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*Original Paper*

# Analysis of the Transmutation of Chinese Archetypes in *The Woman Warrior*

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***Abstract***

*Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior is a rich tapestry of Chinese literary archetypes interwoven with the fabric of American culture, reflecting the complex identity of Chinese Americans. The use of archetypal figures such as Hua Mulan and Yue Fei serves multiple purposes: they represent the struggle against racial discrimination, embody the resistance to cultural invasion, and symbolize the quest for a unique ethnic voice within the immigrant experience. The article will explore the major Chinese archetypes in The Woman Warrior and the reasons why these archetypes undergo transformation and change.*

***Keywords***

*The Woman Warrior, Maxine Hong Kingston, Archetypal Theory, Mulan*

## 1. Introduction

Northrop Frye, one of the proponents of archetypal theory, believes that archetypes are typical or recurring images that frequently appear in literary works and are considered an integral part of literary experience (Frye, 1996). He argues that many elements in literary works, such as mythology, rituals, and the hero's journey, are manifestations of archetypes, which recur in different works, constituting a shared literary experience for humanity. According to this theory, there are four references to Chinese literary images in *The Woman Warrior*, and the characters and stories of these literary characters in the work are somewhat different from the original characters. The literary images of *The Woman Warrior* are a transmutation of Chinese culture, and the author adds American culture on the basis of the archetypal story, which is a fusion of Chinese and American cultures.

## 2. Brief Introduction Maxine Hong Kingston and *The Woman Warrior*

### *2.1 Maxine Hong Kingston*

Maxine Hong Kingston, as the second-generation Chinese American immigrant writer, enjoys a high reputation in the American and even the world literary circles (Cheung, 1990). Born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, she was the eldest of six children. Her father, a former village teacher, immigrated to America seeking a better life, while her mother, a doctor in China, worked in sweatshops upon arrival.

Growing up in a bicultural environment, Kingston was a quiet student but found her voice through her mother's storytelling tradition, which significantly influenced her writing style and imagination. Her childhood, marked by mental challenges and cultural "ghosts", provided rich material for her writing, which became a means to confront her American life (Leong, 1993).

Kingston was an excellent student and attended the University of California at Berkeley, where she met her husband, Earll Kingston. After graduation, she began teaching before the publication of her first book, *The Woman Warrior*, in 1976. This work blended personal narratives with fictional elements to depict the experiences of Chinese-American women (Kim, 1990).

Following *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston published *China Men* (1980) and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989), earning her recognition in multiple languages and solidifying her reputation as a major American writer. In 1980, she was named a "Living Treasure of Hawaii", and in 1992, she received a National Humanities Medal and an Honorary Doctorate (Skenazy & Martin, 1998).

Kingston's influence is profound; her work is among the most anthologized of any living American writer, and she is widely read by American college students, particularly Asian American women who find inspiration and representation in her stories. Her contributions have paved the way for a generation of Chinese American writers to reach a national audience, marking her as a significant figure in the development of Chinese American literature (Hom, 2015).

### *2.2 The Woman Warrior*

*The Woman Warrior*, has won international awards and entered the best-seller list in the United States since its publication in 1976, and Kingston has successfully joined the ranks of major contemporary American authors. The Woman Warrior tells the different life stories of five women in five chapters, narrated in the first person. The first chapter "No Name Woman" tells the tragic process of nameless aunt who was pregnant but was accused of adultery, and finally threw her newborn baby into a well and drowned. The second chapter "White Tigers" tells the story of "I", a little girl, who followed the noble people of the world to learn art, and then went to the battle and overthrew the rule of the stupid. The third chapter is "Shaman", after his father went to the sea, his mother Yong LAN stayed at home alone, assumed the heavy responsibility of the family, and benefited the people with his superb medical skills; The fourth chapter "At the Western Palace" tells the story of the weak aunt Yue LAN who came to the United States and found that her husband had already set up another door, and was devastated but

helpless, unable to adapt to the life in a foreign land, and finally passed away miserably. In Chapter 5, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe", "I" does not like to talk and often does not say a word, because "I" do not want to communicate and express myself in English, but eventually I grow up to be one of the best students on campus. *The Woman Warrior* is Kingston's portrayal of the lives of past and present women in China and the United States, whose experiences are either tragic or great, subverting the stereotype and discriminatory attitude of Western society towards women or Oriental women on Kingston's works that *The Woman Warrior* shows a distinct feminist color. Susan Currier has described the book as Kingston's attempt to express her need for reconciliation between the identities of Chinese and American women; Linda B. Hall is also praised for her insights into individuals in cultural dilemmas (Huntley, 2001).

## 3. Archetypal Analysis of *The Woman Warrior*

### *3.1 Mulan: Embracing Her Femininity*

In the chapter "White Tiger" of *The Woman Warrior*, the heroine embarks on a journey of self-discovery and self-acceptance in the battlefields. Throughout her adventure, she boldly embraces her femininity, emphasizing female autonomy, demonstrating her leadership abilities, breaking traditional gender roles, and challenging patriarchy.

The heroine in the story demonstrates a remarkable level of autonomy. She willingly undergoes training, transforms into a warrior, and takes charge of her own decisions in both combat and daily life. This stands in stark contrast to the traditional portrayal of Mulan, who passively enlists and conceals her identity.

The heroine is not only a warrior but also a leader. the heroine put on her battle attire before a young man of the same village shows up and she says to him, "You will be the first soldier in my army" (39; ch.2). She has thus established and led a continuously growing insurgent army. Her leadership is further exemplified by the fact that she inspires her army and feeds them (40; ch.2). However, in the traditional story of Mulan, her battling life is omitted. As "Song of Mulan" writes, "In ten years they've lost many captains strong, / But battle-hardened warriors come back in delight" (lines 33-34). And only from the group image can be known that Mulan performs well but her leadership role is not emphasized.

The heroine wears men's clothing, but her female identity is not a secret. "I put on my men's clothes and armor and tied my hair in a man's fashion. 'How beautiful you look', the people said. 'How beautiful she looks'" (40; ch.2). The soldiers in the army know she is a woman and accept her as their leader. The heroine even gives birth in the army, as she says "I hid from battle only once, when I gave birth to our baby" (43; ch.2). She breaks the traditional boundaries of gender roles by fulfilling the duties of a mother while exhibiting the bravery of a warrior. By contrast, in "Song of Mulan" her battle mates don't know her female identity before she returns to her hometown. "We have marched together for twelve years, / But did not know there was a lass' mid our compeers!" (lines 51-52).

The heroine depicted by Kingston embraces her authentic self and rejects societal expectations that limit women's potential by demonstrating that women can balance between family and career lives, and can be mothers, wives, and warriors. This contrasts with the more traditional and restrictive gender roles in the story of Mulan.

*3.2 Yue Fei: Individual Emotions Replacing Patriotism*

In the chapter "White Tiger" of *The Woman Warrior*, the heroine undergoes a tattooing ritual similar to that of Yue Fei, where her parents inscribe characters on her back. Through this process, they express their profound expectations and the sacrifice of the family. This ritual is not merely a physical marking; it serves as a spiritual inheritance, bestowing upon her a deep sense of personal and familial mission.

Yue Fei, a military commander of the Southern Song Dynasty, stands as a national hero renowned for his resistance against the invading Jin people. The tale of his mother tattooing characters on his back is widely known in China. It is believed that Yue Fei's mother, fearing that petty men might tempt her son into treason after her death, inscribed the words "Jin Zhong Bao Guo"—serving the nation with unwavering loyalty—on his back.

In the chapter of "White Tiger", the story of Yue Mu's character-tattooing is appropriated into the story. Her parents take the heroine to the family hall before her departure for the war:

In the morning my parents woke me and asked that I come with them to the family hall. … She was holding a basin, a towel, and a kettle of hot water. My father had a bottle of wine, an ink block and pens, and knives of various sizes (37; ch.2).

However, unlike Yue Fei's tattoo, the heroine's is inscribed with "oaths and names". Her parents tell her "Wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice … And you'll never forget either" (37; ch.2). This reflects the family's sacrifice and personal memory, rather than just loyalty to the country.

The story of Yue Fei embodies the ancient Chinese ideals of loyalty to the monarch and dedication to serving the country. And Yue Fei's actions reflect a selfless commitment to the welfare of his nation. Conversely, the heroine's actions are portrayed as a reaction to familial hatred, making her a revenge-seeker driven by personal emotions and family duties. "The list of grievances went on and on" (37; ch.2).

Through this appropriation, Kingston shows readers a powerful female image, transforming the traditional idea of loyalty to the monarch into a more personalized and family-oriented story, and endowing the heroine with the connection between emotion and action: out of love for the family and hatred for injustice.

*3.3 Water Margin: Rebels and King-slayers*

In the chapter "White Tiger" of *The Woman Warrior*, the heroine's warrior journey builds upon the traditional figure of Mulan, incorporating the experiences of characters from Water Margin, yet it possesses distinct aspirations of war.

In “Song of Mulan”, Mulan’s reasons for joining the military stems from her loyalty to the country and her allegiance to the ruler. Her achievements are ultimately recognized and rewarded by the ruler. “Back, they have their audience with the Khan in the hall, / Honors and gifts are lavished on warriors all” (pp. 35-36). But Mulan refuse s any fame or gold, which reflects her noble character that is not motivated by fame or wealth, but by loyalty and patriotism. All she wants is “A camel fleet to carry me to my native place” (38). Water Margin is one of the four great masterpieces in ancient China. It tells the story of the one hundred and eight generals uprising led by Song Jiang against the corrupt government. These heroes are forced to Mount Liang for various reasons, their motivation is mainly due to the fight against social injustice and corrupt rule, and the pursuit of freedom and dignity, but with an ultimate wish to serve the imperial court again.

In the story, the heroine’s motivations for engaging in war are significantly different. She no longer holds loyalty to the ruler, but instead wants to achieve justice and the welfare of the common people. “The peasants would crown as emperor a farmer who knew the earth or a beggar who understood hunger” (40; ch.2). The heroine overthrows tyranny, liberates the oppressed, and ultimately elects a farmer who understands the hardships of the people as the new leader. Her actions are to achieve social justice and the happiness of the commoners. This is reflected in her war objectives and ultimate choices, as she rejects the throne but instead chooses to return to her hometown.

This is similar to the heroes in the Water Margin and traditional Mulan. They are peasant rebels or warriors and have common ground in resisting injustice and pursuing justice but not seeking fame or wealth. However, both the traditional Mulan and the Water Margin reflect the feudal loyalty ideology. The heroine’s struggle is combined with individual heroism, for the sake of broader social change and people ‘s well-being. This change in motivation reflects the transcendence of the traditional idea of loyalty to the monarch and the redefinition of the role of individuals in social change.

*3.4 Ts’ai Yen: Cultural Assimilation of Migrants*

In the last chapter “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” of *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist encounters various predicaments in America, including language barrier, cultural conflict, identity crisis, gender pressure, family disputes, and other issues. She tries to seek courage and methods to deal with the challenges of adapting to a new culture while preserving the original culture as an American-born Chinese from historical reference of Ts’ai Yen.

Ts’ai Yen also named Cai Wenji, a talented woman of ancient China. During the late Eastern Han Dynasty, she was captured by the Huns and raised two children in the savage lands. 12 years later, she was ransomed by Cáo Cāo and composed “Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, one of the ten famous melodies of China, on her way back. This piece, a blend of Han and Hun cultures, was created to express the hardships of her life and the sorrow of separating from her children.

Kingston borrows the archetype of Ts’ai Yen without making significant modifications. She retains the main plot after she was captured by Huns. But Kingston described her life in the barbarian land in

greater detail, writing about how she lived with the Huns and how she was influenced by their music. After her capture, she acquires the skill of fighting, despite traditionally being disbarred from wielding blades. "Ts'ai Yen fought desultorily when the fighting was at a distance, and she cut down anyone in her path during the madness of close combat" (201; ch.4). This makes her more of a warrior. At first, her children couldn't understand her speaking Chinese. "She spoke to them in it when their father was out of the tent, but they mocked her with meaningless singsong words and laughed" (201; ch.4). After listening to a great amount of Hun music, Ts'ai Yen comes to compose her own songs which the Huns could also grasp the underlying sadness within. "Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there... Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering" (201; ch.4). Finally, Cai Wenji is able to integrate into the life of the Huns and lives harmoniously with them. "Her children no longer laughed, but eventually joined in the singing when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, surrounded by the barbarians" (202; ch.4).

From an innocent poet to a warrior in *The Woman Warrior*, and even to a symbol of cultural assimilation of migrants, Ts'ai Yen's evolving image reflects on the social phenomenon of racial integration and cultural exchange, exploring how Chinese Americans can better coexist with other ethnic groups.

## 4. Reasons behind the Transmutation of Chinese Archetypes

First of all, the second generation of Chinese immigrants have been experiencing a certain crisis of identity as they grow up. In Lacan's mirror stage theory, there are three stages in which man establishes his identity: imaginary order, symbolic order, and real order (Lacan & Sheridan, 2021). The use of traditional literary images is the imaginary stage in the search for identity- Chinese Americans explore how they should be in traditional literary images. Unlike the immigrant generation, the second generation of Chinese Americans grew up under the influence of dual cultures from an early age.

Then it comes to the second stage-the symbolic order. The symbolic order is the search for identity under other factors, especially the image of the environment. The second generation of immigrants is educated in traditional Chinese culture in their families, and at the same time, they live in the United States all the time. The author lived in an era in which the Chinese Exclusion Act was repealed, but it still did not change the environment in which Chinese Americans were discriminated against. The second generation of immigrants has been educated in the United States since childhood, and their behavior and identity are American. However, they are unable to fully integrate into either the Chinese cultural environment or the American environment, which puts them in a situation of identity loss. The story of Mulan and Yue Fei can show their situation. The roots of Chinese culture have been affected by foreign cultures, and they have been subjected to racial discrimination. Fa Mulan and Yue Fei are both rebels against the invaders, expressing the resistance of Chinese Americans to racial discrimination and the struggle for ethnic discourse. Not only that, Mulan and Yue Fei are both fighting against foreign

cultural invasions. It can also be seen from this that in the establishment of identity, Chinese Americans need to carry the cultural foundation of their ethnicity in order to strive for a unique right to speak.

Secondly, the unique experiences of Chinese women of that time also play a role in it. *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976, when Maxine Hong Kingston was 36 years old. Most of the stories of the female characters in the work are close to the author's own age. The same is true for the selection of the two characters of Mulan and Ts'ai Yen. From the details in the work, it can be seen that the environment in which the author grew up was biased towards patriarchy, and the family members had more traditional requirements for women. This was also the case at the time, where Chinese Americans were severely racist and Chinese women were doubly marginalized. In the 20th century, the feminist movement arose, and Chinese women also participated in this movement. The use of the character of Mulan is a struggle against the dross of traditional Chinese culture, breaking the stereotype of Chinese women in the West and fighting against American Orientalism.

Thirdly, the author holds good wishes for peaceful cultural exchanges between China and the United States. In the original book, Ts'ai Yen was captured and became the wife of the hun. Twelve years later, Ts'ai Yen was ransomed by Cao Cao. After returning to her homeland, Ts'ai Yen wrote "Eighteen Beat of Wu Gier", expressing her homesickness and humiliation. However, the anger and humiliation expressed in the original story cannot be found in the story of "me". She paints a picture of harmony and peace. In this chapter, Ts'ai Yen and the hun share the same music and emotions. They feel empathy and understand each other, even if they are under different languages and cultures. They embrace cultural diversity, share with each other, and bridge barriers and barriers between them.

In the adaptation of Ts'ai Yen's story, we can see the harmonious communication between the Hun and the Han people. This is what the author finally realized after a failed attempt to abandon Chinese culture. The growth and rooting of Chinese Americans cannot abandon Chinese culture, they will eventually need to find a balance, find a balance in the cultural exchange between China and the United States. Ts'ai Yen's story expresses the author's beautiful vision for the integration and exchange of Chinese and American cultures. The appearance of Ts'ai Yen's story at the end implies the author's deep meaning.

## 5. Conclusion

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* deftly reimagines Chinese literary archetypes within an American context, offering a nuanced portrayal of Chinese American identity. The novel challenges traditional gender roles, reframes patriotism through personal and familial narratives, and advocates for social justice over feudal loyalty. By drawing on the stories of Mulan, Yue Fei, and Ts'ai Yen, Kingston explores the complexities of cultural assimilation and the struggle for identity among second-generation immigrants. Her work serves as a powerful testament to the resilience of Chinese American women and the potential for harmonious cultural exchange between China and the United

States.

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