association with popular forms and women’s culture unsurprisingly give an impression that her works are “lesser” in academic value and
not worthy of being treated as serious literature, corresponding to elitists’ "jeremiads about the perniciousness of popular forms" (Davidson 527). My study of the comparison of “talk-story” in the two writers’ works to high art and to something more popular seems to consolidate the idea of Tan being a weak literary sister. Nonetheless, I would suggest that the relation of Tan’s talk-story to “talking cure,” emotional expressiveness, and sentimental feelings, though it appears lacking in intellectual and academic values of the elitist high culture, is not at all condescending towards Tan. Tan’s remodelling of Kingston’s trailblazing notion of talk-story into a more popular form suggests that she is literally efficient in appealing to a large reading public with her works which portray an “emotional verism” – “a form of psychological reality, or inner realism” – of her characters (Ho, HMH 51). In addition, though elitists’ view on it is rather negative, popular culture “has the ability to deconstruct or subvert popular stereotypes”’ (qtd. in Ho, HMH 55) and popular art forms are “worthy of attention” because “they can lead one to an understanding of the social situation” (Radway 256). In this sense, suggesting that Tan writes more in a popular form as her works are linked strongly to the feature of psychotherapy, which is part of the American popular culture, does not relegate Tan to a “lower” status than Kingston.

It is important to point out here that I do not attempt to claim that Kingston’s works are not popular nor Tan’s works are lacking in artistic/literary value because first, this is not true; and second, popularity and artistry/literariness are not exclusive. This study is a comparative study of the two writers’ fictions and hence this classification of their works is a relative claim, based on the study of “talk-story” as a narrative theme and structure, as I am interested to look into the differences in their use of talk-story as a cultural form of empowerment and how
they interact differently with mainstream American literary studies. In this study, I have enriched the concept of "talk-story" by making specific references in the two writers' works to the interactive and dynamic process of storytelling, examined how talk-stories function differently for the literary characters and the writers, and highlighted the diversity of writers within the same ethnic group and their differing strategies in placing themselves in the larger social and literary context, as they tell histories and "her-stories" in their texts. It proves that storytelling and stories as art forms deserve their place in the American literary history as they provide varieties and possibilities and question monolithic and unitary notions. With the shaping of experience and viewpoints in "storied" forms, Kingston and Tan engage actively with their audience/readers and invite them to value, recall, and tell their own stories, and thus (re-)producing stories that will never end.
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