



How Femininity in Chinese and American Culture Confused and Established the Narrator's Identity in *The Woman Warrior*

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Hur kvinnlighet i kinesisk och amerikansk kultur förvirrade och etablerade berättarens identitet i *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract

This essay uses social constructionism and intersectionality to argue that the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* is experiencing feelings of identity confusion due to the different stereotypes of femininity that American and Chinese culture hold. The experiences are caused mainly by Chinese society, American society, her mother, and the talk-stories told in the book. She also establishes her identity through all four of these categories and comes to the conclusion that the concept of femininity is a stereotype and should not be adhered to as it furthers the patriarchal view of women.

Key words

The Woman Warrior, femininity, gender, social construct(ionism), intersectionality, American culture, Chinese culture, mother, talk-stories

It was over forty years ago that Maxine Hong Kingston published her book *The Woman Warrior*, but her revolutionary work is still talked about and debated today. It was an immediate critical success as its combination of myth, folktales, family history, and memoir writing started a new ambiguous way of writing (Britannica). *The Woman Warrior* is a book written from the perspective of a first generation Chinese American girl/woman who is trying to fit into the world around her, but she has trouble with it due to the contrasting beliefs of Chinese and American culture. This essay will argue that the narrator is experiencing identity confusion as a child/young teen due to the different concepts of femininity in American and Chinese culture; and that the narrator is able to establish her own identity through the experiences of identity confusion as an old teen/adult. There are four main reasons for these experiences; the Chinese society, American society, the narrator's mother, and the talk-stories told in the book, which will be the basis that will prove the argument in the essay.

The Woman Warrior's genre has been heatedly discussed due to its ambiguity. While some – Sau-Ling Cynthia Wong, Benjamin Tong, Jeffery Chan, and the most notorious critic of Kingston; Frank Chin (Jobs 81) – believe that the book is fictional, others believe that it is an autobiography/memoir. In the article “*The Woman Warrior: A Question of Genre*” Jenessa Jobs takes a different standpoint by saying that *The Woman Warrior* is both fictional and biographical. She seems to be leaning more towards the book being an autobiography, as she argues that the fictional parts of the story create a more accurate description of Kingston's personality and experiences rather than fact (Jobs 82). David Cheuk in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Forming and [sic!] Identity through Silence* points out that some things might be enhanced to show the absurdity of the reality and the values that the narrator is experiencing (3). In an interview Maxine Hong Kingston has revealed that it was her publisher who decided to call it a memoir, and that her unusual way of writing – using techniques of both fiction and nonfiction – have created a whole new genre that is called “creative nonfiction” (Cheung). One such writing style, is the talk-stories in *The Woman Warrior*. The term talk-story itself is a Chinese oral storytelling tradition that combines elements of reality and myth which parents use to teach their children life lessons.

Therefore, even if some of the story is fictional, it is used as a tool to show the reality of the narrator's youth and trouble in an explicit way to make sure no one is missing the point of the work. The reason why the genre matters so much in this essay is to show that the text is currently relevant. Even if *The Woman Warrior* was written in the 1970s, and is mostly taking place around the 1950s, the treatment, the value of women, the attitude to femininity, and gender roles are still relevant today, as even though feminists are fighting and trying to educate for equal treatment it remains an

issue. Many of the values and treatments in *The Woman Warrior* are still recognisable to young girls and women; therefore the question of genre is a universal issue, as it is demonstrating a reality of young girls/women today.

This essay will focus on femininity in relation to the narrator, what troubles it has caused, as well as how it shaped her identity. However, the definition of femininity is widely ranged, and changes depending on the person you ask. According to Merriam-Webster femininity is defined as “the quality or nature of the female sex” which is highly ambiguous and open for interpretation.

This essay will use Simone de Beauvoir thoughts of femininity, but mainly social constructionism in its interpretation of femininity. Simone de Beauvoir said, “One is not born a woman; she becomes one.” (Tyson 92), which means that the behaviour of women is not something that is inborn, but something that they are taught by society.

Social constructionism is a theory that includes Simone de Beauvoir's core belief of femininity being a product of society. It is a theory of how people view the world around them. The meaning, connotation, impression, assumption and belief made of a concept, a person, an idea, or an event by a society which is then accepted by the people of that society; which in turn decides how the people act towards these things based on a pre-learned conception (Boghossian 1). As Paul Boghossian in his article “What is social construction?” so effectively puts it, “This thing could not have existed had we not built it” (1). Femininity is then something that is socially constructed, as without society the concept of femininity would not exist.

Given this information, it can be established that femininity is a constructed stereotype of women as things that are appointed as feminine across culture changes. There are some qualities that seem to remain the same across cultures: submissive, nurturing, and emotional; though this is not applicable to all women; and men can possess these qualities too. However, we are socially taught to believe in these gendered characteristics which are treated as if they are the “truth,” and thereby we behave according to these gendered social rules. As people hold these beliefs of gender differences, people expect them and treat people according to these expectations. Due to this people conform into the stereotype, as a person's behaviour towards someone elicits a response that then conforms to the stereotype and thereby confirms the pre-existing notion of femininity and masculinity (Helgeson 98-101). Stereotypes are harmful and restricting, especially as internalised stereotypes restrict opportunities for both women and men (Helgeson 101).

In addition to this, Lise Eliot and Gina Rippon, both professors in neuroscience, refute the idea of brain differences based on gender (Lorenz; Fox). Eliot states, “anyone who goes searching for innate differences between the sexes won't find them” (Lorenz para. 2). Rippon affirms this by stating that while searching for sex differences in the brain she was unable to find anything that was

not deemed inconsequential, and came to the conclusion that there are no differences based on gender (Fox para. 6). The brain is changing long into adulthood, as it changes every time it learns a new skill, but also changes depending on the experiences the person has had, like education, job, hobby, and sports (Fox para. 9, 19). They both conclude that due to the gender-binary system the default assumption is that differences exist, and due to neurosexism the brain is still thought of in that kind of categorised system (Lorenz; Fox). But, their research has shown that female and male brains are not very different. The differences are mostly due to the brain's need for rules, for instance the categorised feminine and masculine, and as these gender rules exist, it is a certainty that those will be visible in a brain (Fox para. 11). That, however, is due to the experiences of individual brains – the socialisation and culture – and not something that is innate (Fox para. 12).

In correlation to this, studies have been done with how women and men experience emotion. Even though the participants orally reported a sex difference in the experience of emotion, as women reported feeling greater emotion than men (Helgeson 308). However, in a study where the participants used a device to show their emotions immediately during the day it was found that men and women experienced the same amount of emotions as well as the same kind of emotions (Helgeson 308). One reason for the verbal retelling of the experienced emotions is that they are recalling them in a way that is conforming to gender-role stereotypes (Helgeson 308). On the other hand, there is a gender difference in how women and men express emotion, but it depends on which kind. Girls expressed more positive emotions, while boys expressed more anger (Helgeson 309). Despite this, the results are unconvincing as it has been previously established that people are able to identify more emotions on a woman's face, as well as believing that women are more expressive because they are female (Helgeson 310). Women are associated with being emotional, and that their emotions are due to internal states. Meanwhile men's emotional state are associated with situational factors; that men are “having a bad day” (Helgeson 311), due to this, the belief that women are “emotional” is still standing (Helgeson 311). The stereotype that it is feminine to be emotional and masculine to be unemotional is, as shown in the previous study, untrue. The only reason for the association and the behaviour is due to the pre-constructed view of feminine and masculine that people are following due to socialisation and social pressure.

These discoveries refute the idea of biological essentialism (Tyson 81) and further the support of the theory of social constructionism. It further establishes the view that we are culturally programmed to view things as masculine and feminine, when in fact such a distinction does not really exist, and is something that has been and still is socialised into us.

Social constructionism is flawed in one aspect. It separates categories cleanly into neat groups, while reality does not quite work like that. A woman does not, for instance, face different

discriminations because she is Asian, and then separate discriminations because she is female; she is discriminated against for being an Asian woman. She is being discriminated for being both Asian and female, a nuance which Asian men and white women will not experience. This is why the term intersectionality is brought into this essay, to get an understanding of the narrator who is a Chinese American girl. She faces discrimination because she is a girl in the Chinese community; because she is a Chinese girl in American community; and she faces discrimination for being a Chinese American girl from both communities. Intersectionality brings in the nuances the narrator experiences by bringing different categories like race, culture, religion, socio-economic conditions, and gender into one interconnected map, which demonstrates a fuller picture. This essay will focus mainly on gender (femininity), culture and race to explain some of the narrator's identity confusion, as well as what she learned from those experiences.

In addition, Kingston's unique writing style needs to be mentioned. The reason the essay is able to observe how the narrator experiences both identity confusion, and the eventual establishment of her individual identity is due to the use of two different "I"s when writing. The first "I" is the narrator during childhood, and the second "I" is the narrator in adulthood that can be seen intermittently throughout the work, sometimes commenting on her past self, and sometimes bringing in thoughts and ideas during the talk-stories.

In inference, this essay believes that femininity is a social construct made by society; a stereotype that is so ingrained in people that they believe it as truth. Social constructionism is flawed in one aspect, which is how it neatly puts things into categories, which is not an accurate representation of reality. To be able to delve deeper into *The Woman Warrior*, knowledge of intersectionality is needed as it combines the categories of Chinese, American and girl into the intersection of Chinese American girl, who experiences different things than what she would do in these separate categories. This essay will explore the damaging results a deeply believed stereotype like this can have in the form of the narrator's confusion.

The first reason for why the narrator experiences identity confusion is due to the result of the Chinese society's view on women and what is feminine. In *The Woman Warrior*, the value of women and what is seen as feminine by Chinese culture is rooted in Confucianism. The Confucian view of women is that they are inferior to men (Zhan 275), and this is shown by Chinese women being viewed as being submissive, passive, and powerless (Zhan 269). The position of inferiority is only highlighted by the "three obediences and four virtues" that women have to follow (Sun 6). These rules state that women have to be obedient to their father, then the husband after marriage, and finally her son after the husband's death (Sun 6). The virtues state that a woman should know her position, that she should guard her words and not speak too much or bore others, she should be

dressed well and cleanly to please men, and she should not avoid her family duties (Sun 6). These seven rules show clearly the view that Chinese culture have of women, and in turn show what is regarded as feminine to the Chinese community: obedient, quiet, pleasing men, and performing housework (laundry, preparing food, taking care of children, etc.).

The people in *The Woman Warrior* that practice the Confucian view the most are the male characters in the book, like the narrator's father, great-uncle, and the other Chinese people living in Chinatown. Her great-uncle would scream "Maggot!" (227) at her, her sisters, and her cousins during dinner repeatedly and very visibly show that his attitude to women fits into the traditional Confucian view. The other Chinese people who live in Chinatown kept the Confucian view of women as when the narrator is walking outside with her family they would shake their heads at her and her sister and say, "One girl – and another girl" (56) which made her parents feel ashamed. The Chinese people also shows their Confucian belief by hinting to the narrator's parents that the girls were starting to get age-appropriate for marriage, when they were still in high school.

For the narrator, it is her father that is possibly the worst male character that keeps the belief of the Confucian view of female inferiority. The narrator explains that he once said: "Chinese smeared bad daughters-in-law with honey and tied them naked on top of ant nests, [...] A husband may kill a wife who disobeys him. Confucius said that." (229). Shuang Sun in her thesis *Interpreting Silence and Voice in Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Memoir of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* explains that if a man believes a thought like that, he is able to do whatever he wants, while a woman has to follow the "three obediences and four virtues" (47).

This view of female inferiority which her father, great-uncle, and other Chinese people promote show that they find girls and women worthless. The Chinese saying: "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls." (55) further validates this view, and the repetition of this sentence in *The Woman Warrior* shows how ingrained the belief of women's inferior value is.

The narrator's confusion of identity in response is partly due to the contrast of American values, and also due to the illogical unfairness she sees in this treatment. However, she does not seem to realise that is the cause right away, since in childhood she experiences identity confusion that shows through how she wants to be a boy and by exclaiming that she is not a bad girl.

The narrator throws a tantrum every time after her parents, or another Chinese person, would say: "Feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (55) at which point she would lie down on the floor and scream. When her mother then scolded her for crying and telling her she is a "bad girl" the narrator would only cry harder and scream, "I'm not a bad girl [...] I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl.' I might as well have said, 'I'm not a girl.'" (56). When the narrator refused to cook, and when she washed dishes she would sometimes break them, and at times like that the scolding of "bad girl"

would go differently: “Bad girl,’ my mother yelled, and sometime that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?” (57).

When the narrator says she might as well have said, “I’m not a bad girl” and that she is not a “bad girl” she is actually going between wanting to be a feminine girl but being an “unfeminine” girl, and wanting to be an “unfeminine” girl. She is experiencing identity confusion as she has yet to decide if she wants to conform to the Chinese gender roles, even if she disagrees with the view of women as inferior, and the wish to be a boy so that she would not need to experience the awful treatment Chinese culture has of women. She seems to be leaning more toward rejecting the Chinese gender roles as she does not agree nor does she behave in accordance to what the Chinese community is telling her to replicate. The sentence “Isn’t a bad girl almost a boy?” (57) is very telling as she does not desire to be a boy physically. The only reason she wants to be a boy is because the sexes are treated differently. According to Chinese culture girls are submissive, inferior, worthless, and unwanted, while boys are aggressive, superior, respected, and cherished. The reason the narrator wants to be a boy is simply because she wants to be treated as a human being, with respect, and as a being with her own opinions, choices and dreams, and not as a girl who has practically no choice in her future and will be married off at first opportunity to be a “wife and slave” (24).

The narrator has also shaped her identity through Chinese society. The narrator's most harrowing experience is watching the quiet girl in the same class as her. She never spoke, and it reminds the narrator of her own silent period, something most Chinese girls go through. The quietness of the girl distress the narrator and she confronts her in a school bathroom, and starts off by the narrator telling the quiet girl that she is going to make her talk. But, it soon develops into a more physical confrontation; “I gave her face a squeeze. ‘Talk.’” (209). Her demands are futile as the quiet girl remains silent despite the narrator squeezing her face and pulling her hair, which starts to frustrate the narrator; “Then I screamed, ‘Talk!’ I would scare the words out of her.” (212). When that did not cause any reaction either, she had a large outburst:

‘Why won’t you talk?’ I started to cry. [...] ‘I want to know why. And you’re going to tell me why. You don’t see I’m trying to help you out, do you? Do you want to be like this, dumb [...] your whole life? [...] What are you going to do for a living? Yeah, you’re going to have to work because you can’t be a housewife. Somebody has to marry you before you can be a housewife. 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. [...] Nobody’s going to notice you. And you talk for interviews, speak right up in front of the boss. Don’t you know that? You’re so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?’

Sniffing and snorting, I couldn't stop crying and talking at the same time. [...] It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person. 'I'm doing this for your own good,' I said. 'Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you. Talk. Please talk.' I don't understand why you won't say just one word,' I cried, clenching my teeth. [...] 'Look. I'll give you something if you talk. I'll give you my pencil box. I'll buy you some candy. OK? What do you want? Tell me. Just say it, and I'll give it to you. Just say, "Yes," or, "OK," or, "Baby Ruth."' But she didn't want anything. (214-215)

The quiet girl is the archetype of the Chinese feminine for the narrator, which can be seen in her descriptions of the quiet girl during the confrontation, like this one; "She was so neat. Her neatness bothered me. I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown-paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes [...]. I hated pastels; I would wear black always." (210). The reason for her detestation is that the quiet girl represents everything that the narrator has been struggling with, the concept of femininity, the value of women, and female victimisation. As Sun explains: "silence signifies female victimisation", and silence, a feminine trait, signifies the oppression of women both in Chinese and in American culture (8).

In comparison, voice stands for speaking up, demanding women's rights, and the refusal to be looked down on (Sun 8), which is why the narrator is so fixated on making the quiet girl speak. The narrator is so distressed by the notion of the silent girl, as she believes the girl would be doomed to suffer forever if she is unable to state and tell who she is and what she wants, and consequently will fall victim to the silence, and female oppression. This concept is particularly terrifying to the narrator due to the talk-story of No Name Woman that she had heard from her mother. That story in particular shows the victimisation of women and their silence, and the narrator could not stand by to see this happening to someone, being forgotten and ostracised by society because they could not express themselves. This may be the reason for the narrator's insistence during the ordeal, as there are several pages of her trying to force, beg, and bribe the quiet girl to speak; a desperate attempt that failed as the quiet girl never said a word.

Additionally, the narrator seems to go through at least three of the five stages of grief established by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross; anger, bargaining, and depression. Not everyone will feel all five steps however, and the order of them can differ from person to person (Lim 12). It is a natural response to loss which can be either physical or abstract (Lim 11). Abstract loss can be linked to an individual's facets of social interactions (Lim 11), which is what the narrator is experiencing. She goes through anger, bargaining, and depression in the confrontation with the quiet girl. The first is anger as she lashes out physically and screams at the girl; the second is bargaining as she says she will get the

girl some paper to clean her face, and that she will let her go if she just says one word; the third is depression, were the narrator experiences a feeling of hopelessness, and frustration which is shown through her desperate rant and the constant crying during the tirade (Lim 12). The grief stages are caused by the narrator coming face to face with her fear, and loss of hope as she realises that she is unable to change anything about the pre-established positions and behaviours of men and women, and she is afraid of having to conform to the established feminine rules.

The confrontation of the quiet girl causes her confusion due to the previous knowledge she has gathered from her parents, and from the Chinese society, though that is not the focus of this encounter. The narrator experiences a part of her identity forming due to the confrontation of what had bothered her so much about the Chinese values and behaviour, which has taken the physical shape of the quiet girl. When confronted with how she herself would look if she conformed to the beliefs, and if she would take on the same feminine qualities that the quiet girl possesses, which is something her parents and society are trying to force her to comply to, she lashes out at the girl as she is terrified of suffering the same fate. She is projecting towards the girl and is trying to make her talk so that the girl will not remain in the feminine niche and be unable to escape the tragic fate of victimhood the narrator is expecting her to have when she grows up if she were to adhere to the silence.

The second reason for why the narrator is experiencing identity confusion is due to what is considered feminine in American society. First, it should be pointed out that both Chinese and American culture share the core beliefs of women's place in society. Both Chinese and American culture instils the belief that women are inferior and less competent, and believe in the gender roles of men and women; that men work while women take care of the household (Helgesson 81; Sun 6). In *The Woman Warrior* the American society is more subtle with these beliefs as they are not said explicitly in comparison to the Chinese community.

The narrator is unable to notice the feminine American stereotypes as clearly as she faces the more explicit way the Chinese express them more frequently. This is the reason why the narrator, in the beginning, wishes to be more American feminine. She tries to achieve this in different ways, such as making her voice quieter to fit the American feminine, as well as fitting into the American beauty standard by using make up and taping her eyelids.

The narrator experiences some difficulties with adjusting between the Chinese feminine way of speaking and the American feminine way of speaking:

Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the

Americans. [...] We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak up even in Chinese school. (204)

The silence, and the whispered voices that the narrator shows is an indication of the confusion of identity she is feeling as she is “too quiet” for the American feminine, but her normal voice would be too loud for American school and she would then be unable to fit inside the American feminine stereotype. She and the other Chinese girls do manage to establish an American feminine way to speak, but before they were able to do that their response is fear of talking at school:

It was when I found out that I had to talk that school became a misery, that silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak. I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. 'Louder,' said the teacher, who scared the voice away again. The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl. (197)

As the narrator observes she is not the only one that is affected by this but the other Chinese girls are as well. The Chinese boys are not experiencing this – as they are excluded in the quote – since they do not have to face the confusion of having two very opposite notions of what the correct voice is. The Chinese boys' voices fit into the American masculine voices, which is louder than the American feminine voices, and are able to fit better into the American masculine stereotype.

In “An Analysis of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*” Cynthia Baiqing Zhang states that the narrator learned what American femininity was mainly through the teachers at American school, who, while praising the narrator for her excellent grades and encouraging her to go to college, also isolated her and the other Chinese girls due to their quietness (22). One instance of this is when her teacher excludes them from being part of a play:

When my second-grade class did a play, the whole class went to the auditorium except the Chinese girls. The teacher, lovely and Hawaiian should have understood about us, but instead left us behind in the classroom. Our voices were too soft or nonexistent, and our parents never signed the permission slips anyway. (198)

This exclusion by the teachers – though probably not their intention – serves as a punishment for the girls for being too quiet; and they are thereby being punished for not fitting into the American feminine stereotype. It is worth noting once more that the Chinese boys are not left in the classroom as they are able to fit inside the American masculine stereotype better and are thereby able to

participate in the play. This exclusion is only due to the intersection of being a Chinese girl, a discrimination which they alone face.

As seen above, the narrator is trying to fit inside the more visible part of the American feminine, the outer appearance of femininity like beauty standards and image, like her voice. However, she does not conform to the core beliefs of femininity that are mentioned above. To be American feminine a woman is supposed to be a housewife; taking care of cooking, cleaning doing laundry and raising the children (Lamb). This American ideal of femininity, is very close to the Chinese one, and the narrator rejects both of them. We can see this in the way that she refuses to do chores: “I refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two.” (57), and how she, as a child, refuses to marry anyone, which goes against the 1950s certainty of marriage, which questioned more “when” and “with whom” a person would marry than marriage itself (Lamb 10).

The narrator encounters the considered certainty of marriage after her parents bring home potential suitors to marry her off to when she is in high school. Her response to this is doing everything she can to chase the suitors away, which is her behaving in the most “unfeminine” way possible, either by how she dresses or through displaying horrible habits; since no one would listen to her if she said that she did not want to see any suitors. She uses the tactic of “unfemininity” to repel the suitors, since “feminine” is something men desire a woman to be, as it shows their submission, and what women desire to imitate to be attractive. She is making herself unattractive by doing everything she should not do. It is successful as the suitors stop coming, and the narrator is never married off.

This rejection becomes a part of her identity as we can observe her doing the same in adulthood: “Even now, unless I'm happy, I burn the food when I cook. I do not feed people. I let the dirty dishes rot. I eat at other people's tables but won't invite them to mine, where the dishes are rotting.”(58) She is rejecting the gender role forced on her, and the “nurturing” nature that women are supposed to have. The narrator is rejecting the idea of women being inferior and only capable of doing housework by refusing to do household chores, however, she is following the American feminine rules to fit into the American society more, and maybe experience less discrimination by doing that. If Zhang is correct however, American women have a hierarchy amongst themselves that is based on race/ethnicity, which would make the narrator's efforts irrelevant (11).

The narrator mentions marriage once in the adult sense of “I”, and it shows her independence, wishes and, loneliness:

No husband of mine will say, 'I could have been a drummer, but I had to think about the wife and kids. You know how it is.' Nobody supports me at the expense of his own adventure. Then I get

bitter: no one supports me; I am not loved enough to be supported. (58)

The narrator is rejecting what women during the 1950s – and 1960s – believed to be “the greatest feminine accomplishment, a perfect family, and a perfect house” as she does not believe in marriage for marriage's sake (Lamb 35). The only way she would marry anyone would be with someone that would love, respect, and support her. She would never marry someone who says that she has robbed him of anything, or made him unable to do something that he wanted. If these conditions are not met, she would rather be alone. The bitterness she feels while expressing this is due to her need of having someone supporting her, as she has not felt that support through childhood, or adulthood.

The narrator comes to a more agreeable conclusion of how to view both Chinese and American femininity when she goes to college in the 1960s, where she demonstrated and joined marches to “change the world” (57). At university she is introduced to Western feminism, and that together with the feminist advances during the sixties – “American Women”, the Equal Pay Act, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1966 National Organisation for Women (Lamb 50-52) – causes the narrator to adopt a more feminist view and ideology which she uses to rebel against both the Chinese and American patriarchal society (Sun 28). For the narrator it explains her internal struggle of the two contrasting feminine stereotypes she has been experiencing since childhood.

The third reason for why the narrator experiences identity confusion is due to the influence of her mother, who also plays a role in shaping the narrator's identity. The narrator grows up with her mother's lessons and talk-stories about femininity and what it means to be a woman. Her lessons regard Chinese femininity and the inferior position of women, but Brave Orchid contradicts herself as she does not necessarily follow these lessons herself.

Cynthia Baiqing Zhang explains this by the social environment that Brave Orchid has found herself in. In China, there had been a movement called the “May 4th Movement” that respected women's rights and encouraged women to get an education and a job (Zhang 18). This led to Brave Orchid's own success as a doctor, as she invested the money her husband had sent her on an education (Zhang 18). But, things changed when she moved to the U.S. as it exercised a very rigid racial segregation, which made Brave Orchid regress to the gender roles she knew from China when it was still ruled by an emperor (Zhang 18-19). This explains why Brave Orchid is reinforcing gender roles on her children, and why her expectations of her daughters are not so high (Zhang 18-19).

The narrator's mother causes her confusion as she says things to her that are in accordance with the traditional Confucian view; e.g. “There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than

girls.” (55), that she would grow up to be a “wife and slave” (24), and how pre-marital sex, or adultery is the woman's fault which would be punished, and that she has to follow the orders of her husband. Brave Orchid is trying to make the narrator act Chinese feminine; submissive, silent, obedient, and doing the housework and raising children. She is trying to inscribe the “three obediences and four virtues” into her daughter.

On the other hand, Brave Orchid is not following these rules herself. After she told the narrator the talk-story of No Name Woman she says this:

Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. 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. (5)

It causes confusion for the narrator as her mother is telling her that having sex outside of marriage would shame her so much that she might have to commit suicide to escape the shame and the ostracising the Chinese community will put her through. But, before that, she warns the narrator against telling her father as he has forbidden her to speak about the estranged aunt, but does so anyway. This goes against the second rule of obedience, as she tells her daughter a prohibited story.

Brave Orchid also has an education in medicine which challenges the idea that ignorance is a virtue for women (Sun 56) and by educating herself she is showing her daughter that she does not have to be Chinese feminine in order to be successful at life. This image is crushed a bit as after Brave Orchid is moved to the U.S. she leaves her desired life behind in order to obey her husband and fulfil her feminine role as a housewife (Cheuk 17). In this particular instance Brave Orchid represents the archetype of Chinese feminine; a woman should “always be ready, both hands and feet to serve her man” (Cheuk 17). The narrator decides from this, and from her teacher's encouragement, that she is going to go to college, but that she will not leave the life of an independent woman for marriage, or by obeying her husband's wishes.

Brave Orchid leaves an impression of being strong and fearless, which goes against the Chinese feminine ideal. She is brave during the encounter with the Sitting Ghost, which, according to Zoila Clark in her essay “Maxine Hong Kingston, Ghostbuster Feminist”, symbolises patriarchal oppression that dominated the university she studied at (55-56). Brave Orchid was fighting against the patriarchal belief that women are not capable. By conquering this symbol, Brave Orchid proves to the narrator that women are able to defeat the feminine stereotypes, if they just have the courage to persist in the endeavour (Clark 55). The defeat further proves to the narrator the absurdity of the Confucian beliefs, and she does not want to adhere to them as her mother clearly is not doing so

either. The narrator comments on her mother's courage when she went to confront the Sitting Ghost:

My mother may have been afraid, but she would be a dragoness [...]. She could make herself not weak. During danger she fanned out her dragon claws and riffled her red sequin scales and unfolded her coiling green stripes. Danger was a good time for showing off. Like the dragons living in temple eaves, my mother looked down on plain people who were lonely and afraid. (79)

Her mother got the name Brave Orchid after prevailing against the Sitting Ghost, which discloses her strong will, fearless attitude, and her personality (Sun 53). And as can be seen here, this is what the narrator most admires in her mother: her courage and strength. It is something she herself is trying to acquire throughout her childhood and teenage years.

In high school, the narrator has a perverse stalker that watches her every day at the laundromat which her parents ignore without caution. Due to this the narrator has an intense outburst at her mother during dinner:

If I see him one more time, I'm going away. I'm going away anyway. [...] I may be ugly and clumsy but one thing I am not. I'm not retarded. There's nothing wrong with my brain. [...] I'm smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I've already applied. [...] Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I'm not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here. I can't stand living here any more. [...] You tried to cut off my tongue but it didn't work. (240)

David Cheuk explains that the narrator has come to the conclusion that her mother is her biggest obstacle in life and that her mother is the one that has kept her from finding her own identity in *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: Forming and [sic!] Identity through Silence* (15). This outburst shows that the narrator is forming her own individual self; her motivation for this comes from her mother, even though she might not realise it. It is an established fact that children learn by mimicking their parents' behaviour (Nauert), more so than doing the things parents are telling them to do. Here, the narrator is establishing her independence and individual self through imitating her mother's actions and personality, by finally having acquired the courage she has admired her mother for. The narrator is clearly following Brave Orchid's actions when facing the Sitting Ghost (the patriarchal oppression) by also questioning the feminine stereotype; instead of following Brave Orchid's lessons of Chinese femininity which she herself does not abide. This also explains why the narrator wants to be more like how her mother actually is: independent, strong, and hard-working as that is what she observes her mother to be.

The last reason for the narrator's identity confusion and identity establishment is caused by the talk-stories in *The Woman Warrior*. This might be the most important one in terms of identity formation as we see her take lessons as well as give her own lessons through them.

In “Controversial Enactments of Gender-Crossing in Maxine Hong Kingston's Writings” Sihem Arfaoui states that the narrator in *The Woman Warrior* cross over from femininity into masculinity as he argues that she possesses traditionally masculine characteristics. He puts specific emphasis on the talk-story of Fa Mu Lan as he believes it shows the narrator's gender disruption, as well as her jealousy of men's power (Arfaoui 92). Arfaoui explains this by how some of her actions cross into the “masculine realm” (93) in the chapter “White Tigers”, with special focus on the story of Fa Mu Lan. For example, when the narrator is fired by her racist boss she is mimicking the character of Fa Mu Lan's vindication; Arfaoui regards it as a form of crossing over from the feminine sphere into the masculine one. He further states that Kingston is writing to dismantle the thinking that imposes the superiority of masculinity over femininity, which is easy to observe as correct; however, he concludes that – even though disputable – the narrator wishes to achieve masculinity.

Even though Arfaoui's essay has some fair points, as it shows the narrator's struggle with identity and states that the narrator is rejecting gender discrimination; the issue that remains is how Arfaoui's essay states that the narrator is rejecting gender discrimination by moving into the “masculine realm” (Arfaoui 93). It does not negate the belief of masculinity and femininity as it still puts the narrator in those categories, only that she rejects the system by going back and forth in-between them. In this way, the essay is tilting its focus slightly from the real issue. Femininity and masculinity are deeply ingrained stereotypes and it seems counterproductive to put the narrator in either one or the other category.

The counterproductive nature of categorising people by femininity and masculinity can be shown clearly through the narrator herself, Brave Orchid, and Moon Orchid in the talk stories told in the book. With Brave Orchid we can observe how categorising qualities in that way is useless by simply reading the talk-story in the chapter “Shaman”.

What is more important than showing how the narrator moves between the stereotypes of “masculinity” and “femininity” is not how she crosses over between them but how these narrow categories confused, and also shaped her identity through the messages she learned from them. In the story of Fa Mu Lan we can see the confusion that the narrator experiences through American femininity and Chinese femininity as she is trying to blend them together into something comprehensible, or something that can be used side by side depending on the occasion.

One of the Chinese “feminine” qualities that the narrator/Fa Mu Lan had to learn was how to be quiet, which is a lesson that her mother is trying to enforce on her to conform to traditional Chinese

gender roles. However at this point in time – for the narrator, as the story of Fa Mu Lan is a childhood daydream/talk-story she experiences – being quiet is seen as something good, as she is able to view a part of the world she had not been able to perceive before. This is also most likely due to the fact that the narrator was quiet in class and needed security in the belief that being quiet was all right. However, as later seen in the other talk-stories she learns the lesson of what happens if women remain quiet.

Cheuk states that the narrator's way of using silence as well as obedience are reinforcing the values that Brave Orchid wants her to possess (16). This is shown through the lesson of being quiet since she was happy when she was being married to a boy even though she was not physically present, and how the narrator/Fa Mu Lan pledged her obedience to her husband and her husband's family when the war was over. These are the things that the narrator as a child is not refuting.

However, there are sections in the talk-story of Fa Mu Lan where the reader can clearly distinguish the confusion the narrator is feeling. One example is when the narrator/Fa Mu Lan first meets her teachers:

'Have you eaten rice today, little girl?' they greeted me.

'Yes, I have,' I said out of politeness. 'Thank you.'

('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.')

Although it cannot be certain that this Chinese politeness is due to her being female, we can safely consider politeness to be feminine in Chinese culture as two of the Confucian rules for women are to be obedient and pleasant, which politeness often times is. In this section, the narrator is once again reinforcing the values that her mother wishes her to possess by “acting out” the politeness in the talk-story, but the section in parentheses shows her true feelings on the matter. She is participating in it due to her mother's expectations, but at the same time she is confounded by why she had to lie to be polite, especially as in the American culture that is not needed, and you can outright say if you are hungry.

Another example is when the narrator/Fa Mu Lan comes face to face with an enemy:

Then – heaven help him – he tried to be charming, to appeal to me man to man. 'Oh, come now. Everyone takes the girls when he can. The families are glad to be rid of them. “Girls are maggots in the rice.” “It is more profitable to raise geese than daughters.”’ He quoted to me the sayings I hated.
(52)

It is very telling that it is her enemy telling her these proverbs when in reality it has been her parents and other Chinese people saying them to her. It shows her confusion with identity once more as she is both embracing some of the Chinese culture's view of femininity, such as silence – at least at the time – as well as rejecting them in this talk-story. In this case the narrator is clearly rejecting the Chinese community's inferior value of women by projecting them onto the enemy, and by defeating the enemy she also defeats this view that she opposes. Her confusion of this is also due to how unfair it is, and how hurt she is by the Chinese people, but mostly by her parents, for using such words and sayings colloquially. In both the citations above we can see that the confusion over these aspects is already starting to form the narrator's identity by questioning what it really means and why they are there, as is seen here, “Perhaps women were once so dangerous that they had to have their feet bound.” (23).

The talk-story of Fa Mu Lan does, however, have American elements in it too. The most relevant to this essay is the image of the husband. He is the narrator/Fa Mu Lan's childhood friend turned childhood sweetheart, who were separated until they are finally reunited as husband and wife at the camp of the troops that she is leading. This goes with the “American dream” of men and women finding love in “the girl/boy next door” and then spending their life together happily. The concept of the narrator/Fa Mu Lan's husband is built on this concept, and thereby shows the more American femininity in the story as this was something that was supposed to be desired by women at the time.

The talk-story of Fa Mu Lan is, as Moira Gatens in her essay “Let's Talk Story: Gender and the Narrative Self” so well puts it, “not the genuine Fa Mu Lan anymore, but the new Chinese American Fa Mu Lan”(64), this also corresponds with the topic of femininity as we can see a combination of both Chinese and American femininity in the talk-story. There is not much in this story that the narrator has shaped her identity through, it mostly has to do with her identity confusion.

The first talk-story introduced is about the narrator's unknown aunt that she calls No Name Woman as her father and her father's family denies her existence. This story also deals with the expectations of her mother as well as the Chinese society, specifically to be obedient and quiet. Even though this talk-story is told to the narrator by her mother, the narrator builds on the talk-story by imagining No Name Woman's actions which will also take a part in this analysis.

The confusion the narrator experiences in the talk-story of No Name Woman can mostly be seen through the narrator's continuation of the talk-story through the imaginary reasons before pregnancy, and during the suicide and filicide. The narrator is questioning the reasoning behind the shunning, ostracising and punishment the aunt suffered through by the villagers. The village had

blamed the pregnancy on No Name Woman, and she was the only one that was punished for it. The narrator argues that the aunt firstly had not seen her husband – who had gone to America – for several years, and thereby should not be held accountable for falling in love with someone when she cannot even remember her husband's face. The aunt might have been threatened into being a man's "secret evil" (7) and due to the obedience rule, the aunt would have no choice but to follow his orders. The aunt may also have been a victim of rape by a family member. Going by these "reasons" the woman should not have been blamed as she had been, as then she would have been blameless according to the "three obediences and four virtues" (Sun 6).

Cheuk points out that No Name Woman being unable to even remember her husband's face shows the brevity of the relationship, and wondering if it even qualifies as a relationship anymore (7). He also says that the narrator questions the validity of the relationship due to this and wonders if No Name Woman was just moving on with her life, and if so, if it should even be considered infidelity (Cheuk 7). Cheuk also considers the death of No Name Woman and her baby. If she had committed suicide and filicide which is the right female reaction according to Chinese customs, she would have been a typical Chinese female, obedient, and silent by not telling the father's name, and by not abandoning the baby to its fate (Cheuk 8-9). However, if No Name Woman killed herself and her baby out of spite by plugging up the drinking well she would not be as obedient as had been portrayed and her last act is instead taking a – though silent – stand against the patriarchic misogyny that defines the Chinese culture (Cheuk 8-9).

The confusion the narrator is experiencing by imagining these scenarios is by comparing how a Chinese girl should behave to how she is treated. In all the above scenarios – except the one where No Name Woman actually fell in love – the aunt would have done nothing wrong according to female Chinese behaviour and would have followed the rules set for them. However, even by doing everything right she is still punished. The narrator is confused by how this injustice is justified as something normal that could happen, but out of fear of the consequences she follows the rule of silence for twenty years, but it does spark the start of forming her identity.

What the narrator's mother wanted her to take from the story and what message the narrator in the end received is very different from the intention. The first thing her mother does is warn her not to tell anyone about this, and the last thing she says is to be careful as the narrator has started to menstruate and the things that happened to her aunt could happen to her too. This shows clearly what her mother wanted the narrator to take from the story: obedience, silence, and fear of the same fate. And as Gatens puts it, it links the narrator's lived experience of "menstruation, sexuality, and fertility with risk, shame, death, and erasure" (46). It shows that her mother intended the message to be a cautionary one that would instil fear in the narrator and in turn make her follow the rules of

“three obediences and four virtues” (Sun 6) that are expected of women.

The narrator follows the rule of never talking about No Name Woman for twenty years, but the narrator comes to a realisation, “But there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have.” (18). This part shows clearly what message she decided to take from the talk-story instead, especially when put together with her own imaginings of the story as well as this part: “My aunt haunts me – her ghost drawn to me now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her” (19). The narrator decides that she is no longer participating in her aunt's punishment of erasure and instead is willing to show her story to the world to, as Cheuk puts it, “signif[y] the absurdity of it all” (7) and show how the Chinese's strict beliefs still afflict the aunt after her death. The narrator decides to build a more feminist identity from this talk-story instead of following the misogynist Chinese culture and the oppression of women.

The narrator learns the same lesson from the talk-story of Moon Orchid, her mother's sister who moved to the U.S. from China to reunite with her husband as per Brave Orchid's persistence. Moon Orchid seems to embody what is typical for a feminine Chinese woman; silent, obedient, polite, and pleasant. Brave Orchid talks her sister into taking her place as her husband's first wife. Moon Orchid reasons that her husband might not want to see her as he never sent for her from China – which, though she wished for it, she never uttered – and then feels foolish about confronting him. They do anyway, but Moon Orchid is unable to say a single word and her husband does not even recognise her. He has also found a new wife, who is better suited for the American life as Moon Orchid's husband says to Moon Orchid, “It's a mistake for you to be here. You can't belong. You don't have the hardness for this country. I have a new life” (180). This rejection as well as the new American culture and life turn Moon Orchid insane.

It is an eerie parallel to the story of No Name Woman as we can see here that according to Chinese tradition of femininity and female gender roles Moon Orchid has done nothing wrong. Even if No Name Woman had done something wrong according to Chinese culture, then in this case Moon Orchid's husband has committed the same crimes as No Name Woman, although, his behaviour is not judged due to the fact that he is a man. Moon Orchid continues to follow the female gender role of femininity by not saying anything about what happened. Her feelings for the whole thing is kept inside and that with the combination of her dependency causes her to turn insane. As Cheuk explains, by comparing these talk-stories to each other the narrator is commenting on the biases that exist in societal values, as Moon Orchid's husband is not condemned for his actions, nor does he or his family suffer any disgrace by his actions (11).

Through both the story of No Name Woman and of Moon Orchid the narrator has become aware of that she must bring her fate into her own control to be able to live freely as her own individual

self, as the stories of her two aunts show that women are doomed to be victims if they are dependent on others (Sun 46). The tragedies of their stories is due to their blind obedience, they are unable to express themselves at all, which is rooted in the sexism and misogyny in Chinese culture (Sun 46).

The last talk-story that will be analysed is the very last talk-story in *The Woman Warrior*. It is fitting that this one, more than any other, shows the narrator's identity, with no confusion in sight, as it is something that has remained in the past. It is a reconciliation between the two cultures that created her own individual self.

Before the talk-story starts, the narrator says, "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. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." (245). Cheuk explains by saying this, the narrator no longer fears her mother's talk-stories (17). The talk-stories are now used as a form of self expression, and they no longer silences her as it did as a child (Cheuk 17). We can see that the narrator has come to terms with her identity by stating this as, for a while, the narrator in childhood briefly portrayed her mother as the villain so she would be able to let out her feelings of confusion and injustice against someone. The reconciliation we partake in between Brave Orchid and the narrator also shows that she has established her own identity and values, and left the confusion behind her in the past.

However, the readers are able to see her past struggle of confusion, and her identity formation through the talk-story of Ts'ai Yen. The beginning is of her mother and her family going to the theatre, which represents the narrator's Chinese background and upbringing. It is, however, when the woman Ts'ai Yen enters the story that we are able to see the clear similarities between the narrator and the talk-story's protagonist.

Ts'ai Yen was Chinese but is captured by barbarians, which represents the narrator's Chinese heritage as well as the American culture she is living in. It is a struggle to fit in, for them both, and like Ts'ai Yen fights with her enemies, the narrator fightst to be able to use her words properly to be able to speak about her thoughts, the injustices, racism, etcetera. The narrator's outburst at her mother for the unfairness she felt as something between Chinese and American, and of the boy that sat in the laundromat, is shown after the part where the barbarians have played their flutes. Ts'ai Yen's answer of a song partly in Chinese, and partly in the barbarians' language, but still being recognisable as sadness and anger with the different cultures, lostness, and unfairness (regarding femininity or anything else for the narrator), this song represents the narrator's own thoughts when she is screaming at her mother at the dinner table. And, as Sun states, just like Ts'ai Yen uses poetry as a weapon to fight against the barbarians the narrator is using words to fight against the patriarchal society and discrimination (61).

The last sentences of the talk-story, as well as the last lines of the book shows the narrator's

conciliation of both Chinese and American culture:

She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is 'Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,' a song that Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well.

This part shows that the narrator's identity has taken a solid form, which is no longer suffering from confusion. For the narrator, a part of finding her identity had to do with reconciling the differences between the different cultures and finding a middle ground for the cultures to exist peacefully (Cheuk 18). This citation also shows how instead of telling the stories in the same way her mother has, and thereby reinforcing the coercion of women in inferior roles, the narrator twists them to be more empowering of women (Cheuk 19); that the narrator's ability to "improvise, to innovate, to re-invent, the stories" she is what claims her own independence and has forged her own identity (Gatens 48).

To conclude, this essay considers femininity to be a social construct which the narrator is trying to understand. However, she is experiencing confusion concerning the different concepts of femininity due to the contrasting stereotypes of American femininity and Chinese femininity. She rejects most of the Chinese femininity as the Chinese society is more vocal about the view of female inferiority and thereby favours the American stereotype. She is unable to feel at ease with the feminine concept however until she realises that the whole concept of femininity is nonsensical, and to remove herself from the categories of femininity altogether.

The narrator also experiences confusion through her mother whose actions contradicts her lessons, as well as the talk-stories told in *The Woman Warrior*, that show the absurdity of the gender categories and their consequences. She however comes to the same conclusion there in the establishing of her identity when she decides to remove herself from the stereotypes and instead focus on what she feels, and wishes out of life.

The limitations of this essay establish that femininity is only analysed regarding the story *The Woman Warrior* and does not bring the author's life into it. This is due to the fact that the story is very subjective as established by Kingston herself through the writing in *The Woman Warrior* as she admits that she is not able to distinguish what is Chinese tradition, and what is her own family's situation, and what is American influence. Therefore, the book, which most likely have some truths in it, is still an interpretation of Kingston's own childhood and experiences and cannot be believed to cover the same experiences as all Chinese-Americans which is why this essay has only analysed the narrator's own experiences in the book and not that of the author.

If this essay had more pages, it would continue the analysis of the talk-stories of Moon Orchid and Brave Orchid as both of them could be analysed more; as well as further the research on this topic to also focus more on the narrator's relationship of femininity and her mother, as well as how femininity has caused her problems, and further establishing her identity when she entered the work force. It is suggested that further research on this specific topic would start there, and if the time and space is unlimited to further the analysis of what has already been argued for in this essay.

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