



## Ts'ai Yan: A Sentimental But Melodious Song

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### Abstract

By rewriting the story of Ts'ai Yan at the end of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston displays to the mainstream society a unique female image that is far different from the traditional one in Chinese history. This writing is to analyse the hybridity of the figure of Ts'ai and to probe into the rationality as well as the practical significance of rewriting the story.

**Key words:** Ts'ai Yan; Hybridity; Rationality; Rewriting

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### INTRODUCTION

*The Woman Warrior* was published as an autobiography novel in 1976, which follows author Maxine Hong Kingston's memories of growing up as a child of Chinese immigrants in San Francisco. It portrays how a second-generation Chinese-American girl has struggled to establish her cultural identity in "between worlds" (in Amy Ling's terms). In this novel, the writer transplants and rewrites a lot of Chinese myths, traditional customs and historical stories. Since its publication in 1976, *The Woman Warrior* has maintained both popularity and controversy. Much of the debate concerns issues dealing with "autobiographical accuracy, cultural authenticity, and ethnic representativeness", while the critical center of the battle is whether or not Kingston offers a faithful

representation of Chinese culture and of Chinese-Americans (Lim, 2009). In the final part of "*A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe*," Kingston retells the story of Ts'ai Yan, a poetess born in A. D. 175, to end the novel. After captured by the Southern Hsiung-nu barbarians, she brings her songs back from the savage lands and passes down "*Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe*", a song that "Chinese sing to their own instruments"(1989, p.209). This is a fitting conclusion to a text in which Kingston combines different worlds and cultures and creates a harmony of her own. However, this Ts'ai Yan as depicted in her work is thousands of miles away from that traditional figure in Chinese history. This writing is to analyze how and why Kingston has rewritten the story of Ts'ai Yan, as well as its practical significance.

### 1. HYBRIDITY IN THE STORY OF TS'AI YAN

It is recorded in *Yuefu Poetry* (2010)—compiled by Guo Maoqing of Song Dynasty—that Ts'ai Yan was the daughter of Ts'ai Yong, a well established scholar of Eastern Han Dynasty. She was wed to Wei Zhongdao in 192 but her husband died shortly after their marriage and they did not have any children. Between 194 and 195, when China entered a period of chaos, southern Hsiung-nu nomads intruded into the Han Dynasty's territory. Ts'ai Yan was captured by them and taken back as a prisoner to the northern lands. During her captivity, she became one of the wives of the Hsiung-nu chieftain (the "Wise Prince of the Left") and bore him two sons. 12 years later, the warlord Cao Cao, who had become the *de facto* head of government in China, paid a heavy ransom in the name of Ts'ai's father. Ts'ai was released and she returned to her homeland but left her children behind in Hsiung-nu territory. The reason Cao Cao wanted her back was that she was the only one remaining of her clan and he needed her to placate the spirits of her ancestors. After being back

from Hsiung-nu, Ts'ai Yan yearned for her children left in Hsiung-nu territory and was always thinking of her hard days there, so she wrote two poems named *Poem of Sorrow and Anger* to express her thoughts and feelings. Her poems were noted for their sorrowful tone, parallel to her hard life. The famous guqin piece *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* is traditionally attributed to her, although the authorship is a perennial issue for scholarly debate.

While in Kinston's writing, the story has displayed a completely different sentimental tone:

Ts'ai Yan, a poetess born in A.D. 175. She was the daughter of Ts'ai Yung, the scholar famous for his library. When she was twenty years old, she was captured by a chieftain during a raid by the Southern Hsiung-nu. . . . . During her twelve-year stay with the barbarians, she had two children. Her children did not speak Chinese.

Out of Ts'ai Yan's tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman's voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts'ai Yan sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along.

After twelve years among the Southern Hsiung-nu, Ts'ai Yan was ransomed and married to Tung Ssu so that her father would have Han descendants. 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. (1989, pp.207-209)

Comparing with Ts'ai Yan's life record in Chinese historical books, we can see Kinston's rewriting of the story has misrepresented some historical facts. The figure in *The Woman Warrior* is no longer the traditional one. It has been rewritten in three aspects:

To begin with, Kinston narrates her captive experience with a romantic tone. From the descriptions in *Yuefu Poetry* and *Poems of Sorrow and Anger*, we can see and imagine her miserable and negative experiences in southern Hsiung-nu. Having suffered from enough, she even thought of committing suicide to end her miserable fate. According to recorded documents, during her 12 years in Hsiung-nu, there is nothing pleasant at all, except for her personal sufferings and painful departure with her children. While in Kinston's writing, this Ts'ai Yan seems to have naturally accepted the barbarian chieftain's love, completely different from the heartbroken one in *Poems of Sorrow and Anger*. "He made her sit behind him when the tribe rode she had to put her arms around his waist to keep from falling off the horse. After she became pregnant, he captured a mare as his gift to her" (1989, p.208). The new image presents to readers a picture full of romance. The woman that was ravaged and bullied has disappeared, while a liberated American-like young woman emerges, who has forgotten national hatred and bravely seeking for love.

Besides, in *The Woman Warrior*, Kinston portrays Ts'ai Yan as a Warrior who dared to kill all the enemies she met. "She cut down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat" (1989, p.208). This description not only shows that she has excellent fighting skills, but indicates her submission to the barbarians. In Chinese history, Ts'ai Yan was a talented poetess and musician, knowing nothing about Martial Arts, let alone fighting on the battlefields. So Kinston's random rewriting of Ts'ai Yan created a brand new feminine image in the western culture and shows great hybridity.

At last, Kinston made some creative rewriting on the process of Ts'ai Yan composing *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute*, as well as its influence on the barbarians and her children. According to the annotations by Guo (2010), there is no solid evidence to prove it was composed by Ts'ai Yan. He just mentioned in the annotation that when the Huns heard of Ts'ai's leaving; they picked a reed leaf and played a plaintive melody with it. While in Kinston's writing, it is Ts'ai Yan that composed *Eighteen Songs of a Nomad Flute* after being inspired by fluting typical of barbarian culture. The song is no longer simply to express grief and sorrow, but most of all, a powerful metaphor for the bump and harmonization of two cultures.

In sum, Kinston made a bold rewriting about the traditional story and sculptured a new figure different from the traditional angry and distressful image. The new figure was transplanted in the western culture by English language, while it neither completely belongs to the west, nor completely inhabits in the east. It can only exist with a state of hybridity in the western culture, i.e. the so-called Third Space by Homi K. Bhabha.

## 2. RATIONALITY OF REWRITING THE STORY

*The Woman Warrior* is an autobiography novel. In some sense, it is deemed as a psychological growth novel, narrating how a Chinese-American girl grows out of the frustrations of her childhood and finds her own voice in "between worlds". As a little second-generation Chinese-American girl who was from a poor family with low education level, her only way to keep a connection with Chinese culture was by listening to her mother's talk-stories and by figuring from her parents' behaviors and eye sights. "You figure out what you got hit for and don't do it again if you figured correctly" (1989, p.183). For some practical reasons, in order to protect their life in America, her parents kept a lot of things as secrets and didn't give any explanation. "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" (1989, p.183). Anyway, living in a state of cultural fracture, ignorant of Chinese culture and alienated by the

mainstream culture, the writer couldn't "sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living." "My American life has been such a disappointment" (1989, p.205). There is a sharp contrast between reality and fantasy which lured Maxine into consoling imagination easily. On her growing path from a quiet, insecure, and alienated young girl to a mature person who could "see the world logically" (1989, p.204), and use her past to find strength as a writer, she experienced frustration, confusion, inner-struggle, certainly imagination and dreams. It's natural for a little girl in struggle to dream herself to be Hua Mu-lan and take revenge, but get confused some cultural details of the myth stories. It's also natural for an adult to imagine a historical figure from an unacquainted culture into a new one that fits into her new cultural values and dreams. "and I think to write true biography means you have to tell people's dreams. You have to tell what they imagine. You have to tell their vision. And, in that sense, I think I have developed a new way of telling a life story" (Chin, 2007). On this point, I completely agree with Kinston. Only when we truly reveal a person's psychological and mental world, can we know his real life story. The rewriting of the story of Ts'ai is to present a true look about the writer's dream and vision during her growing.

In this sense, Kinston's rewriting of Chinese culture including the story of Ts'ai Yan is quite acceptable.

### 3. SIGNIFICANCE OF REWRITING THE STORY OF TS'AI YAN

The rewriting about the Story of Ts'ai Yan is a fitting ending to *The Woman Warrior*. It bears great significance.

On the one hand, Ts'ai Yan naturally accepting the love from the barbarian chieftain embodies the writer's feminist thought. As a second-generation Chinese American, Kinston was born and received education in America. She inevitably was assimilated by American culture. The novel was composed just as feminism movement was booming. In literature, feminists tried hard to shake off the man-centered tradition and treaded on the field of writing and criticism. They advocated writing from a feminine aspect and writing against the male reader-centered literature. Greatly influenced by feminism, Kinston longed to become an independent and liberated western woman. She would rather distort some historical facts than describe Ts'ai Yan into a victim of male violence.

On the other, the song by Ts'ai Yan serves as a metaphor for Kinston's own project in writing her memoir. "Ts'ai Yan sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese" (1989, p.209), so it's rooted in and writes about Han culture. "Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering" (1989, p.209). It has become a crystallization

of two cultures absorbing and hybridizing each other. It is rich in the following implications:

1) It's a metaphor of Kinston trying to break the oppressive silence of Chinese-Americans in the mainstream society. It represents the endeavor of Chinese Americans who desire to make their voices heard so as to construct an equal cultural identity in America. The last story *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe* describes the Chinese girl's silence at home, in the school and in the society at large, and her struggle against this silence. Her parents were first-generation emigrants, living in China Town and knowing no English, so before Kinston went to school, she couldn't understand English either. "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent". "My silence was thickest total during the three years that I covered my school paintings with black paint" (1989, p.165). Here the black paint is a metaphor of Chinese students' ignorance and puzzle about American culture. Not just Kinston, other Chinese students also suffered from this kind of silence. So the descriptions about "keeping silent" are a true reflection on the invisibility of Chinese culture in American mainstream society. Realizing the importance of speaking and finding English language is a good way to get rid of alienation; Kinston began to read aloud and began to speak with the white students. Gradually she was no more silent, was making progress in academics, and "got straight A's" (1989, p.195). Finally, she became a woman warrior who spread Chinese stories in American mainstream culture and whose works caused a great sensation in American literature, just like Ts'ai Yan singing out her own song in the barbarian areas. Ts'ai Yan's song, a Chinese story written in English, that is narrated to end her debut novel, is a proper metaphor for Chinese Americans to find a voice in the mainstream culture. Kinston means to tell readers loud and clear that she at last became to recognize herself as one member of the overseas Chinese community no matter how foreign and alien she has become in a foreign land.

2) It also expresses Kinston's anticipation that the misunderstanding between two generations of Chinese Americans will ultimately be cleared up. In the story, "Her children did not speak Chinese" "they imitated her with senseless singsong words and laughed" (1989, p.208). In the novel, words "senseless" and "laughed" were used to imply that Ts'ai Yan's children didn't understand their mother or any of Chinese culture. That's because they were born in barbarian areas and took up the native language there. Although, for the cultural gap between two generations of Chinese Americans, they have difficulty in truly understanding each other, Kinston, still, by rewriting the story, expresses her hope to have them reconciled. When Ts'ai Yan went out of her tent and sang out her own song in Chinese, "Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along" (1989, p.209). Here, "sang along" shows that the children were shifting their attitudes

to their home culture. They began to understand their mother's emotions and be more serious about Chinese culture. As a second-generation Chinese American, Kinston is just like one of Ts'ai Yan's children. They were born in America, spoke the language of English, and they could understand Chinese, but were ignorant and confused about Chinese culture, which was from a far-away and completely strange place in their mind, while their parents grew up in China and later emigrated to America, knowing nearly nothing about English and the white culture. So, in this novel, Ts'ai Yan and her children were endowed with symbolic meaning, representing first-generation and second-generation Chinese American emigrants respectively. In reality, the conflicts between Kinston and her mother were throughout the whole novel. By rewriting the story, Kinston expressed her anticipation to clear up the cultural divide and to bridge the gap between them. "Sang along" is a metaphor for the mutual understanding and mutual acceptance of two Chinese-American generations.

3) The hybridity of Ts'ai Yan's story also reveals that the differences between Chinese and American cultures will be negotiated in time, and that all the ethnics will live in harmony in American society. Ts'ai Yan, a Han Chinese who didn't know the barbarian language, but lived there for many years, symbolizes those Chinese Americans living in Chinatown. "She hasn't sung for many years" indicates Chinese Americans' cultural aphasia and marginalized status. "Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering" (1989, p.209). That is the result of her living there many years and having been assimilated, and Ts'ai Yan's song is the

product of cultural hybridity and integration. "it matched the flutes" and "the barbarians understood their sadness and anger" (1989, p.209), further show that Chinese cultures are possible to coexist and live in harmony with the mainstream American culture.

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## CONCLUSION

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Kinston, a woman writer stuck between Chinese and western culture, by rewriting the story of Ts'ai Yan at the end of *The Woman Warrior*, displays to the mainstream society a unique female image. Just as Ts'ai Yan had to translate Barbarians' songs back to her people, so must Kinston take the "incomprehensible Chinese culture" and translate it to her readers. By composing *The Woman Warrior*, Kinston, just like Ts'ai Yan, after many years of silence and depression, sung out her own song in the foreign lands, a sentimental but melodious song.

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