# The Woman Warrior

## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Maxine Hong was the eldest of six children born to Chinese immigrants. Her father, Tom, had been a poet, teacher, and calligrapher in his native country. He smuggled himself to New York City from Cuba and was deported from Ellis Island until his third attempt to enter the United States, which was successful. Unable to find work in his new country as a scholar, he took a job in a laundry and then sent for his wife, Ying Lan, in 1939. Kingston's mother had also been a professional—a midwife and doctor trained in both Chinese and Western medicine. Kingston credits her mother for bestowing her with a gift for storytelling. Ying Lan had learned the ancient art of "talk-story" from her own father, who had been a village storyteller. From her mother, Kingston heard tales about life in China, such as women going to the market to buy girl slaves, as well as myths and legends. Such stories would be incorporated into *The Woman Warrior*, her debut work. Kingston was educated at the University of California-Berkeley where she had received a scholarship for engineering. Later, she switched her major to English. While at Berkeley, she became involved in the Free Speech Movement, which first developed at Berkeley before spreading to other campuses. Kingston's involvement in these protests would lead to a lifetime of activism, particularly anti-war pacifism. In 1962, she married Earll Kingston and the couple had one son. Kingston and her husband took teaching positions, first in Northern California, and then in Honolulu, Hawaii, where they moved in 1967. The success of her writing career led to Kingston being named Distinguished Professor of English at her alma mater, Berkeley, in 1990. Kingston continues to publish and leads writing retreats for war veterans and widows whose work she helps to publish.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

*The Woman Warrior* takes place during Kingston's girlhood in Northern California in the 1940s and 1950s. World War II had recently ended and the Japanese internment camps in her state were closed. A physical war had given way to an ideological one—the Cold War. Kingston claimed that her decision to study engineering at Berkeley had not so much been about interest in the subject as it was about the fact that ambitious students like her were often drawn toward studying the sciences to meet the demands of the burgeoning technological age. In the memoir, Kingston's mother escapes from an onslaught of Japanese bombing in her native Canton province in the 1930s. In the same decade, Japan expanded their imperial power into China after the seizure of Manchuria in 1931. Kingston notes that her mother had been a refugee in China, living in the mountains with other refugees, then left China in the winter of 1939, several months after the outbreak of World War II in Europe, to immigrate to New York, arriving in January 1940. Kingston recounts that "the same war [was] still going on years after she [Brave Orchid] crossed the ocean." The United States had entered World War II in 1941, after the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, a Hawaiian naval base, on December 7, 1941.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The political consciousness movements of the 1960s and 1970s not only led to challenges to political authority, but also inspired challenges to narrative authority. *The Woman Warrior* was published during a time in American literary history when scholars and readers, aided by the advent of Cultural Studies, were starting to examine what constituted an "American story" and who could write one. The desires both to assert American identity while also declaring a relationship with ancestral homelands, which Kingston addresses, was a popular subject in Black American literature in the 1970s and 1980s, in works such as Paule Marshall's *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) and Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day* (1988). Kingston's exhumation of her family history is similar to other works about seeking ancestral connections through narratives, particularly Alex Haley's *Roots* (1976). Though she incorporates aspects of Chinese history and myth into her work, Kingston has been insistent that her stories are "American" stories. Kingston's success was also linked to that of other Chinese-American authors from California who addressed issues related to immigration, racism, and Chinese cultural traditions in their works, particularly Amy Tan, whose most popular work, *The Joy Luck Club*, also narrates family history and illustrates generational conflicts between mothers and daughters. Playwright David Henry Hwang produced his first play, FOB (an acronym for "fresh off the boat"), a story about the Asian-American immigrant experience, in 1979; he published it in 1983. Kingston's harshest critic, writer Frank Chin, also explored issues around immigration and racism. In his novel *Donald Duk* (1991), he creates a fantasy in which a contemporary protagonist morphs into a historical figure.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*
- **When Written:** Early-1970s
- **Where Written:** Honolulu, Hawaii

- **When Published:** 1976
- **Literary Period:** Postmodern American Literature
- **Genre:** Memoir
- **Setting:** Canton province, China; Stockton, California
- **Climax:** In a long monologue delivered to her parents at dinner, Kingston screams at them—not only telling them that she does not want The Hulk around anymore, but also insisting that none of their expectations for her (that she will be a wife or a slave) are valid.
- **Point of View:** First-person; third-person omniscient

## EXTRA CREDIT

**Chinese Laundries.** Tens of thousands of Chinese immigrants first arrived in California around the time of the Gold Rush, which lasted from 1848 to 1852. Barred from working in fishing, mining, and other industries, the Chinese discovered that they could earn income by performing a form of labor that no one else wanted to do: laundry. Chinese laundries quickly became lucrative and helped to establish Chinese immigrants as citizens.

**The Free Speech Movement.** Led by Mario Savio, the Free Speech Movement started at the University of California—Berkeley in 1964. The movement was a demand that universities stop restricting campus protests, arguing that such restrictions curbed students' right to assemble. The movement created a campus atmosphere in which students could freely discuss politics and pursue other political agendas, such as Civil Rights, anti-war protests, and feminism.

## PLOT SUMMARY

Kingston recounts the story of her dead aunt who, due to the shame that she caused her family by giving birth out of wedlock, is never mentioned by her given name; thus, she is known as No Name Woman. Brave Orchid, Kingston's mother, has given her daughter some details about her aunt's life: she was married to a man who left her to immigrate to America and, during his absence, she became pregnant by a man whom she never identified. When the villagers found out about her pregnancy, they ransacked the family home.

Kingston imagines several explanations for her aunt's pregnancy. In one scenario, she considers the possibility that her aunt's lover had organized the raid against her, and that he was a cruel man who "gave orders," including the order to have sex with him to spare her life. In another scenario, Kingston imagines her aunt as "a wild woman" who "kept rollicking company" and was "free with sex," but she quickly abandons this notion due to its implausibility. Instead, Kingston imagines a young woman who appreciated her beauty and had romantic notions, fostered from being a beloved daughter. Still, she had shamed her family. When the time came for her to give birth, she went out to a pig-sty and bore what Kingston imagines was a baby girl. No Name Woman carried the infant to the well, which she envisioned as an act of love—a contrast to the women who smothered infants in mud or abandoned them. The family later found her and the newborn dead at the bottom of the well.

The family's wish to deliberately forget No Name Woman—to treat her as though she had never been born—only piqued Kingston's curiosity. She is tempted to ask her mother for additional details, such as the clothes that her aunt wore, but she knows that her mother would find such a question pointless. Kingston notes that her aunt's **ghost** is drawn to her "after fifty years of neglect," since Kingston not only speaks about her but dedicates "pages of paper to her."

On the other hand, her mother also tells Kingston and her siblings "talk-story" (or legends) about swordswomen. These women had defied convention like her aunt, but their stories were committed to memory. One such example is "the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle." Kingston imagines herself as Fa Mu Lan, the warrior woman, to defy her mother's prediction that she would grow up to be "a wife and a slave." In her fantasy, she is living in a hut on the top of a mountain. An old man and an old woman enter with "bowls of rice and soup and a leafy branch of peaches." They ask her to remain with them for fifteen years so that they can train her to become a warrior through "exercises that began at dawn and end at sunset." Her purpose becomes to avenge her village against a greedy baron who seizes the villagers' crops and forces the men and boys into conscription.

One day, a messenger goes to her family home (where she no longer lives) and demands one of the men of the household. Kingston/Fa Mu Lan's father agrees to go fight. When she learns the news, the girl insists on returning home, but the old man and old woman insist that she must remain with them until the age of twenty-two, when she will be powerful enough to lead an army. When the fateful day arrives, they give The Woman Warrior "men's clothes and armor." Kingston/Fa Mu Lan's family welcomes her home as though "they were welcoming home a son." They carve a message of revenge into her back so that, even if she were killed in battle, everyone would know how they had sacrificed their daughter.

The villagers are impressed with Kingston/Fa Mu Lan, and soon men begin volunteering for her army. Shortly thereafter, she reunites with a "childhood friend" whom she marries and who fights alongside her; when she gets pregnant, she continues to fight, but alters her armor to look "like a powerful, big man." Confronting the baron in his "stronghold," she sees him counting his money with an abacus, sitting "square and fat like a god." The Woman Warrior announces herself as "a female avenger" and the baron is incredulous until she rips off her shirt to expose the message on her back, which also exposes her

breasts. While he is still in shock, Kingston/Fa Mu Lan beheads him. The villagers ransack the house to gain revenge on the baron's family for all of the crops that they seized over the years. After the trials of the baron's allies, The Woman Warrior helps to install a new order, one that includes arts such as "opera" and "talk-story." Her son delights in the sight of his mother, the general, and she is forever remembered by the villagers for her "perfect filiality."

Kingston contrasts the excitement and honor of this fantasy with her less-eventful and less-welcome girlhood. She is a straight-A student, but her mother does not see the purpose of good grades. For her "tantrums" and minor rebellions against the family's expectation that she will be "a wife and a slave," she is labeled as a "bad girl," which Kingston first denies, then accepts, claiming that she will never marry but will instead go to Oregon and become a lumberjack.

In China, Brave Orchid had trained as a doctor and midwife and was so talented that, occasionally, she would allow the other students to glance at her test papers to help them get back on track when they had forgotten something. Brave Orchid was the oldest student in her class and did not tell her classmates that some of them were young enough to be her daughters or that she already had two children. While in medical school, Brave Orchid had her first encounter with Sitting Ghost who crawled into her bed and sat on her chest. She banished it by denying that it could instill fear in her. There were other **ghosts**, too, such as Wall Ghosts, which attempted to lead her away from her path of becoming a doctor. Brave Orchid's knowledge of ghosts, she believes, allowed her to manage them just as well as she managed illness and dislocated joints.

Brave Orchid left China "in the winter of 1939," shortly after witnessing the stoning of a mentally-ill woman whom the villagers had claimed was a spy for the Japanese. She arrived in New York Harbor in January 1940 to reunite with her husband, who had already smuggled himself onto Ellis Island from Cuba. Kingston was born "in the middle of World War II." In America, the family encounters more "ghosts"—Black Ghosts and White Ghosts, Taxi Ghosts and Police Ghosts, and—most frightening of all to the children—Newsboy Ghosts. Kingston's mother and father retain the hope of returning to China. This lasts until Kingston is well into adulthood and her father gives his last piece of land to her uncles.

In California, the family operates a laundry. When Brave Orchid's younger sister, Moon Orchid, arrives from California, Brave Orchid attempts to employ her at the laundry until she can make arrangements to reunite her sister with her estranged husband who lives in Los Angeles. Moon Orchid proves to be incapable of work and annoys her elder sister with her fondness for fancy clothes and for seeming "useless." Brave Orchid insists that Moon Orchid force her way back into her husband's life, asserting her rights as First Wife, though Moon Orchid has no interest in this. Her husband has financially supported her and sent their daughter to college; this seems to be enough. However, Brave Orchid ignores her sister and arranges for her son to drive them to Los Angeles.

They arrive at a skyscraper which houses Moon Orchid's husband's medical practice. When they enter his office, they see that he has a new, younger wife who works as his nurse. They hatch a scheme in which they tell the nurse to inform the doctor that someone is injured outside. When he arrives to help, they see that he looks younger, too, and refers to Moon Orchid as "Grandmother." Brave Orchid informs him that he is speaking to his wife, and the man says that he moved on without Moon Orchid because he did not believe that she was strong enough to survive in America and because she did not speak, not even to him. The encounter is devastating to Moon Orchid, who remains in Los Angeles with her daughter but begins to have paranoid delusions about Mexican Ghosts plotting on her life. To help her recover, she moves back to Stockton so that Brave Orchid can treat her, but it is of no use. She descends further into madness, repeating the same "talk-story" about Mexican Ghosts. Her daughter commits her to a state asylum where she finds friendship with a few other women and learns a new "talk-story," but shortly thereafter, Moon Orchid dies.

During Kingston's childhood, her mother tells her that she cut the frenulum under Kingston's tongue to help her talk more (to keep her from being "tongue-tied") and to enable her to learn any language. However, given the family's penchant for silence, Kingston thinks that her mother cut her tongue so that she would not speak at all. As a result, she becomes resistant to silence. She bullies a girl in her sixth-grade class for not speaking much, and she insists that silence can lead to madness.

When a mentally- and physically-challenged boy begins hanging around her family's laundry, Kingston gets the notion that her parents plan to marry her off to him. She has an outburst at dinner one evening in which she rejects this possibility, as well as all of her parents' and her culture's other notions of what her life ought to look like. Brave Orchid, a "champion talker," talks over her daughter and denies what she says, arguing that they never believed that she was ugly or dumb, but that they merely said "the opposite," according to Chinese custom. Kingston struggles with her own voice. A typical Chinese woman's voice, she notes, is "strong and bossy." An American feminine voice is softer.

Kingston concludes with the story of the poetess, Ts'ai Yen. When she was twenty, Ts'ai Yen was captured in a raid by the southerner Hsiung-nu. She fought alongside him, later gave birth, and taught her children to speak Chinese—a language different from their father's "barbarian tongue." One day, the villagers heard her singing about her native China. Those songs were later passed down by her Han descendants after she returned from the "savage lands." Kingston notes how well they have translated.

# CHARACTERS

## MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Maxine Hong Kingston** – The author and the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston was the eldest of six children, though she believes that her mother had two more children—a son and a daughter—who died in China. Kingston reimagines the life of No Name Woman, the publicly shamed aunt whom she never knew. In a fantasy, she recreates herself as Fa Mu Lan, supposedly a real-life woman warrior, to escape her mother's prediction that she would grow up to be "a wife and a slave." Kingston narrates her mother Brave Orchid's life, both her years as a successful doctor and midwife in Canton province, and her later years as a dutiful wife and mother working in their family-run laundry business in California. Kingston also narrates the thoughts and actions of her aunt, Moon Orchid, recalling the time when she lived with Kingston's family. By usurping the voices of both living and dead women, figures from her life and legends from "talk-story," Kingston is able to construct her own selfhood, which exists between her traditional Chinese culture and her American identity. She recalls that she was a straight-A student, but that her mother was indifferent to her academic success due her sense that grades had no practical use. Kingston rebels against the sexist criticism hurled at her by her mother and by members of her community, and she counters expectations based on her gender by pretending that she wants to assume unconventional roles, such as becoming a lumberjack in Oregon. Kingston later attends the University of California—Berkeley where she protests against the Vietnam War, which her brother was fighting in at the time.

**Brave Orchid** – Kingston's mother and Moon Orchid's sister. Brave Orchid is a strong, resilient woman and "a champion talker" who immigrated to the United States from Canton province in January 1940 after her husband, who had found work in New York, sent for her. During her years in China, Brave Orchid trained as a midwife and doctor. Though she was a woman of science, she told stories of fighting off **ghosts**, particularly Sitting Ghost, which sought the bodies of newborn infants and, during her years at medical school, tried to paralyze her with fear. Brave Orchid confesses to her daughter that she suffered a fall in her status when she moved to New York, then to California to work in the laundry that she and her husband opened. Brave Orchid had six children, but may also have had two older children, a son and a daughter, who died in China. Brave Orchid is a dutiful woman who continues working long after her husband has retired. She hires herself out to pick tomatoes on local farms. She dyes her hair black to appear younger, then waits in line on Skid Row, her daughter recounts, with other recent immigrants to be chosen for work. She differs from her sister, Moon Orchid, in that she does not care for fancy clothes and is so careful with her resources that she eats everything and cooks everything—even her children's leftovers. She is also much stronger than her younger sister and is unafraid to speak, whereas Moon Orchid is very timid. Brave Orchid is pushy toward her daughter and her younger sister, often forcing them to assume roles to which they seem ill-suited. In the case of Moon Orchid, she inadvertently forces her sister to relive the trauma of being abandoned by her husband, from which Moon Orchid never recovers. In many instances, Brave Orchid privileges traditions and established beliefs over the needs and feelings of others, particularly those of Moon Orchid and her eldest daughter.

**Fa Mu Lan** – Also known as "the woman warrior" (and familiar in Western popular culture as "Mulan"), legend has it that she replaced her father in battle and saved her village from a greedy baron. Kingston imagines herself as The Woman Warrior to defy her mother's expectation that she will be "a wife and a slave," deciding instead that she "would have to grow up a warrior woman," using the "the song of the warrior woman" that her mother had taught her to imagine other possibilities for herself. Fa Mu Lan lives with an old man and an old woman who train her from the age of seven to the age of twenty-two to avenge her village. The legend of Fa Mu Lan is reimagined by Kingston with the inclusion of details that are specific to her Western upbringing. For example, Fa Mu Lan's effort to depose the current emperor, whom she beheads, and inaugurate "the peasant who would begin the new order" is reminiscent of Joan of Arc. Kingston even mentions Joan directly in the narrative as a contrast to the woman warrior, who has a husband and a son, whereas Joan of Arc was "a maiden." The woman warrior also goes alone in the woods for a spirit journey, akin to the traditional spirit journey that Native American boys take as a rite of passage during puberty. After years on the mountain being trained by the old couple, Fa Mu Lan returns to her family, and they carve a message of revenge on her back. At the age of twenty-two, she gathers an army, marries "a childhood friend," and soon bears a child. Disguised as a man, she enters the baron's stronghold, reveals the message and simultaneously reveals herself to be a woman, then decapitates him. Kingston chooses Fa Mu Lan as a heroine, for the warrior woman's femininity does not hinder her strength, but instead reinforces it. The story of the woman warrior contradicts Brave Orchid's negative attitude toward girls and also challenges China's traditional devaluation of girls and women.

**Moon Orchid** – Brave Orchid's sister, who arrives in the United States after spending years living in Hong Kong. Moon Orchid differs from her sister, who is only one year older than she, in that she is a rather passive personality and less independent. Brave Orchid does not respect Moon Orchid's fondness for fancy dresses or her inability to perform hard work, which becomes clear when Brave Orchid tries to employ her younger sister in the family laundry. Brave Orchid decides that Moon Orchid will resume her rightful role as First Wife by traveling to

Los Angeles to reunite with her husband. Moon Orchid has been supported by her husband since he left her to immigrate to the United States. Though she obeys her sister's instructions, she is rather uninterested in living with her husband and is resistant to seeing him again. When she does see him, he rejects her yet again. The encounter devastates Moon Orchid, who goes to live with her daughter until she develops a paranoid fear that the "Mexican **Ghosts**" are plotting to kill her. Brave Orchid has her sister move back in with her in Stockton, but Moon Orchid's paranoia only increases and Brave Orchid is unable to treat her. Brave Orchid surmises that Moon Orchid's spirit is unsettled due to wandering too much. A sign of her sister's madness is that she only has one "talk-story," whereas sane people have many. Moon Orchid's daughter then commits her mother to a state asylum. Moon Orchid is happy in the asylum, where she meets other women with whom she can speak; as a result, her sister notices that she has learned another "talk-story." Moon Orchid dies in the asylum shortly after their visit.

**No Name Woman** – Kingston's dead aunt and her father's sister. Brave Orchid tells Kingston about her aunt but warns her that she "must not tell anyone." No Name Woman had been married to a husband who was "gone for years," then became pregnant out of wedlock and gave birth to a daughter. Her marriage had been to "a young man in the next village." At the ceremony, "the best rooster" had served as his proxy. They met once for their honeymoon, then he left for America. Kingston longs to know more about her aunt, so she creates scenarios for her. Kingston assumes the possibility that the lover was not much different from her absent husband, probably forcing her to have sex, then threatening her. In another story, she is "a wild woman" who is "free with sex," but this seems to be least plausible. When the villagers found out about No Name Woman's illegitimate pregnancy, they ransacked her family's home. Kingston thinks that they punished her for believing that "she could have a private life, secret and apart from them." The No Name Woman never revealed the name of her daughter's father. She "gave silent birth" in a pig-sty, then jumped into a well with her infant daughter and died.

**Old Man and Old Woman** – When reimagining herself as the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan, Kingston creates a "talk-story" in which she is trained by an old couple to be a warrior who will avenge her village against an evil, greedy baron. When they first meet in her hut on the mountain, the old man and woman enter "carrying bowls of rice and soup and a leafy branch of peaches." Later, they lead Kingston / Fa Mu Lan in exercises that "began at dawn and ended at sunset." They also lead Kingston / Fa Mu Lan in a survival test and teach her how to stalk tigers and know dragons. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan remains with them for fifteen years, until the age of twenty-two, which is when she becomes a general and fights for her village.

**Sitting Ghost** – The most significant **ghost** among all of the ghosts that Kingston and Brave Orchid enumerate. Sitting Ghost, also called "Boulder," first visits Brave Orchid when she is in medical school. It is the only "ghost" that is fully described. The ghost is something with "many wide black mouths," a being that is "dangerous," "real," and "mysterious." Brave Orchid recalls an instance in which the ghost briefly killed her, but she "returned" to medical school, outwitting it and other ghosts—Wall Ghosts—that sought to divert her from her rightful path. She refuses to give in to Sitting Ghost, refuses to relent to the pain that it seeks to inflict and refuses even to acknowledge its power, which kills "babies" and "cowards," but not "a strong woman."

**Father** – Also referred to as Brave Orchid's husband. He is usually discussed in relation to the women in his life—Kingston, who is his eldest living daughter, Brave Orchid, and his unmentionable sister, No Name Woman. He is never referred to in the narrative by his given name. He smuggled himself to the United States via Cuba. When he was finally granted entry, he worked in a laundry in New York City. After saving enough money, he sent for Brave Orchid in 1939. The couple then moved to California, where they owned and operated a family-run laundry, which was later razed to put up a parking lot. Kingston's father retired after this.

**The Slave Girl** – A sixteen-year-old girl Brave Orchid bought from Canton market shortly after she became a doctor. Brave Orchid recalls that the girl had a "strong heart" which "sounded like thunder within the earth, sending its power into her fingertips." Brave Orchid tells her daughters that she "would not have sold a daughter such as that one." Brave Orchid recalls the girl's quickness, and her ability to write a word from memory without leaving out "a single stroke." Brave Orchid tested the girl's quickness with a series of riddles and a question about weaving. Brave Orchid pretended to be dissatisfied with the girl's answers so that she could buy her for a lower price, and the girl, instinctively playing along, pretended to know less about weaving so that she could be sold to Brave Orchid at the asking price. Brave Orchid buys the girl and decides to train her to be her nurse. Kingston notes that her mother's enthusiasm for her own daughter is duller than that for the slave girl whom she bought for fifty dollars. Brave Orchid notes that she paid the doctor two hundred dollars to give birth to Kingston who, it seems, she perceives as less useful and less dutiful. Kingston's younger sister, also sensing her mother's favor for the slave girl, said, "When I grow up, I want to be a slave," a confession that both amuses and pleases her parents.

**Moon Orchid's Daughter** – Brave Orchid's niece and Kingston's cousin, she lives in Los Angeles with her own husband and children, but she stays with her aunt and cousins while they await Moon Orchid's arrival to California from Hong Kong. Brave Orchid perceives her niece as she perceives her mother—"the lovely, useless type." When Moon Orchid's

daughter announces that she must return to Los Angeles, Brave Orchid decides that they will all drive south so that Moon Orchid can be reunited with her husband. When this does not work out, Moon Orchid goes to live with her daughter; then, after she experiences a series of paranoid attacks, her daughter has Moon Orchid committed to a state asylum.

**Moon Orchid's Husband** – A doctor in Los Angeles when Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid find him. He left Moon Orchid in China but continued to support her and their daughter financially. He has remarried a younger woman who works as a nurse in his office. He is displeased to be reunited with Moon Orchid and tells her that he left her in China because he did not think that she was strong enough to survive in the United States. Though he obliges Brave Orchid's request for lunch, he does not want to see his first wife again. Brave Orchid notices that her brother-in-law, who never divorced Moon Orchid, seems more American and looks significantly younger than his first wife, whom he mistakenly refers to as "Grandmother."

**The Baron** – In her fantasy as Fa Mu Lan, the baron is an evil lord who has seized control of Kingston's / Fa Mu Lan's village. He hoards all of the villagers' food and oppresses them with his army. The baron sends a horseman to Kingston's family's imagined home in ancient China to conscript a man—"one from each family"—into his army. Kingston describes the baron as having "a piggish face." When the woman warrior / Kingston faces him in her male disguise, he is counting his money on an abacus. Kingston / The Woman Warrior pulls off her shirt to reveal the words her parents have engraved into her back. The baron is shocked at seeing her breasts, letting him know that the warrior is actually a woman. Kingston / The Woman Warrior cuts off his head, then lets the villagers into his stronghold, where they drag his family and servants out into the courtyard for punishment.

**The Quiet Girl** – A sixth-grade classmate of Kingston's and a fellow Chinese-American girl who will not speak. Kingston bullies her into talking by calling her a "sissy-girl" and pinching her cheek. The girl has the ability to speak—Kingston claims to have heard her speaking, yelling even, in Chinese and English at her home, and the girl sometimes reads aloud in class—but she refuses social interaction. Her timidity and neatness annoy Kingston. The girl recalls Kingston's own fears about being unable to speak, as well as her exasperation with all of the silences and secrets within her family.

**The Woman Next Door** – One of the people that Kingston mentions to illustrate her point that speech makes "the difference between sanity and insanity." The woman next door had a husband had "bought her and married her" in China, but he had a child—"half Chinese and half white"—with another woman, whom the woman next door raised. Kingston describes her as "chatty one moment…and shut up the next." The children fear her, "though she said nothing, did nothing." Kingston recalls that she "died happy, sitting on the steps after cooking dinner."

**Crazy Mary** – Another neighbor from a family of Christian converts who sent for her in China after they had earned enough money in California. By the time she arrived, nearly twenty years old, she was supposedly crazy. Kingston describes her as "a large girl" with "a big black mole on her face"—normally a sign of good luck in Chinese culture. One day, a delivery person for the pharmacist delivers Crazy Mary's pills to Kingston's home and Brave Orchid is outraged, due to the implication that the messenger has brought sickness into their household. Kingston recalls that Crazy Mary "seemed cheerful, but pointed at things that were not there." Eventually, she is sent to a "crazyhouse" and spends the rest of her life there, much like Moon Orchid. Also like Kingston's aunt, Crazy Mary supposedly said that she liked living at the asylum.

**Pee-Ah-Nah** – A third woman from their community who is both mentally ill and homeless. Kingston distinguishes her from the other "crazy ladies" in their neighborhood, for this one qualified as a "village idiot." Also referred to as "a witchwoman," Pee-Ah-Nah picks in the same "slough," or swamp, where Brave Orchid and the children go to pick orange berries. She gets her name due to being old and in the habit of "riding to the slough with a broom between her legs." She also "powdered one cheek red and one white" and "wore a pointed hat and layers of capes, shawls, [and] sweaters buttoned at the throat like capes, the sleeves flying behind like sausage skins." The children are in the habit of running away from her, believing that, like a witch, she is chasing them. Other children say that she will boil them or tear them apart if she catches them. One day, they no longer see her. Kingston assumes that she has been "locked up in the crazyhouse too."

**The Hulk** – A "mentally retarded boy" from Kingston's Chinese school who spends time at the laundry and follows Kingston around at school. He also carries around bags of toys to hand out to "certain children," supposedly brought from toy stores owned by his family. Kingston refers to him as "the monster" and "the hulk" and registers repulsion at the boy's large, stiff, sweaty body. Kingston's disgust with the mentally- and physically-challenged adolescent boy, who only seems to want friendship, has nothing to do with anything he has actually done. Instead, it is a manifestation of her belief that her parents would see him as a suitable match for her. She projects her own feelings of being ugly, stupid, and unwanted onto the boy.

**The Village Crazy Lady** – A madwoman from Brave Orchid's village who was stoned to death because the villagers thought that she was a Japanese spy. During air raids, she wore an elaborate red headdress with mirrors and flailed her arms. The villagers thought that she was signaling the planes to attack. When the woman refused Brave Orchid's attempt to protect her from the frightened villagers by taking the headdress, the woman refused. They beat her head and face and smashed the mirrors, then buried her along with the rest of the dead.

**Brave Orchid's Son / Kingston's Brother** – Brave Orchid's

eldest son and Kingston's brother. He is assigned the tasks of driving his mother, Moon Orchid, and Moon Orchid's daughter to Los Angeles to confront Moon Orchid's husband. He also participates in a scheme to get the doctor to leave his office after Brave Orchid tells him to repeat a lie about having an uncle lying hurt in the street from a car accident.

### MINOR CHARACTERS

**Fa Mu Lan's Husband** – A childhood friend with a beautiful face, according to Kingston's description, with whom she / Fa Mu Lan reunites shortly before going into battle. He fights alongside her, and they have a son together.

## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

### STORYTELLING AND IDENTITY

As a memoir, *The Woman Warrior* is Maxine Hong Kingston's effort to tell her own story. By telling her own story, though, Kingston mostly finds herself telling the stories of others—those in her family, those around her, and the myths of the Chinese and American cultures between which she is caught. She interweaves these personal stories, family stories, and myths so that they build on one another, both chronologically and thematically. Crucially, she also allows the stories to overlap and contradict one another, without attempting to unify the stories or resolve their discrepancies. That stories are so central to each character in the book, and that Kingston tells her own story through the interwoven, contradictory stories of others, suggests that storytelling occupies a foundational place not only in Kingston's life but in human life more generally. Stories are how people understand themselves, and how they relate to others. In fact, by showing that stories are simultaneously messy and malleable, and that storytelling is always a negotiation between self, community, and culture, Kingston makes storytelling a metaphor for the complex and contradictory process of constructing one's own identity.

Though many of the stories that Kingston tells are not her own (they are frequently family stories or myths), she ultimately tells each story in an effort to understand herself better, and to break free from the conventions of her community and its negative attitude toward girls. She uses the legends that her mother teaches her during "talk-story," particularly that of Fa Mu-Lan, the woman warrior, to construct new meanings of femininity and ideas about what kind of woman she would like to become. Her choice of "talk-story" legends reveals her own values, while her revision of her aunt's story allows for her to explore uncertainty.

Perhaps the most striking example of Kingston using storytelling to figure out who she is comes from her retelling of the story of her deceased aunt, the "no name woman." She reimagines the story of No Name Woman's adulterous pregnancy three times: in the first version, it was rape; in the second, she chose to sleep with the man who impregnated her; in the third, her aunt slept with many men because she was a "wild woman." These stories about No Name Woman are also possibly stories about Kingston herself—Kingston is making up stories about her long-dead aunt to try to understand her own evolving sexuality and how to position her sexual development between Chinese and American cultural norms. Thus, her aunt was not wanton because Kingston does not see herself as wanton. Conversely, it is possible that her aunt chose a lover, that she had the gall to be the sole romantic in her village, eschewing convention to pursue desire. Kingston would like to do the same, which is why she refuses to believe that she will grow up to be "a wife and a slave," and asserts her independence to her parents in the memoir's climax. Kingston is the only member of her family who wishes to talk openly about her aunt. In her writing, she gives No Name Woman a complexity and freedom that her aunt was not allowed in real life.

Another way that Kingston uses storytelling to come to terms with her evolving multi-cultural identity is through embracing contradiction and unknowing. Kingston never presents one definitive truth through storytelling, instead allowing for a multitude of truths to exist in parallel, even when many of them are irreconcilable. By telling contradictory versions of the same story without attempting to resolve their differences, Kingston evokes the impossibility of reconciling the truths and norms of her American upbringing with what she learns and intuits about China.

One example of this is the story of Moon Orchid, Kingston's aunt from China whose husband left her to go to America and start a new family. In an effort to convince Moon Orchid to hunt down her husband in Los Angeles and take him back from his second wife, Kingston's mother tells Moon Orchid a Chinese story about a good empress who had to save the Emperor from a bad empress. Kingston herself is caught between understanding the Chinese norms and stories that justify such an intervention, and the American norms that approve of him starting a new life. Ultimately, there is no one truth to this story—no good or bad characters. It is simply a story of the collision of two ways of life that cannot be easily resolved.

Most of Kingston's stories that take place in America center around such irreconcilable contradictions, while her family stories from China—a place Kingston herself has never been—are characterized by her inability to know details at all.

This is apparent in the story of No Name Woman, whose choices and motives can only be guessed. This ambiguity is also evident in Kingston's inability to come to a conclusion about whether or not her mother had children who died in China. The gaps in Kingston's stories about China mirror the gaps in her knowledge of China overall. Kingston's insistence on telling stories that are full of gaps and contradictions is meant to demonstrate fundamental truths about identity, and particularly multi-cultural identity. Every person—but particularly one who is the child of immigrants—is shaped by many conflicting stories and perspectives, and by places and events that will always remain murky and unknown. Thus, the nontraditional structure of Kingston's storytelling mirrors the gaps and contradictions in her own identity.

Kingston's nontraditional style of storytelling—her multiple conflicting narratives and her tendency to blend myth and personal history, for example—mirrors her complex process of identity formation, but it is also more active than that. Kingston's storytelling style is an attempt to assert herself by reinventing the style of storytelling used by her relatives.

Many of the stories Kingston is told by her mother are didactic, meaning that they are not intended to explore ideas or raise questions, but should instead instruct Kingston on what she should and should not do. Kingston's mother tells her the story of No Name Woman, for example, with the intention of showing Kingston the danger of wanton sexuality and the importance of modesty and fidelity. Kingston's choice to tell the story multiple ways and fill in its gaps by imagining her aunt's different motives and desires, then, transforms this from a moralistic story to an open-ended one that helps Kingston to explore her own curiosity and identity.

Likewise, the story of the good empress that Brave Orchid tells Moon Orchid is meant to provide her with a moral lesson. What this story does not do, however, is prepare Moon Orchid for the complexity of the situation she is facing or give her tools to make an informed decision on how to proceed. Kingston is committed to reflecting the multiple nature of reality through her stories rather than presenting a simplistic and ultimately false image through such moralistic narratives.

Thus, Kingston's overt rejection of stories with morals, single truths, and singular perspectives is not simply a mirroring of the complex way she sees the world. Rather, Kingston's choice of storytelling style is an active way of claiming an identity different from her family's, and an acknowledgement that she will have to create her own modes of storytelling in order to thrive in America. Instead of using stories to instruct and repress, Kingston learns to use nontraditional storytelling as a vehicle for her curiosity and a tool for liberating herself from norms and identities that restrict her sense of self. Storytelling thereby reveals the ambiguity of her identity as both Chinese and American, the product of history as well as a symbol of her family's future. She hovers between both, and so refuses to settle into a single narrative to explain who she is.

## GENDER ROLES IN CHINESE CULTURE

Kingston characterizes traditional Chinese culture as having rigid gender rules that particularly limited women's self-expression and did not value girls. Brave Orchid's stories of buying girl slaves and midwifing reveal the brutality of life in China for girls and women who considered themselves fortunate if they were allowed to live beyond infancy (again, at least in Kingston's portrayal). Through storytelling, Kingston imagines what it would be like if people in her ancestral country had believed that girls were as capable and worthy as boys. By imagining herself as the warrior Fa Mu Lan, Kingston expresses her wish to be a hero and a fighter, an image that sharply contrasts with her mother's prediction that she will grow up to be "a wife and a slave"—a woman defined only in relation to others. Later, by reimagining the story of No Name Woman, Kingston also gives credence to the possibility that a Chinese woman could have a sex life that is about her own pleasure and a wish to share her beauty, as opposed to accepting a typical life of servitude and obedience. Through the power of her imagination, Kingston adds richness and complexity to the lives of these women, thereby offering them more individuality than they may have been afforded in life due to the restrictive gender roles of their culture.

The story of No Name Woman is both a source of shame, hence the pretension of silence when telling the tale, and a cautionary fable. Kingston's dead aunt is the protagonist of a story that Kingston's mother orders her not to tell. Kingston is thus left to construct an image of her aunt from that of the young woman lying dead at the bottom of a well with her illegitimate baby. On the other hand, Fa Mu Lan's image is colorfully illustrated on one of the paper dolls that her aunt, Moon Orchid, brings back from China. Both women, however, are the protagonists of stories about rejecting gender conventions in favor of living the lives most suitable to them.

Brave Orchid concludes No Name Woman's story by warning her daughter about the vulnerability of women's bodies: "Now that you have started to menstruate, it could happen to you. Don't humiliate us." Brave Orchid frames pregnancy as something that just happens to a woman when she is not careful. She, unlike her daughter, does not entertain the possibility that No Name Woman may have been in love or that she may have wanted the child that she took with her to the bottom of the well. Kingston interprets it as an act of love, for her aunt could have simply smothered the baby and lived, albeit with her shame. Sex, after all, was not something that women were to be assertive about.

On the other hand, in Kingston's retelling of Fa Mu Lan's story, the girl's assertion that she would take her father's place in battle is an ultimate sign of the dutifulness that many Chinese men prize in their daughters. She is forgiven for wearing a

warrior's clothes, an act that would normally warrant execution. In her retelling of the story of The Woman Warrior, Kingston contemplates a scenario in which a woman can disobey convention and still succeed. Fa Mu Lan's successes are a husband who is her equal partner and who appreciates both her beauty and strength and a son who admires his mother for being a general. When The Woman Warrior gets pregnant, she is not in a delicate state; on the contrary, she alters her armor so that her protruding stomach can give her the look of "a powerful, big man."

Kingston contrasts her fantasies of Fa Mu Lan with the reality of her own life, which she finds disappointing and characterized by her struggle to prove her worth to her parents, who find fault with her for being a girl. Kingston's fights with her mother in particular are not only about gender, but also a conflict over language—about Kingston's right to take her mother's chant of Fa Mu Lan and make it her own, and also her right to define and assert her girlhood in a way that is meaningful to her, as opposed to accepting her mother's gender-based expectations.

As a child, Kingston does not have the language to refute her mother's insistence that she is "bad" or useless. Instead, she cries, which only reinforces her mother's accusation that she is a "bad girl." In other instances, Kingston refutes the language used against her—"I'm not a bad girl"—repeating the negation, though she is not empowered by doing so. The folk tales, on the other hand, give her a language of resistance and serve as an ultimate form of rebellion, for Kingston is using the stories that her mother had told her, stories drawn from a culture that traditionally oppressed women.

While a student at Berkeley, Kingston develops a stronger voice through protesting for various causes, particularly against the Vietnam War, which her brother is fighting in. Protesting, Kingston notes, "did not turn [her] into a boy," meaning that it neither earned Kingston her family's respect nor did it get her Fa Mu Lan's warrior's welcome which they bestowed, instead, to her brother after his return from Vietnam. The benefit is that in protesting Kingston learns to accept that her voice can be heard without her having to throw tantrums or try to out-shout her mother at the dinner table. She also learns to negotiate between the "strong, bossy" voice more typical of a Chinese woman and the softer American feminine voice of the postwar era. Kingston's voice, like her identity, is somewhere in-between.

In that margin, Kingston learns that she can develop an idea of womanhood that is based neither on her mother's traditional assumptions nor on the soft, girlish image she sees in American popular culture. By re-appropriating and re-imagining the lives of her dead aunt and Fa Mu Lan, she slyly makes Brave Orchid's stories of non-traditional women work in her favor. If Fa Mu Lan could defy expectations and become the pride of her village, Kingston believes that she can, too. Her mode of femininity can be uniquely her own.

## SILENCE VS. SPEECH

Kingston has an almost visceral fear of silence. Silence could make it seem as though someone had never existed, as in the case of No Name Woman. In some instances, the unwillingness to talk can lead to madness, as in the case of Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid. In Kingston's characterization, Chinese people associate silence with weakness and insanity, and all of the evidence that Kingston sees in childhood strongly affirms this. The act of telling stories is shown, for Kingston, to be a way to fight against silence, in all its oppressive power.

Following Chinese cultural norms, Kingston's family relentlessly stresses the value of speaking and the danger of silence. Because of this, opposition to silence becomes associated with the Chinese aspect of Kingston's identity.

When Kingston was a baby, Kingston's mother Brave Orchid supposedly cut the membrane under Kingston's tongue so that Kingston would "not be tongue-tied." She wanted her daughter to be able to speak any language, pronounce any word, and always have something to say. Likewise, Kingston's mother teaches her that only insane people whisper. Moon Orchid's descent into insanity seems to prove this. Moon Orchid was unable to speak to her husband in China and, in America, her inability to speak English makes so her fearful of the world around her that she goes insane. After she is institutionalized, Moon Orchid is happier because everyone there "speaks the same language." Thus, the ability to speak is shown to be both a kind of sanity and a metaphor for belonging, while silence becomes emblematic of Kingston's worst fears: weakness and estrangement.

Nonetheless, Kingston does not find speech easy. For much of kindergarten, she cannot bring herself to speak because she is shy, embarrassed of her voice (particularly of revealing its "ugly" Chinese inflection to her white peers), and because American norms dictate that children—particularly girls—should be quiet and orderly, which is at odds with the loud and rowdy childhood that is expected for Chinese children (in Kingston's experience, at least). Being enrolled in a Chinese school after the American school helps Kingston to begin to find her voice. In this way, Chinese culture is associated with speaking and claiming one's identity.

However, Kingston shows that associating China with speech and America with silence would be too simple. In her home and in her Chinese community, Kingston notices pervasive silences on certain topics—silences that seem, to her, to be confusing and repressive. For example, Kingston describes Chinese immigrants in America refusing to speak their names and tell stories from China. While to them this is a way of protecting the parts of their identity that cannot be understood in America, to Kingston this silence is a source of confusion and pain that cuts her off from understanding her heritage. In her

family, dinners are often held in silence, and Kingston notices that there are some topics that, despite her curiosity, cannot be brought up. For example, her mother tells her the story about No Name Woman only once, and she prefaces the story with the instruction that Kingston cannot tell anyone and that she should never bring it up again. This silence is the dead woman's punishment for breaking social norms, and Kingston finds it unbearably cruel. Thus, silence is a threat that also has roots in Chinese culture, hanging over Kingston and intensifying her fear.

Kingston's fear of silence is most palpable in the final chapter of the memoir, in which Kingston torments a silent girl in her sixth-grade class, warning her that unless she speaks, she will never amount to anything or have a personality of her own. Ultimately, Kingston acknowledges the cruelty of this act and understands that her tirade was a projection of her own fear and insecurity, rather than a genuine attempt to help the girl. Kingston fears that if she were to be silent, it would mean being swallowed up both in her family and in the American culture she is trying to navigate—but silence means something different to the other girl. This brings Kingston to an understanding that silence can be a form of cruelty and erasure (as in the silence surrounding No Name Woman) but, for others, such as Kingston's classmate, it can be a form of self-expression and strength.

The climax of the book—the moment in which Kingston asserts her selfhood—is when she is finally able to yell at her family and vocally reject the narratives and expectations that they—and particularly her mother—have imposed on her. She tells her mother that she will not go to Chinese school anymore, that she doesn't want to hear any more of her mother's illogical stories, and that her mother cannot stop her from talking (despite Kingston's mistaken belief that her mother cut the membrane under her tongue to silence her forever). This is a moment in which Kingston appears to have enough confidence and self-knowledge to assert her own needs and envision her own future. In this way, it is a moment of triumph over the silences and insecurities she has fought throughout the book.

On the other hand, though, this moment also betrays Kingston's tremendous confusion between Chinese and American culture and between silence and speech. As Kingston's mother correctly points out, she cut Kingston's tongue so that Kingston would speak *more*, not less. While the intent of cutting Kingston's tongue was likely perfectly clear in a Chinese context, this passage reveals that it did not translate to an American context. Kingston took the tongue-cutting as emblematic of the silence that she feels is imposed upon her as a Chinese person in America, as she is neither able to explain her heritage to her white peers, nor to express her curiosity about it to her Chinese family and community. Therefore, even though Kingston's mother equates Chinese culture with valuing speech, Kingston herself equated her Chinese heritage with a silencing that she had to overcome.

Overall, Kingston suggests that all silence and speech is double-edged, and there is no simple way to separate silence from speech or to determine which is preferable. Silence can be powerful and affirming to one person and simultaneously confusing and painful to another. Kingston acknowledges the complexity of silence and speech by showing that the dual power of both actions to affirm or wound depends entirely on perspective. For her own part, Kingston decisively comes down on the side of valuing speech. Crucially, the kind of speech she values is her own *free* speech, not the kind imposed on her by either Chinese or American norms. In light of Kingston's fear of silence and her complex thoughts about the interplay between silence and speech, her choice to write a memoir using nontraditional methods of storytelling can thus be seen as the ultimate assertion of her individuality and strength.

## THE IMMIGRANT EXPERIENCE

Kingston maintains a connection to "the old world" (China) primarily through her mother, Brave Orchid. Thus, Kingston develops a sense of China as both a real place and a mythical land. This tension is further highlighted by the fact that her family continue to obey the traditions and customs of the old world after immigrating to the United States, despite their lack of relevance in 1950s America. Her mother's insistence that China is "home" persists until the last of their family's land in China is taken over by the villagers. For Kingston, who has no personal connection to this land about which her mother speaks, the anecdote is merely another story, whereas Kingston's mother never planned to make a permanent home in America. The mother and daughter's differing perceptions of home reveal that the line that separates "the native" from "the foreigner" is generational and, often, merely a matter of conditioning.

Brave Orchid's lack of understanding about her children's behavior is one indication of her distance from her adopted country. What baffles her most is their constant movement—an effect of living in a country in which people could never stop working. The effect of this busy lifestyle produces, in Brave Orchid and Kingston, different perceptions of time as well as different values.

Brave Orchid's perception of America is that of a place where she was too busy working to earn a living and maintain a household to remember the pleasures she had once enjoyed in China. Brave Orchid recalls moments when she could enjoy boredom, with "nothing to do but fan ourselves." In contrast, in America, she cannot stop working and claims to "hurt" or "get dizzy" when she stops. This contrast highlights the demanding natures of life as an immigrant and the work that it takes to establish one's place in a new country. Brave Orchid's new life, marked by mobility, forced upon her the new habit of incessant movement to perform tasks—a habit so ingrained that, when

she diverts from it, she believes that her body responds negatively to the change.

Brave Orchid passes this penchant for constant work on to her daughter, who insists that she knows how to work, works all the time, knows "how to kill food, how to skin and pluck it…how to keep warm by sweeping and mopping…how to work when things get bad." In this regard, Kingston mirrors her mother's resourcefulness and toughness. Despite her desire to distance herself from her mother's expectations and "old world" tendencies, she admits that it is those tendencies which have helped her to become an independent woman.

On the other hand, Brave Orchid's constant movement is not the result of restlessness, as she believes it is with her children, but concentration and discipline. While waiting for Moon Orchid at the airport, her own children do not sit with her for the nine hours in which she waits. They are instead "lured away by the magazine racks and the gift shops and the coffee shops" due to their "wandering feet." She quietly "hoped they would get back from the pay t.v.'s or the pay toilets or wherever they were spending their money before the plane arrived." The children's "wandering feet" and attraction to things they do not need support their mother's belief that they tend to be wasteful.

Brave Orchid's perception of Americans parallels Kingston's limited understanding of the Chinese, but it differs in that Brave Orchid sees all foreigners who are not Japanese (a legend says that they were sea-faring Chinese people sent on a mission from which they never returned) as otherworldly. Her method of reimagining inscrutable people and forces as **ghosts** parallels her daughter's habit of re-appropriating folk tales, blending everyday life with history and myth in an effort to make sense of an overwhelming and often confusing world.

Every American Brave Orchid encounters is a "ghost," distinguished only by the jobs or tasks that they perform, such as "Tree-Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts" and, the scariest of all to Brave Orchid, "Newsboy Ghosts" who "shouted ghost words to the empty streets" which she believed "reached children inside the houses, reached inside the children's chests." Brave Orchid's creation of other Americans as "ghosts" indicates that they remain foreign to her despite her presence as the relative newcomer. They are ghosts, too, for each seems to have a special power—the ability to put out fires or drive different vehicles—which no one in her village had.

In China, Brave Orchid believed that, as a doctor, she contended with ghosts that sought to kill the babies she attempted to deliver. Unlike in America, she was not quietly suspicious of the spirits that she perceived but spoke to them directly, asserting that she was not afraid of them and would not give in. In California, her lack of English prevents her from interacting with those whom she does not understand or from asking about the machines whose functions are a mystery to her.

Brave Orchid's American experience is one of striving. Like her daughter, she uses her imagination to cope with both forces that are hard for her to understand and those which are beyond her control. Instead of communicating with other Americans (she cannot due to her lack of English), she creates stories to explain their behavior, just as Kingston creates stories to understand what life in China may have been like. The reliance on stories—to understand the new country and to remember the one that was left behind—is what seems to link generations in Kingston's family, just as Ts'ai Yen's poems linked future generations of Chinese to their Han ancestors.

## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

### GHOSTS

Ghosts represent fear and the unknown in the novel. Ghosts could be the result of the sudden death that seizes newborn infants, or they could account for strange Americans and the machines that they operate. Supernatural creatures, such as ghosts, explain what cannot be readily explained through science or acculturation. Brave Orchid believes that ghosts are not ancestors, as many believe, for she likes "to think that the ancestors are busier than that" and "probably more at rest." Instead, she posits that ghosts are "an entirely different species of creature." She includes ghosts in her "talk-story," or narratives of Chinese legends. In the United States, she also uses the metaphor of ghosts to refer to the Americans whose customs and habits Kingston's family cannot understand.

In the chapter entitled "Shaman," which recounts Brave Orchid's years as a doctor and midwife, Brave Orchid recalls her encounters with numerous ghosts, particularly those who sought the lives of newborn children. Brave Orchid refused talismans from the villagers, fearing that the ghosts would avoid her when, in fact, she wanted them to come near so that she could learn them as thoroughly as she had learned ailments in medical school. Sitting Ghost, also known as "Boulder," is a particularly prevalent ghost. In the narrative, the ghost is introduced as "something alive, rumbling" that "climbed the foot of the bed…and landed bodily on her [Brave Orchid's] chest" (in this way, it resembles a symptom of sleep paralysis—victims of this condition often have hallucinations of antagonistic beings sitting on their chests).Brave Orchid describes Sitting Ghost as an entity with "many wide black mouths," something "dangerous" and "real" that "is surfeited with babies and is now coming after adults." The Sitting Ghost is "mysterious" and "grows." It is a spirit that feeds off of human

weakness—the feebleness of an infant or the low morale of those who doubt themselves, as Brave Orchid did when Sitting Ghost sat on her chest. When a ghost takes possession of her, Brave Orchid asks her classmates to pull her earlobes back and forth and call back her spirit so that she can regain herself.

In California, or the **Gold Mountain**, the ghosts are innumerable. There are "Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, and Fire Ghosts." Ghosts are even delineated racially as "Black Ghosts" and "White Ghosts," though the former are distinguished by being more "open-eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts." The only people who are not ghosts are the Japanese who, according to one legend, may have once been Chinese people, or are the result of "an ape that raped a Chinese princess." The suggestion is that the Japanese are not "ghosts" because they are familiar, though they are still foreign and even antagonistic. Thus, they do not need to be explained as something beyond nature. On the other hand, the Americans exhibit customs and manners that are nonsensical to Kingston's family. To protect themselves from a language that they do not understand, they pretend that it is not a language at all. Among all of the ghosts, the children are most alarmed by the Newsboy Ghost, who is a child like them, but one with the power to call people out of their homes and make them follow him down the street. The children mimic this "ghost," desiring his power, though they also fear him.

## GOLD MOUNTAIN

"**Gold Mountain**" is another name for America, particularly California, where the men in Kingston's family had agreed to meet after immigrating from their native Canton province in China. The Gold Mountain represents opportunity. Its description as "gold" references the California Gold Rush of 1848-1852. Though all of the gold had been extracted from the western mountains long before Kingston's family had arrived, it remained a place where they could reap profits through opening a laundry business. Kingston's family was never wealthy but, as her mother notes, America is a place where work never ceases: "Here midnight comes and the floor's not swept, the ironing's not ready, the money's not made." Thus, while America is a place where the family found economic success and peace from political upheaval, in some ways, they were happier in China where they had more leisure time and were not burdened by the racism that was prevalent in their new country. America offered an escape from the hardships of China, but that escape came at a price—even the literal price of Kingston's father losing his land. The name "Gold Mountain" is, therefore, double-edged: America is a place replete with opportunities to make money, but those opportunities are always a little out of reach. Brave Orchid, who in her old age lends herself out as a farmhand, is like so many immigrants who strive constantly, seeking to extract as much wealth from the land as it has to offer, as though mining for gold in a mountain.

## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *The Woman Warrior* published in 1989.

### 1. No Name Woman Quotes

"You must not tell anyone," my mother said, "what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born.

**Related Characters:** Brave Orchid (speaker), Maxine Hong Kingston, No Name Woman

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 3

**Explanation and Analysis**

This quote opens both the chapter and the memoir. Brave Orchid's message about Kingston's aunt prepares the reader for a family history rooted in secrecy. Despite No Name Woman's suicide being a family secret, Brave Orchid clearly and directly outlines the details of her death, as though it has frequently been detailed. Because Brave Orchid was the one who found her sister-in-law in the well, she may have committed the story to memory, both to acknowledge her trauma and the existence of the woman the men were committed to forgetting due to her transgression—that is, asserting a sexual freedom that was not granted to women. There is a conflict between the silence in which No Name Woman's identity is shrouded and the persistence of memory, which cannot keep anything quiet. Thus, even though Kingston does not know her aunt's name, Kingston insistently gives her an identity rooted in her erasure.

They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brothers, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge west had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker),

Father, Old Man and Old Woman

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 8

**Explanation and Analysis**

No Name Woman, like other women, had a responsibility to remain in the village and to secure its traditions, whereas the men in her family were permitted the right to move West and forge new traditions. They could make mistakes in the new country and no one would know, while everyone would know No Name Woman's errors and transgressions. The boundaries that she crossed were moral and generational, which was less forgivable than moving to a new country. Both she and her brothers, however, were trying to live different lives. What separated her from them was a responsibility imposed on her to bear and care for future generations, which made her life matter less. She was merely the vessel through which the village would perpetuate itself.

> It could very well have been, however, that my aunt did not take subtle enjoyment of her friend, but, a wild woman, kept rollicking company…

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), No Name Woman

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 8

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston is contemplating the context in which her aunt met the man who impregnated her. She briefly considers the possibility that her aunt may have been free with sex, but quickly dismisses the idea, not only because it was unlikely for her time, but also because Kingston herself is not free with sex, and does not know many other people who are either. This interpretation is a vague attempt to place No Name Woman in the context of 1970s free love in America, but it is not sensible enough to be convincing even to Kingston as she reimagines the story.

> In the village structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land. But one human being flaring up into violence could open up a black hole, a maelstrom that pulled in the sky. The frightened villagers, who depended on one another to maintain the real, went to my aunt to show her a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the "roundness." Misallying couples snapped off the future, which was to be embodied in true offspring. The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), No Name Woman

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 12-13

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston attempts to explain what inspired the villagers' violent retribution against her aunt and the rest of the family. In a culture where all were perceived as one people, interconnected and interdependent, Kingston's aunt could not have a private life or commit a transgression that did not involve the whole community. In a culture where women bore the sole responsibility for perpetuating the next generation, her actions were seen as an abdication of her responsibility to the community. Worse, their superstitions fostered the belief that calamity was always a possibility. By having an affair, she had a child whose existence threatened to break the village's harmony with itself and with the spirits it always sought to appease.

> My aunt haunts me—her ghost drawn to me because now, after fifty years of neglect, I alone devote pages of paper to her, though not origamied into houses and clothes. I do not think she always means me well. I am telling on her, and she was a spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), No Name Woman

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 16

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston explains her choice to write about her aunt in the context of Mao's tradition of encouraging Chinese people to create paper replicas of aspects of the modern world to share with dead ancestors. Kingston commits her aunt to writing, which is not an act of symbolism, but a commitment to giving her a history. Kingston suspects that her aunt would not want a history, however—that she would not want anyone to remember her shame or her tragedy. Kingston claims to feel haunted by "her ghost," but perhaps this is also her own fear of unearthing what her family hoped to keep silent.

## 2. White Tigers Quotes

"After I grew up, I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle.... I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind. She said I would grow up a wife and a slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid, Fa Mu Lan

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 20

**Explanation and Analysis**

The chant of Fa Mu Lan is the most memorable and important of the "talk-story," or traditional narratives, that Brave Orchid passes on to Kingston. It was a story that Brave Orchid told in passing, not realizing that it would serve as an inspiration and would become the tool with which Kingston would challenge her mother's unfair and sexist expectations. The story of Fa Mu Lan revealed that there was room in Chinese culture to defy rigid gender norms and to triumph, even as a woman. The story of No Name Woman need not be the only outcome of transgression. Thus, Kingston uses the story of Fa Mu Lan to create a new lesson for herself, about individuality and the assertion of a woman's strength—a lesson that her mother had not expected her to take from the tale.

"I saw two people made of gold dancing the earth's dances. They turned so perfectly together they were the axis of the earth's turning [....] Chinese lion dancers, African lion dancers in midstep. I heard high Javanese bells deepen in midring to Indian bells, Hindu Indian, American Indian [....] Then the dancers danced the future—a machine-future—in clothes I had never seen before. I am watching the centuries pass in moments because suddenly I understand time, which is spinning and fixed like the North Star. And I understand how working and hoeing are dancing; how peasant clothes are golden, as king's clothes are golden; how one dancer is always a man and the other a woman.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Fa Mu Lan

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 27

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan is hallucinating as a result of starving in the forest. Her hallucination is of a world in harmony. Here, Kingston uses the traditions of China, the United States, and other cultures to create a vision of humanity which she defines as being more similar than different. Thus, the Chinese lion dancers become African, and the peals of indigenous American bells just as easily sound like Hindu Indian bells. She imagines a balance between the classes and the sexes, as well. The vision that Fa Mu Lan has on her spirit journey may reflect a similar vision that Kingston had as an adolescent growing up in California. Her sense of social justice distanced her from her parents, but it also gave her a vision of the world that inspired her participation in social justice movements, starting in college.

"I'm not a bad girl," I would scream. "I'm not a bad girl. I'm not a bad girl." I might as well have said, "I'm not a girl."

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 46

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston here responds to the condemnation she receives from her mother and other members of their Chinese community due to her tendency to argue and throw

tantrums. She resists their judgment, but she is not yet capable enough with language to form an effective argument in response to those judgments. Instead, she meets their criticisms with repeated denials and fits of temper, which merely confirm their worst ideas. Note also Kingston's assertion that with these words, she might as well have denied being a girl altogether. "Badness" and "girl" are synonymous in her household. Her denial is a form of effrontery that only reinforces the worst expectations about her being difficult.

❝ It is confusing that my family was not the poor to be championed. They were executed like the barons in the stories, when they were not barons. It is confusing that birds tricked us.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), The Baron

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 51

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston reflects on the stories she heard about her relatives in Communist China. Uncles were killed for owning land or for trying to feed their families, and elderly relatives were killed for no longer being capable of work. This confuses Kingston, for she had always envisioned herself and her family as less privileged, despite the laundry business, both due to their modest income and their status as ethnic minorities. However, in the context of Communist China, they were very privileged, and were presented as enemies of the people in Maoist propaganda. Thus, she learns that interpretations of stories can change, depending on the context in which they are told and who is telling the story.

❝ The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them. What we have in common are the words at our backs. The idioms for *revenge* are "report a crime" and "report to five families." The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words. And I have so many words— "chink" words and "gook" words too—that they do not fit on my skin.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Fa Mu Lan

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 53

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston concludes her retelling of Fa Mu Lan's story by contrasting herself with the woman warrior—she did not perform well in fights, and her mother shielded her from viewing dead bodies around the neighborhood. What they have in common, though, is a need to seek revenge both through and for language. In both Kingston's case and Fa Mu Lan's, they seek retribution for their people who have been wronged by those with more privilege and status. In Fa Mu Lan's story, she seeks out the baron; in Kingston's, she seeks out readers in a society that tolerated discrimination against her family. Through writing her family history, she seeks to show that the slurs that have been used to dehumanize them are crimes worthy of a warrior's revenge.

## 3. Shaman Quotes

❝ But the Communists wear a blue plainness dotted with one red Mao button. My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magicians who came down from the mountains. "When I stepped out of my sedan chair, the villagers said, 'Ahhh,' at my good shoes and my long gown. I always dressed well when I made calls. Some villages brought out their lion and danced ahead of me. You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America."

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 76-77

**Explanation and Analysis**

Brave Orchid explains how she returned to her village in triumph after becoming a doctor. Despite the ancient Chinese aversion to female scholars, she was highly regarded, but also met with disbelief. Her elegance was an indication of her singularity among other villagers, who all wore the same Communist uniform—indeed, under Mao's regime at the time, any kind of association with Western-

ness or wealth was usually condemned. Brave Orchid thinks that she has "fallen" since "coming to America" due to no longer being able to practice medicine. She thinks that this is because she cannot speak English, but she also did not acquire the medical training required in her new country. Still, it is a great fall from being a woman who is the most elegantly dressed in her village to being responsible for washing others' laundry.

> Nor did she change her name: Brave Orchid. Professional women have the right to use their maiden names if they like. Even when she emigrated, my mother kept Brave Orchid, adding no American name nor holding one in reserve for American emergencies.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 77

**Explanation and Analysis**

Brave Orchid had to make many compromises when she moved to America, but she would not change her name, not even to take that of her husband. The decision may have been her attempt to maintain some connection to the prestige she had enjoyed in China, which she can never know again—both because they cannot go back to China, and because the country would never again allow her such a status, not even as a doctor. Her aversion to American names is part of her unwillingness to take the nation seriously, though she eventually relents to it being her home. There is a stubbornness in Brave Orchid that demands that the Americans call her by her Chinese name, though she refuses to call Americans by *their* names.

> My mother's enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl; nor did I replace the older brother and sister who died while they were still cuddly. Throughout my childhood my younger sister said, "When I grow up, I want to be a slave," and my parents laughed, encouraging her.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), The Slave Girl, Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 82

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston compares her mother's recollection of buying the slave girl to her recollection of giving birth to Kingston. One would think that the birth of a child would be a great moment of pride, but Brave Orchid reserves this feeling for her ability to bargain successfully for a sixteen-year-old girl. Sensing her mother's favor for a slave, Kingston's younger sister identifies as such, which amuses and pleases her parents who expect obedience from their daughters. Kingston places her mother's affection somewhere between Brave Orchid's love for her deceased children, who are eternally frozen in newborn perfection for eternity, and her mother's appreciation for the adolescent girl who was intelligent, resourceful, and did as she was told. Kingston is neither an object of adoration nor a dutiful servant, and so feels that her mother has little "enthusiasm" for her.

> I hope this holeless baby proves that my mother did not prepare a box of clean ashes beside the birth bed in case of a girl. "The midwife or a relative would take the back of a girl baby's head in her hand and turn her face into the ashes," said my mother. "It was very easy." She never said she herself killed babies, but perhaps the holeless baby was a boy.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 86

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston recalls her mother's story about delivering a baby born without an anus. Brave Orchid never identifies the gender of the baby, but recalls how it whimpered and struggled, as though trying to make a bowel movement. The fact that the baby was allowed to live long enough to feel his pain indicates that he was probably a boy.

Nevertheless, Brave Orchid never tells her daughter if she herself ever killed a female infant, despite recalling how "easy" it looked when others did it. Kingston hopes that her mother did not participate in the ritual of murdering infant daughters, both out of fear of her mother performing such a heinous act and what that would say about her evaluation of Kingston and her sisters.

> The Japanese, though "little," were not ghosts, the only foreigners not considered ghosts by the Chinese. They may have descended from the Chinese explorers that the First Emperor of Ch'in (221-210 B.C.) had deployed to find longevity medicine. They were to look for an island beyond the Eastern Ocean, beyond the impassable wind and mist. On this island lived phoenixes, unicorns, black apes, and white stags. Magic orchids, strange trees, and plants of jasper grew on Penglai, a fairy mountain, which may have been Mount Fuji. The emperor would saw off the explorers' heads if they returned without the herbs of immortality. Another ancestor of the Japanese is said to be an ape that raped a Chinese princess, who then fled to the eastern islands to have the first Japanese child. Whichever the case, they were not a totally alien species...

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 93

**Explanation and Analysis**

The Chinese attitude toward the Japanese, which was, according to Kingston, to regard them as actual people instead of alien phantoms, reveals a sense of commonality. The Chinese seemed to see the Japanese as a part of them (albeit an antagonistic part)—distant brethren who split off from the family tree at some point in history.

The Chinese myth that connects the Japanese to explorers caters to the notion of the Japanese as a sea-faring people with an appetite for conquest. Perhaps they continued this habit out of fear of a wrathful and murderous emperor. The second myth gives them a sub-human ancestor with a penchant for raping Chinese women. Thus, the Japanese were familiar in the context of myth as barbarous distant relatives. Both of these myths would then help explain to the characters the Japanese abuses of the Chinese in modern history.

> But America has been full of machines and ghosts—Taxi Ghosts, Bus Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Fire Ghosts, Meter Reader Ghosts, Tree Trimming Ghosts, Five-and-Dime Ghosts. Once upon a time the world was so thick with ghosts, I could hardly breathe; I could hardly walk, limping my way around the White Ghosts and their cars. There were Black Ghosts too, but they were open eyed and full of laughter, more distinct than White Ghosts.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 97

**Explanation and Analysis**

Brave Orchid has taught Kingston to regard Americans as ghosts—unreal, transparent creatures that have no connection to them or the real world which, for Brave Orchid, was China. "Machines" and "ghosts" are non-entities with no soul. Every ghost in America serves a social function, and this function names them.

Kingston recalls a world crowded with ghosts, particularly White Ghosts, whose only reference to anything real was their cars. Thus, Kingston defines "White Ghosts" by their materialism, whereas "Black Ghosts" are distinguished more by physical and emotional expression. Both, however, are distant and unfamiliar, despite Kingston's family's co-existence with them.

> Whenever my parents said "home," they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me. My father would marry two or three more wives, who would spatter cooking oil on our bare toes and lie that we were crying for naughtiness. They would give food to their own children and rocks to us. I did not want to go where the ghosts took shapes nothing like our own.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid, Father

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 99

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston's parents remained insistent on going back to China, though their children knew nothing about this country other than what their mother had told them during talk-story. From the stories, China seemed like a place where Kingston and her siblings would endure subjugation within a hierarchy of other children and family members, due to the assumption that their father would take more

wives and those wives would hate Brave Orchid's children. Kingston's greater fear is that she and her siblings would be totally alienated in China, for the customs and habits of the people would be so different from what they have grown up with.

"This is a terrible ghost country, where a human being works her life away," she said. "Even the ghosts work, no time for acrobatics. I have not stopped working since the day the ship landed. I was on my feet the moment the babies were out. In China I never even had to hang up my own clothes. I shouldn't have left, but your father couldn't have supported you without me. I'm the one with the big muscles."

**Related Characters:** Brave Orchid (speaker), Maxine Hong Kingston, Father

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 104

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston has returned home to visit her mother, who admits to missing her and the other children now that they have all moved away. Brave Orchid does not like America, which is why she held out hope for so long of moving back to China, and tried to convince her children that America was a "ghost country," in which nothing was real, as in China. Work—the menial physical labor of doing laundry—has characterized her life in the United States. In China, however, she enjoyed a higher status and made enough money to hire servants. Thus, while in the U.S. she tends to other people's laundry, in China she was so pampered that she never hung up her own clothes. She moved to America to support her husband, whom she insists was weaker than she.

Brave Orchid usurps the masculine role in her marriage by declaring herself "the one with the big muscles." Kingston notes that her mother is physically strong, lifting 100 pounds of Texas rice, but also has a determination to persevere and override her fears.

## 4. At the Western Palace Quotes

"A long time ago," began Brave Orchid, "the emperors had four wives, one at each point of the compass, and they lived in four palaces. The Empress of the West would connive for power, but the Empress of the East was good and kind and full of light. You are the Empress of the East, and the Empress of the West has imprisoned the Earth's Emperor in the Western Palace. And you, the good Empress of the East, come out of the dawn to invade her land and free the Emperor. You must break the strong spell she has cast on him that has lost him the East."

**Related Characters:** Brave Orchid (speaker), Moon Orchid's Husband , Moon Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 143

**Explanation and Analysis**

On the drive to Los Angeles to reunite Moon Orchid with her husband, Brave Orchid begins this talk-story to encourage Moon Orchid to fight for her right to be back in her husband's life after years of abandonment. In her descriptions of the figurative Empresses of the East and West, Brave Orchid expresses her contempt for Western life and its false promises. It is a place that casts a strong spell, causing some people to forget the East, which is "good and kind and full of light." Moon Orchid, with her lack of guile, fits this description, but her husband was lured away from her by the promise of becoming Western. Brave Orchid suggests that not only has he lost connection to his wife, but also to his roots and true self.

"Oh, Sister, I am so happy here. No one ever leaves. Isn't that wonderful? We are all women here. Come. I want you to meet my daughters." She introduced Brave Orchid to each inmate in the ward—her daughters. She was especially proud of the pregnant ones. "My dear pregnant daughters." She touched the women on the head, straightened collars, tucked blankets. "How are you today, dear daughter?" "And, you know," she said to Brave Orchid, "we understand one another here. We speak the same language, the very same. They understand me, and I understand them." Sure enough, the women smiled back at her and reached out to touch her as she went by. She had a new story, and yet she slipped entirely away, not waking up one morning.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston, Moon Orchid (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 160

**Explanation and Analysis**

Brave Orchid visits Moon Orchid in a state asylum after Moon Orchid's daughter commits her, due to her mother suffering a series of paranoid attacks. Moon Orchid is comforted in what would normally be perceived as a very uncomfortable place. She finds constancy in the other women's madness, as well as a common language between them. It is possible that the women communicate to each other silently, given that Moon Orchid does not speak English. This would indicate that silence has the power to connect people, too.

By designating the women as her daughters and taking a concern in their pregnancies (it is not clear whether they are real or phantom), she establishes another family—indeed, another village for herself, since she can no longer return to China and could not find a community in which she belonged in California. This "family" offers a "new story," which ends when Moon Orchid dies.

## 5. A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe Quotes

"I cut it so that you wouldn't be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything. Your frenum looked too tight to do those things, so I cut it."

**Related Characters:** Brave Orchid (speaker), Maxine Hong Kingston

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 164

**Explanation and Analysis**

Brave Orchid responds to Kingston's question of why she cut Kingston's frenulum under her tongue when Kingston was a baby. It is not certain whether this event actually occurred, or if it is just "talk-story." Still, Brave Orchid expresses a wish for her daughter to have fluency and fluidity in speech. Later, Kingston suspects that the purpose of the tongue-cutting was to do just the opposite, to make her less capable of expressing herself, though her mother insists otherwise.

Brave Orchid does not want Kingston to suffer the limitation that she endured due to being unable to learn English. She would also like her to avoid Moon Orchid's helpless fate—partly the result of being unable to speak English and partly of being unable to communicate with her husband. Problems arise, in Brave Orchid's view, when people are "tongue-tied" or do not know what to say in a given situation. Brave Orchid thus tried to ensure that her daughter would be a better talker.

Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American-Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 172

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston contrasts the expression of voice. Kingston separates herself from "normal Chinese" women—that is, those who were born in China and have an instinctive sense of the language derived from living on the land—and American-Chinese, like Kingston, who have learned the language second-hand and apply an American cadence.

Kingston grew up in California in the 1950s, when femininity, particularly that which was portrayed in the films Kingston enjoyed watching in her youth, portrayed girlish women whose voices were small—a contrast to the "strong and bossy" voices she was accustomed to hearing. Kingston's voice did not fit either of these modes, but she felt pressure to adapt to the latter voice to make herself appealing in mainstream American culture.

Lie to the Americans. Tell them you were born during the San Francisco earthquake. Tell them your birth certificate and your parents were burned up in the fire. Don't report crimes; tell them we have no crimes and no poverty. Give a new name every time you get arrested; the ghosts won't recognize you. Pay the new immigrants twenty-five cents an hour and say we have no unemployment. And, of course, tell them we're against Communism. Ghosts have no memory anyway and poor eyesight.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Related Symbols:**

**Page Number:** 184-185

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston contemplates her Chinese community's method of dealing with Americans, particularly authorities. The rule is subterfuge and to reveal as little about one's background as possible. Kingston constructs nearly every sentence as an imperative, emphasizing the sense of these being rules that one ought to follow to thrive in the new country.

In this passage, Kingston subtly addresses the way subterfuge allowed the Chinese to shift socially from an ostracized and scorned group to a "model minority." By maintaining social cohesion—collectively refusing to report crimes and keeping quiet about illegal immigrants amongst them—they eluded suspicion and reproach. They relied on the Americans' prejudices and the stereotypical inability to tell Asians apart ("Ghosts have no memory anyway and poor eyesight") to insinuate themselves among the citizenry.

> Maybe because I was the one with the tongue cut loose, I had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know the true things about me and to stop the pain in my throat.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker), Brave Orchid

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 197

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston adopts the Catholic habit of confession, which she has learned from her Mexican and Filipina friends. She thinks that by confessing all of the improper things that she has ever done or thought about doing, she can grow closer to her mother, though this does not work.

Kingston's desire to confess is rooted in a need to cast off the traditional habit of secrecy and to try to establish new, more American traditions, which allow people to speak about their experiences and thoughts without shame. The "pain in [Kingston's] throat" is seemingly the physical result of withholding secrets. Ironically, her mother loosened her tongue, but there was still an obligation not to speak, or only to say "charming" things that would never offend.

> What I'll inherit someday is a green address book full of names. I'll send the relatives money, and they'll write me stories about their hunger [...] I've been making money; I guess it's my turn. I'd like to go to China and see those people and find out what's a cheat story and what's not. Did my grandmother really live to be ninety-nine? Or did they string us along all those years to get our money? Do the babies wear a Mao button like a drop of blood on their jumpsuits? When we overseas Chinese send money, do the relatives divide it evenly among the commune? Or do they really pay 2 percent tax and keep the rest? It would be good if the Communists were taking care of themselves; then I could buy a color t.v.

**Related Characters:** Maxine Hong Kingston (speaker)

**Related Themes:**

**Page Number:** 206

**Explanation and Analysis**

Kingston's questions about her family history, which she posits at the end of the novel, concern what is real and what is apocryphal. The beginning of the novel addresses the supposed impermeability of the silence around No Name Woman, but now Kingston seeks to go to China and find the answers to her own questions about the gaps in her family's stories. She seems less convinced that their suffering is as thorough as they say. It is possible, too, that the Communists are as prone to materialism as anyone else and might, just like their brethren in the West, tell lies and cheat the government to keep more of what they earn and accept as financial gifts. Kingston seemingly poses these questions not to attack their integrity, but to draw herself closer to them. As with her aunt, she wants to see what she shares in common with these long-lost relatives.

## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

### 1. NO NAME WOMAN

Brave Orchid, Maxine Hong Kingston's mother, tells her that her father had a sister who drowned herself in the family well. The family claims that Kingston's father only had brothers. Denial around his sister's pregnancy began when the family first noticed her distended belly—around the same time that the men in Kingston's family began to leave for America, or **Gold Mountain**.

*It seems that Brave Orchid tells Kingston this story in an effort to maintain the family's history of its women, which the men have the power to erase. The erasure could occur not only because of the wish to deny the shame that the sister brought the family, but also because going to America meant creating a new history.*

No Name Woman, which is the name that Kingston grants her shamed aunt, had the baby in the early summer, according to Brave Orchid. The villagers "had been counting" the months from the time No Name Woman's husband left until she got pregnant. They raided the family's home "on the night the baby was to be born."

*Kingston grants her aunt an identity, though it is one that is defined by her anonymity. In the village, however, No Name Woman was known and closely watched, and was never granted the opportunity for any kind secrecy or private life.*

Brave Orchid recalls that the villagers first "threw mud and rocks at the house." Then, they became more violent, slaughtering livestock and breaking into the house, particularly the aunt's room. They destroyed her clothes and shoes "and broke her combs, grinding them underfoot." That evening, No Name Woman gave birth in a pigsty. When Brave Orchid went out for water, she found her sister-in-law and the baby "plugging up the family well."

*The villagers' choice to throw "mud and rocks" is symbolic of the filth which they thought No Name Woman had brought onto her family and the village—they assume that her private actions are public, and affect them all. The comforts of her room contrast with the pigsty in which she gave birth.*

Kingston notes that, whenever Brave Orchid wanted to teach her children something, she would relate a story like this one. The world that Brave Orchid knew was one of "brute survival." The children of immigrants had to figure out how those customs fit into "solid America."

*"Brute survival" indicates that there was limited room for mistakes. No Name Woman, for example, made an error that led to her death. Brave Orchid expected her children to avoid similar mistakes, even in a country that seemed to offer more second chances.*

One method of "brute survival" is the habit of being intentionally misleading. The Chinese not only confuse authorities by hiding their real names, Kingston says, but also seek to confuse the gods by "misleading them with crooked streets and false names." This is further complicated by the penchant for telling stories. Thus, one wonders, "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" Kingston wonders, what actually happened and how much is just invention?

*In the book, Chinese people tell stories as a mode of survival. Learning one's history can be tricky when so much of it may have been made up, both to ensure entry to the United States and to fulfill superstitious beliefs. Fact and fiction are elusive but, it seems, one must be elusive to survive against unjust laws—both those of the immigration authorities and the gods.*

Brave Orchid taught her children that whenever they did "useless" things, they used up energy. Kingston wonders if her aunt may have been one of few Chinese to be extravagant enough to commit adultery. She wonders if her aunt could have been "the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex." It is also possible, she thinks, that No Name Woman was like many Chinese women and did not choose, but that a man may have forced her "to lie with him" and may also have "masked himself" to join in the raid on her family.

*Kingston compares Brave Orchid's notion of "useless" action with her aunt's possible penchant for the "extravagance" of romance. Sex, in the context of No Name Woman's Chinese village, was functional, not a matter of pleasure. Knowing that, Kingston thinks that her aunt may have been raped. If she could not choose to be in love, it is also possible that she could not choose sex.*

Kingston contemplates how her aunt may have met her lover or rapist. Maybe they met in the fields or in the mountains where she would have collected fuel. Kingston is sure that he would not have been a stranger, for there were no strangers in the village. She is also sure that they would have dealt with each other for non-sexual reasons. Perhaps he sold No Name Woman cloth. When he asked for sex, she probably did what she was told, for, "she always did as she was told."

*In keeping with the notion that her aunt was probably as practical as every other member of her family, Kingston imagines that her secret relationship could have been transactional. If her lover/rapist sold her cloth, he could have asked for sex in exchange, as a form of payment. Her aunt, accustomed to obeying and fearing men, perhaps would have agreed.*

No Name Woman married a man from the next village. They had not yet met, so she stood beside "the best rooster, his proxy," for the wedding ceremony. They met once on the night of their honeymoon, then "he left for America" and they never met again. Kingston imagines that her aunt's lover was probably not much different from her husband. He, too, likely gave orders that she followed and may have ordered her not to tell her family about him, threatening to kill her.

*The fact that No Name Woman marries a rooster "by proxy" is both proof of the lack of romance offered to women in the village and the equation of women with livestock, or property. Whereas her husband had the opportunity to do as he pleased, even immigrating, No Name Woman remained the property of the village—her body and her offspring as much theirs as eggs from a hen.*

As punishment for her crime against the family, No Name Woman sat alone at meals. There was, according to Kingston's parents, an "outcast table." Chinese people did not let their "wrongdoers" go out and start "separate new lives like the Japanese, who could become samurais and geishas." Instead, they "hung on to the offenders and fed them leftovers."

*The villagers wanted those who offended the rules and customs to feel the weight of social alienation, which would have been less likely if they were given the individual freedom to form new lives. Feeding them leftovers indicates that they are afterthoughts or burdens, like stray animals.*

No Name Woman technically belonged to her husband's parents. In Chinese tradition, daughters-in-law lived with their husbands' parents. When Kingston's aunt committed her offense, her in-laws sent her back to her own family, though they could have "sold her, mortgaged her, stoned her." Kingston finds this mysterious and wonders if they granted her this privilege "to deflect the avengers."

*Kingston finds it unlikely that her aunt's in-laws were generous, given the traditionally servile relationship between daughters-in-law and a husbands' parents. However, they could also have deflected the avengers by selling No Name Woman, indicating that they were not as unfeeling as Kingston suspects.*

All of No Name Woman's brothers, including Kingston's father, "became western men." When the family's goods were divided, three brothers took the land and Kingston's father chose an education. Kingston's aunt, on the other hand, was expected "to keep the traditional ways." Women were regarded as "heavy" and "deep-rooted," capable of maintaining "the past against the flood, safe for returning."

*This sense of women maintaining the past is likely rooted in their ability to give birth—to perpetuate generations and, thus, traditions. This is what made the villagers think that women had to remain, while men had the freedom to move to new places.*

Kingston wonders what No Name Woman may have enjoyed about "her friend." Maybe she liked the way his "hair was tucked behind his ears" or "the question-mark line of a long torso." Perhaps he had "warm eyes or a soft voice." For some small amount of charm, "she gave up the family." Kingston also wonders if her aunt was "a wild woman," but the image of her being "free with sex" does not seem right at all. These notions are attempts for Kingston to connect her life with that of her aunt so that her aunt can offer her "ancestral help."

*Kingston imposes her own ideas about what makes a man attractive to relate better to her imagining of her aunt. If she and her aunt have similar notions about desire, then maybe Kingston can understand her aunt, despite their differences in time and place. Kingston considers No Name Woman within the context of 1970s sexual liberation, whose notions of sexual freedom do not fit Kingston any more than they would have fit her aunt.*

Kingston imagines her aunt working on her beauty in a mirror in an effort to sustain her love. Married Chinese women did not generally look after their appearance too much; one who did was regarded as eccentric. Married women tended to wear blunt haircuts or pulled their hair back into a bun. Her aunt, however, "combed individuality into her bob." Using a string, she pulled back her hairline and "the tops of her eyebrows" to make "a smooth brow." Kingston recalls that her mother repeated the technique on her daughters. Knowing how much pain this caused, Kingston hopes that No Name Woman's lover appreciated her smooth brow.

*Having a lover would have given No Name Woman more interest in expressing her femininity to appeal to him. Due to limitations in the ways a woman could express her sexuality, the only way in which she could safely be desirable would have been through combing her hair. Like many beauty rituals, No Name Woman's method of combing caused her pain and there was always the possibility that her lover might not have noticed.*

Paying such attention to her looks, Kingston imagines No Name Woman would have caused gossip. She may also have piqued the curiosity of other men, even male relatives. These men left because of poverty, but there may have been another reason—"the never-said."

*Kingston contemplates the possibility that No Name Woman's unusual attention to her looks may have led to incest in the family. Thus, the men would have left not only for opportunity, but also to elude the shame of discovery.*

Kingston thinks, too, that her aunt may have been spoiled, "unusually beloved" as "the precious only daughter." Her family welcomed the chance to take her back after her husband left. Kingston's grandfather was supposedly different from other people as a result of being bayoneted in the head by a Japanese soldier. Once, he tried to trade one of his sons for a baby girl, which he had brought home "wrapped up inside his brown western-style greatcoat." His grandmother made him trade the child back. When he finally got a daughter of his own, "he doted on her."

*Kingston's grandfather's love of a girl was so unusual in his culture that the family created a story in which he suffered brain damage. It is possible, Kingston suggests, that her father's love created within No Name Woman an expectation that she was deserving of other men's love as well. The "western-style" coat in which Kingston's grandfather wraps the strange baby girl parallels his sons' abilities to become "western" men.*

To allow for the harmony of five generations living under one roof without creating sexual confusion, Kingston notes that they "[effaced] their sexual color" in favor of "plain miens." As a result, they all adopted loud voices, which remained "unmodulated to American tones even after years away from the village." Kingston tried to break away from this by walking with her toes "pointed forward" and not "pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine." She also spoke "in an inaudible voice," which was American-feminine.

*To avoid the risk of incest, Kingston's relatives made their voices unalluring, suggesting that attraction is not merely physical, but also occurs through speech. Kingston has difficulty adjusting her speech, as well as her body, to an American mode of feminine attractiveness. Whereas a Chinese voice was abrasive and overbearing, an "American-feminine" one made it seem as though she barely had a voice at all.*

Silence was important, too. At the dinner table, no one spoke. No Name Woman never said "her inseminator's name." Kingston thinks that it could have been a man within her own household, though in their village, sleeping with a man outside of the family would have been just as bad. All men in the village were "kinsmen." They were neutralized as possible lovers by being referred to as "brother," "younger brother," or "older brother."

*No Name Woman's silence may have been a way to protect her lover, or she may have remained quiet because it would not have mattered who he was. The communalism among inhabitants of her village made all relations seem incestuous as well as public. Silence at dinner may have been a way to avoid the casual talk that leads to revelations.*

To make herself less fearful of boys, Kingston herself quietly added "brother" to boys' names. She thinks this is why no one asked her to dance and why she had no dates. She did not know "how to make attraction selective." She thought that if she made herself "American-pretty," the few Chinese boys in her class would fall in love with her, but so would those who were not Chinese.

*Kingston had a complex relationship with Chinese boys. Through her upbringing, she was to regard them as both kin and the only suitable romantic companions. The pressure to conform to American beauty standards to attract them would also, she assumes, attract those she had been taught to regard as unsuitable.*

Kingston's family allowed for some romance, but it was important to avoid a misalliance. These couples "snapped off the future," due to their inability to have "true offspring." The villagers got angry at No Name Woman for acting as though "she could have a private life" which did not concern them at all. Kingston thinks that if she had committed her infidelity at some other time, during a period in which there were large yields of grain, when there was peace and many boys were born, she may have escaped their punishment.

*The purpose of coupling was to ensure the continuance of future generations, not the happiness of couples. The villagers got angry at No Name Woman for choosing personal happiness. This was an indulgence that Kingston imagines might have been tolerated during a period of prosperity, but not a period in which women had to have legitimate offspring to secure the future.*

After the villagers attacked their home, No Name Woman's family believed that she had cursed them. They were certain that death was coming. To avoid the worst, they treated her as though she were already dead and called her "**Ghost**." In response, she ran away into the fields and endured the pain of childbirth alone.

*No Name Woman's family erased her due to fears of punishment from the villagers and their own superstitions. By calling her "ghost," she became the embodiment of their fears of death and the inability to perpetuate future generations.*

Kingston thinks that the No Name Woman's act of going to the pigsty to give birth may have been her last act of responsibility, her decision to "protect this child as she had protected its father." She killed it and herself because a child with no descent line would haunt her. Kingston also thinks that carrying the baby to the well was an act of love, because she could have simply smothered it in the mud. A mother who loves her child takes it along. It is possible, too, that the baby was a girl. If it had been a boy, the family may have been more forgiving.

*Giving birth in the pigsty was both an acknowledgement of her wrongdoing and of the notion that she had sullied the family's reputation. However, No Name Woman would not deny her love for the child she was not allowed to have. Kingston posits that, if it had been a boy, she might have abandoned it and left it for the family to raise. Committing suicide with her child in her arms suggested love of the most desperate kind.*

It had been twenty years since Kingston first heard the story about her aunt. She has not asked for details, not even her aunt's name. Kingston recalls how Chairman Mao had encouraged the Chinese to give "paper replicas" of things from life, such as houses, meat, and dresses—even "spirit money"—to the "spirits of outstanding soldiers and workers, no matter whose ancestors they may be." In a similar vein, Kingston devotes pages of paper to No Name Woman, despite her sense that her aunt's spirit does not wish her well. Kingston, after all, insists on telling her shameful story, that of a "spite suicide" who drowned herself. The Chinese are particularly afraid of "the drowned one, whose weeping **ghost**...waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute."

*Kingston commits her aunt to memory by writing about her, thus giving her the history that her family denied her. Through her narrative she also gives her aunt's life more complexity and meaning than what was traditionally granted to women of her background. Kingston, prone to superstition because of her upbringing, fears that her aunt would not appreciate this exposure of her shame. However, by calling her a "spite suicide," Kingston raises the possibility that her aunt may have killed herself not out of shame, but anger for being unfairly deprived of the life she wanted to live.*

## 2. WHITE TIGERS

Kingston says that when Chinese girls listened to adults "talk-story," or tell tales, they learned that they failed if they grew up only to be wives or slaves. Instead, they could be heroines or swordswomen. A swordswoman could get revenge against anyone who hurt her family. Moreover, it was a woman, according to legend, who invented "white crane boxing." According to Brave Orchid, that woman, "already an expert pole fighter," had asked the spirit of a white crane if it would teach her to fight. It later returned "as an old man" who "guided her in boxing for many years."

*In narratives, or "talk-story," the Chinese girls Kingston describes noticed that women were granted more flexibility in regard to who they could become. Real life offered these girls a fate of servility, but in the stories, they could be powerful and were also granted key roles in history. Whereas real life had relegated them to passivity and rooted them to their villages, they could be as active and mobile as men—and even more so—in "talk-story."*

On Sundays, Kingston and Brave Orchid would see movies at the Confucius Church. In the films, swordswomen would "jump over houses from a standstill," without even "a running start." Kingston perceived her mother's ability to talk-story as another "great power." After she grew up, she recalled the chant of Fa Mu Lan, "the girl who took her father's place in battle." Kingston had heard it in childhood, but she learned the full chant later. Her mother had always told her that she would "grow up a wife and a slave," but the song of Fa Mu Lan led Kingston to her decision to become "a warrior woman."

*In the story of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston finds a role model and a way to break with the sexist legacy of the past. However, Kingston recognizes that not all power needs to be physical. Her mother's ability to tell a story without a preparation is similar to the ability of the swordswomen in the films to jump over houses without a running start.*

The call to become a warrior would come from "a bird that flew over [their] roof," similar to those in brush drawings. Kingston begins to imagine herself as Fa Mu Lan. She would have been seven years old on the day that she followed the bird into the mountains. The village that she had come from "would have vanished under the clouds." The bird, which would appear golden due to their proximity to the sun, would rest "on the thatch of a hut," which appeared to be a part of the mountainside until the bird rested its feet upon it.

*In the universe of talk-story, a person's fate is decided through signs. The bird is perhaps a symbol in Fa Mu Lan's story due to birds being messengers, as well as traditional symbols of freedom. Kingston is attracted to the story as a child not only because it diverts from the traditional narrative of girls as wives and slaves, but also because the story gave her a path to follow.*

The door to the hut opens. An old man and an old woman come out "carrying bowls of rice and soup and a leafy branch of peaches." At bedtime, they tuck her into a bed just as wide as Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's body, and the old woman covers her with "a silk bag stuffed with feathers and herbs." Opera singers, the old woman say, "who begin their training at five, sleep in beds like this."

*The future swordswoman is trained by elders, indicating that she is a part of a tradition that has nothing to do with childbearing. Her training is long and complex, requiring a special diet and particular sleeping arrangements. The comparison with opera singers likens fighting to an art.*

The old man and old woman ask Kingston / Fa Mu Lan to stay with them for fifteen years. When she asks about her parents, the old couple show her an image in a drinking gourd. There, at the bottom, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's parents are looking at the sky, as though searching for her. Her mother says that she did not think that the girl would be taken so soon. Her father says that they knew from her birth that she would be taken. Now they will have to harvest the potatoes without her. The old man asks Kingston / Fa Mu Lan what she would like to do: learn to be a warrior who fights barbarians and bandits or go harvest sweet potatoes. If she remains, the old woman says, she could avenge her village and be remembered forever. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan decides to stay.

*The choice is between a dull but normal life close to those one loves and an exciting life that offers the reward of heroism, but also loneliness and years of grueling training. The fact that Kingston chooses this as her fantasy life indicates that, as a young person, she wanted an extraordinary life, even if it required great challenges. The notion that Fa Mu Lan was fated from birth to become a warrior suggests that some people are destined to live more remarkable lives than others, but only if they choose to accept the option offered to them.*

The first thing Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has to learn, says the old woman, is how to be quiet. They leave her by the streams to watch for animals. At dawn, they lead her in exercises that end at sunset. After five years, her body becomes so strong that she can "control even the dilations of the pupils inside [her] irises." After six years, she can run beside deer. She can also jump twenty feet into the air from a standstill, "leaping like a monkey over the hut."

*The warrior woman's first lesson diverts from the lesson Kingston had been taught growing up—to speak and to make her voice strong and loud. The purpose of the training is not only to make the body strong, but also to improve her concentration, to make every action intentional.*

In her seventh year of training—she is fourteen—the old people lead her "blindfolded to the mountains of the white tigers." With a running start, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan leaps "over the roots, rocks," and "the little hills." The "tiger place" is "a mountain peak three feet from the sky." The old man and old woman wave goodbye, then slide down the mountainside. The old woman takes the bow and arrow, and the old man takes the water gourd. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has to survive "bare-handed" in the snow.

*Kingston imagines enduring a survival ritual, similar to what boys must endure in some cultures as a rite of passage. As a fourteen-year-old girl, the focus is no longer on making herself "American-feminine" to be attractive, but on being physically strong and capable, traits that are usually more appreciated in boys.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan collects wood. The old man and old woman had taught her that fire is stored in trees "that grow red flowers or red berries in the spring or whose leaves turn red in the fall." On the first night, she burns half the wood. She sleeps "curled against the mountain" and hears "the white tigers prowling on the other side of the fire." In the morning, she collects more "wood and edibles," but she eats nothing. She only drinks the water made from melted snow.

*Kingston imagines being in communion with nature and knowing how to survive in the natural world alone. This is reminiscent of Brave Orchid's belief in brute survival, but this time the survival depends on truth. In both instances, it is a matter of knowing what to do and what not to do in order to live.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has gotten "smug" in her strength because the first two days were so easy. The third day of fasting is hard. She "faded into dreams" about the meals her mother cooked. She burns most of her wood that night, for she is unable to sleep out of fear of death. On the fourth and fifth days, she tracks deer and gathers "the fungus of immortality" from the place where they had "nibbled." On the tenth day, she packs snow and builds a fire around a rock. In the melted snow, she puts "roots, nuts, and the fungus of immortality." For "variety," she eats "a quarter of the nuts and roots raw." This turns out to be the best meal of her life.

*Fa Mu Lan begins to long for home, and food is one of the most accessible comforts of home. In her youth, she does not know that hunger can be difficult, so she underestimates it. To avoid the possibility of death from starvation, she tracks and gathers "the fungus of immortality." This fantasy protects Kingston from the possibility of not surviving in the world when it fails to provide, and family is no longer around to help.*

One day, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan walks "long distances." Food becomes very scarce. She has walked into "dead land," where there isn't even any snow. She resolves to continue onward, fasting until she gets to the next woods. She burns almost all of her fuel to avoid wasting strength by carrying a lot of wood. After a while, she loses count of the days. She misses her mother and father. One night, she eats the last of her food, but is still able to make a nice fire. Staring into the flames reminds her of her mother and home-cooked meals.

*The "long distances" that the warrior woman walks are similar to the long distance that we later learn Kingston traveled in order to gain some freedom from her family and its pressures. There is a tension between missing home, but also wanting to survive on her own and wanting to test her individual strength in isolation.*

Suddenly, a white rabbit appears. For a moment, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan thinks it is "a blob of snow that had fallen out of the sky." Her parents had taught her how to "hit rabbits over the head with wine jugs, then skin them cleanly for fur vests." She puts another branch on the fire to help the rabbit keep warm. It does not remain beside her, but instead jumps into the fire. The flames go down a little, then shoot up "taller than before." When the fire calms, she sees that the rabbit has been transformed into meat, "browned just right." The rabbit has sacrificed itself for her.

*The rabbit is a symbol of good fortune and a reminder of the survival tactics that Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's parents have taught her. The sudden appearance of the rabbit is indicative of the way in which a stroke of good luck can temporarily relieve one's suffering and that, sometimes, things show up at the precise moment in which you need them. The scene also emphasizes how Fa Mu Lan seems fated to become a great warrior—even animals give themselves up to help her in her time of need.*

During her fast, before the rabbit appeared, hunger made Kingston / Fa Mu Lan hallucinate. She saw "two people made of gold dancing the earth's dances," turning "so perfectly that together they were the axis of the earth's turning." She saw Chinese and African lion dancers "in midstep" and heard "high Javanese bells deepen in midring to Indian bells, Hindu Indian, American Indian." The dancers "danced the future [...] in clothes she had never seen before." Suddenly, she understood time and understood that "working and hoeing" were also forms of dance and that peasant's clothes are just as golden as those of a king, and that "one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman."

*In her hallucinatory dream, Fa Mu Lan witnesses the harmony of men and women and of other cultures. Her comparison of the same objects from different cultures is a reminder of how Kingston has used influences not only from Chinese culture but also from American culture and others to create her personalized myth of Fa Mu Lan. She applies a class consciousness, too, that the original story may not have had, as well as an emphasis on the equality of the sexes.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan then sees "the old brown man and the old gray woman" walking toward [her] out of the pine forest." They feed her vegetable soup and ask her to talk-story about what happened "in the mountains of the white tigers." Kingston / Fa Mu Lan tells the old couple that the white tigers "had stalked [her] through the snow" and that she "fought them off with burning branches." She also tells them that her great-grandparents' spirits had appeared to lead her "safely through the forests." She says that the rabbit she ate had taught her about self-sacrifice and "how to speed up transmigration." The old couple laugh and say that she tells good stories. They tell her to go to sleep, for the next day, she will have her first dragon lessons. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan want to tell them that, in her dream, she saw how old the couple really was, but she "was already asleep."

*Kingston describes the old couple for the first time in this passage, but only with colors that could reflect their respective places in nature. Brown, for instance, is reminiscent of the color of the cooked rabbit. This indicates that the old people, too, have a place in nature and provide her with nourishment similar to that of the rabbit. The legend that Kingston narrates becomes a metanarrative in which she does talk-story within a talk-story. In each case, she includes her personal vision and creativity to express something she has learned about life. Both the stories of Fa Mu Lan and the spirit journey are about survival and identity formation.*

Dragon training takes another eight years. Learning and copying tigers is relatively easy, but "adult wisdom" is required to know dragons. Dragons are too big, and Kingston / Fa Mu Lan will never see a live one in its entirety. Climbing the mountains is like walking on top of a dragon's head. The closest she comes to seeing a dragon whole is when the old man and the old woman "cut away a small strip of bark on a pine that was over three thousand years old." Its resin flows "in the swirling shapes of dragons." They tell her that, if she decides in her old age to live "another five hundred years," she should drink "ten pounds of this sap." For their own immortality, the old couple eat the leaves of the "red-cloud herb," which they send Kingston / Fa Mu Lan out to pick.

*Learning tigers was easier because it required skills that come easily to young people—quickness and determination. Learning dragons, however, is about understanding the immensity of things and accepting that some things can never be known fully. In the story, dragons not only symbolize the vastness of the world, but also the idea of believing in that which one cannot know or see. In the context of this story, dragons have always existed and, like the divine, are present in all things, even the sap in a "small strip" of pine.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan makes her mind "large" to understand the universe and its "paradoxes." She works every day and exercises in downpours. She is grateful not to be pulling sweet potatoes. On New Year's mornings, the old man lets her watch her family in the water gourd—they are eating the biggest meal of the year. For the holiday, the old couple do not give Kingston / Fa Mu Lan money, but a bead wrapped in red paper, which they take back "for safekeeping." As usual, they eat "monk's food."

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan thinks that, had she remained with her parents, she would not have developed the philosophical sense to contemplate life's immensities. She would have led a simple farm life, which would have been happy and uncomplicated. Still, she misses the smaller pleasures of being with family during holidays.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan also look in the water gourd to watch the men she will one day have to kill. They are "fat men" who eat meat and drink rice wine. They "sat on naked little girls." She watches them counting their money while starving men count what little they have. When bandits go home with what they have stolen, she waits for them to remove their masks so that she can see their faces. She also learns the faces of generals and rebels.

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan must avenge those with power who take advantage of those who are powerless. The "fat men" are greedy and so abusive of power that they sit "naked" on "little girls," an image that suggests sexual abuse. She learns faces to see who will be on her side and who she must defeat.*

The old man shows Kingston / Fa Mu Lan the "strengths and weaknesses" of other warriors when they go into battle. She sees the ways in which warriors could be cheated in battle if the peasants decide to attack. The old man insists that she will never be "trapped like that poor amateur." One could hold back the peasants with one hand and "kill the warrior with the other."

*A good warrior, the old man teaches her, maintains an awareness of enemies on all sides. The other warrior is an "amateur" for his overestimation of the decency of other people. Peasants, or seemingly powerless people, could become enemies, too.*

When Kingston / Fa Mu Lan starts menstruating, she thinks that she has injured herself jumping over her sword. Menstruation does not interrupt her training, however. The old woman explains that she is now an adult and could have children, but they ask that she "put off children for a few more years." Kingston / Fa Mu Lan asks if she can learn how to stop the bleeding, but the old woman insists that this is not something one can control; she has to let it run.

*Despite all of her training and the awareness she had learned to control her body, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan knows nothing about her ability to menstruate until it occurs. It is possible that, in early adolescence, Brave Orchid also did not tell her daughter about this process until it happened to her. Kingston may have imposed her own ignorance onto her revision of the legend.*


To console Kingston / Fa Mu Lan for being without her family on the day she becomes a woman, the old man and old woman let her watch her family inside the magical gourd. They are visiting friends during someone's wedding. Her mother expresses gratitude for Kingston / Fa Mu Lan, wherever she is, even if she is dead. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan predicts that she will be happy one day, and that she will go back and marry her childhood playmate.

*In adolescence, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan experiences not only loneliness for her family, but also the desire to love romantically. In keeping with the notion of suitors as "brothers" in the culture Kingston was taught, she chooses a man with whom she grew up to marry.*


Suddenly, armored men on horseback approach the villagers, who grab "iron skillets, boiling soup, knives, hammers, scissors," and whatever else to protect themselves. One of the horseman "shouted from the scroll in his hands" that the baron has "pledged fifty men" from the district, "one from each family." Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's future husband and youngest brother both volunteer, but her father insists that he will go instead.

*The conscription of men into duty parallels the draft of young men into the Vietnam War—an event that was close to Kingston due to her brother being sent to fight. Her fantasy of Fa Mu Lan may have been an expression of her own wish to fight on behalf of her brother—perhaps not* in *the war, but against it. She later became an anti-war protestor.*

The water in the gourd "churns" and Kingston / Fa Mu Lan then sees the faces of the baron and his family, who thank the gods out loud for "protecting them from conscription." The baron feasts "on the sacrificial pig." Kingston / Fa Mu Lan plunges her hand into the gourd, wanting to grab the baron's throat. She asks the old man and old woman if she can return to help her family. They insist that, at fourteen, she is not ready. She will have to wait until she is twenty-two, and big enough and skillful enough to save families from armies. Until then, they say, she will have to be patient, but she can occasionally use the water gourd to watch her future husband and brother.

*In the context of the Fa Mu Lan tale, the water gourd is the object that allows Kingston / Fa Mu Lan contact with her family. Figuratively, it is her vision of the world beyond the mountain—a world in which injustice prevails and Kingston / Fa Mu Lan is powerless to defend her family and her village against it. Similarly, as an adolescent, Kingston was unable to save her brother from Vietnam, but as a student protestor at Berkeley (she would have been around 22), she could use her voice to "save families from armies."*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan stays on the mountain for years, talking only to the old man and the old woman. One day, when she can "point at the sky and make a sword appear [...] and control its slashing with [her] mind," they tell her that she can leave. The old couple give her fifteen beads to use in case she encounters danger. They bow to one another, and then a bird flies Kingston / Fa Mu Lan down the mountain. She looks behind her and sees the old people waving in the mist.

*Once again, a bird serves as her guide, this time back to her village and her former life. The ability to "make a sword appear and control its slashing" is the ability to use weapons readily but discriminately. A proper warrior was not just a skilled fighter, but she would also know when to fight.*

When Kingston / Fa Mu Lan reaches her village, she sees how old her mother and father have gotten. She helps them carry their farming tools. Her family relates all of the stories the villagers told to explain her disappearance. One cousin said that the Eight Sages took her away to teach her magic and changed her into a bird. Another cousin said, with a giggle, that some villagers thought she had gone to the city and become a prostitute. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan tells them that she "met some teachers who were willing to teach [her] science."

*The villagers told each other talk-story to explain Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's disappearance. Interestingly, her parents knew what had happened and could have explained, but chose to let the family create legends around her disappearance, perhaps in an effort to mislead them about who she would become. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan sticks with the cultural tradition of secrecy and explains her knowledge vaguely as "science."*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's father announces that he has been drafted. She insists that she will take his place. Her parents then kill a chicken "and steamed it whole, as if they were welcoming home a son." Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has gotten out of the habit of eating meat as a result of her training, though, so she eats rice and vegetables instead. After eating, she goes to sleep to prepare "for the work ahead." In the morning, her parents wake her. Her mother instructs her to remain in her bedclothes. She is holding a washbasin, a towel, and a kettle of hot water. Her father holds a bottle of wine, an ink block and pens, and knives of different sizes. Her mother puts "a pillow on the floor before the ancestors" and instructs her to kneel. She then washes Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's back and announces that they will carve a message of revenge into her back, including "oaths and names" so that, even if she dies, the people can use her body as a weapon.

*There is a reversal of gender roles here: the daughter takes the male's place as a warrior, despite the fact that disguising herself as a warrior could get her killed even by those on her own side. Her father will be the one to remain at home, rooted to the village, while his daughter will take on the active role of a fighter. Not only will Kingston / Fa Mu Lan fight, she will also be a living written record of the wrongs committed against her people. Here, Kingston suggests that a writer bears words as weapons in the same way that a warrior bears a sword. Both use these tools to fight against injustice. Through the tale of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston can explore being a literal fighter and one who combats through language.*

The writing is painful, but Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's training has taught her how to withstand the pain caused by the cuts and applications of alcohol. Her parents nurse her back to strength. One day, while she is in the courtyard polishing her armor, a white horse appears. It wears a saddle, just her size, with red, gold, and black tassels. Dragons and tigers are drawn into it, in a swirl pattern.

*Just as the bird appeared at the beginning of the tale to guide her to the mountain, once again an animal shows up to tell Kingston / Fa Mu Lan what to do next. Her fate is dictated to her by these signs. The dragons and tigers are reminiscent of her training on the mountain.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has been waiting for such a sign. Her parents prepare her food and the villagers bring gifts. She can't carry everything with her, and takes only "a small copper cooking bowl." She puts on men's clothes and armor and ties her hair back as a man would. The people marvel at how beautiful she looks. A young man in the crowd volunteers to be her first soldier. Then another man appears, riding a black horse. She draws her sword, thinking that he is an enemy but, he too is coming to join her army. The villagers then give Kingston / Fa Mu Lan their real gifts: their sons. She takes those who are not too beloved and who are not yet fathers—the young men "with hero-fire in their eyes."

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan is regarded as "beautiful" in a masculine guise and, as a male, wins the support of the men in her village. She is an anomaly—a valued daughter, but one with the spirit and skill to fight. She reflects a sensitivity during her conscription that is typically ignored when drafting soldiers (like in the Vietnam War, or the scene with the baron). She does not choose those who would be missed too much—the favorites or men with children—but chooses men who have a desire to fight. Thus, there is more reason and choice in the selection process.*

Often, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan walks beside her horse. At times when they have to impress other armies, she "mounted and rode in front." Those soldiers who have horses flank her. At night, she entertains her army with songs. When they visit villages, they are happy, encouraging others to join them. Her army does not rape, and only takes food where it is abundant. When she wins over a good number of people willing to fight, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan builds up an army that could attack "fiefdoms" and the enemies she had seen in the gourd.

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan leads with humility. She treats her fellow soldiers as though she is one of them, despite being a general and secretly a woman. It's also suggested that her femininity leads her to ensure that they do not commit rape or other forms of harm, such as taking food from those who need it. Kingston imagines a principled army, rooted in strength and altruism.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's first opponent is a giant. She cuts off its leg, then, when it leans forward, she cuts off its head. Instantly, the giant reverts to its true self—a snake. On a green ledge above the battlefield, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan sees the giants' wives crying. They are two fairy sisters. They cry while watching the battle, then climb back into the sedan chairs of their palanquins and let their servants carry them away.

*Kingston draws inspiration from fairy tales and Bible stories. Like David battling Goliath, she defeats a giant. As in fairy tales, the giant turns out to be another creature altogether, revealing the possibility that things are not always as intimidating or as impossible as they seem.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan leads the army northward. The emperor sends the enemies that she was chasing after her and her army. Despite the attacks, her army always defeats them. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan never tells her soldiers the truth about her being a woman. The Chinese kill women who "disguised themselves as soldiers or students, no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on the examinations."

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan knows that a woman's extraordinary ability to fight would not be enough to protect her against her society's hatred of women, particularly those who transgress its rules regarding gender. Success matters less than maintaining the status quo that regulates and oppresses women.*

One spring morning, while Kingston / Fa Mu Lan is in her tent repairing equipment, her childhood friend and future husband appears. He says that she is beautiful and that he has been looking for her. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan says that she had been looking for him, too. She shows him the message inscribed on her back. He weeps, then loosens her hair to cover the words with it. For the first time, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan has a partner. They ride together into battle, just as when they played together in the village, pretending to be little soldiers. When she gets pregnant, during the final four months, she wears her armor "altered" in order to look "like a big, powerful man." Her nude body looks strange to her, with words carved on her back and "the baby large in front."

*Once again, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's fate is dictated to her by the sudden appearance of figures who will facilitate her character's evolution. Kingston conveniently positions a childhood friend as her future husband to overcome her real-life conundrum of not knowing how to make herself attractive to new acquaintances. The ideal marriage would be one between equals, and one in which her femininity would not hinder her but would instead be another source of strength. Fa Mu Lan's pregnancy becomes another sign of her power, like her sword and the words on her back.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan hides from battle only once, to give birth to her son. She and her husband make a sling for the baby inside her armor. They tie the umbilical cord to the red flag—a secret joke that makes her and her husband laugh. At night, in their tent, she carries the baby on her back. When the baby is a month old, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan and her husband name him. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's husband finds two eggs and they dyes them red. She peels one and rolls it over the baby's head for good luck. She then gives her husband the baby to take to his family. She had decided to send her child away from her.

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan inserts womanhood into the notion of being a warrior. By creating a story in which Fa Mu Lan hides a baby in her armor and ties an umbilical cord to the army's flag, she is directly asserting the essential role of women in cultivating warriors and in maintaining the strength of the nation. However, Fa Mu Lan does not define herself solely as a mother, which is why she sends the child away.*

Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's body slims again, and she gets lonely, feeling the milk drip from her breasts. Her loneliness makes her careless. She is confronted one day by "the prince who had mixed the blood of his two sons with the metal he had used for casting his swords." In her confrontation with him and his army, she is afraid, and he takes the beads that the old man and old woman had given her. She goes back to her soldiers and gathers "the fastest horsemen" to pursue him. Finally, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan decides to stop. Her horses are exhausted, and she doesn't want to travel further south. She would win again, but "slow and without shortcuts."

*In her eagerness to resume her status as a warrior, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan misses having her child near her. Kingston suggests through her revision that the bond between a mother and child can be a source of strength, just as the prince who had mixed the blood of his sons with the metal of his swords sought strength from succeeding generations. Distancing herself from her child in the interest of getting back to work as a warrior made her weaker.*

A few million villagers go with Kingston / Fa Mu Lan to the capital to face their emperor. They "beheaded him, cleaned out the palace, and inaugurated the peasant who would begin the new order." She tells them that they can go home if they want, but she will continue on to see the Long Wall, or the Great Wall, which is so close. However, they do not want to leave her. They go to "the northern boundary of the world, chasing Mongols en route." She reaches the wall and touches it with her fingers, and she and the villagers cry. In her travels north, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan had not found her brother who was drafted.

*The confrontation with the emperor is an act of deposing unjust leadership and, by going to the Great Wall, the army reconnects with the nation's true values. Here, Kingston may have been expressing a wish that she hoped to fulfill through her protests at Berkeley: to remove the leadership that had sent her brother to Vietnam and to find a leader who would represent the wishes of the people.*

Back home, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan drops her soldiers off "at crossroads and bridges" and confronts the baron in his stronghold alone, as she had intended. She finds him counting money with his abacus. He demands to know who she is, and encircles his money with his arms as though she had come to take it. She announces herself as "a female avenger," and the baron responds with disbelief. She tells him to express sorrow for his actions, including conscripting her brother and taking away her childhood. The baron denies that he has done anything to her. At this point, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan rips off her shirt and reveals the message on her back. She also reveals her breasts, confirming that she is, indeed, a female warrior. While the baron is in shock, Kingston / Fa Mu Lan slashes his face and then cuts off his head.

*The significance of dropping her army off at "crossroads and bridges" is that Fa Mu Lan / Kingston has reached a point at which her decisions can lead her forward on her path or, in defeat, set her and her village backward. She confronts the baron and his greed but does not defeat him only with her sword, as one would expect, but with the shock of her womanhood and the power of language. Again, Kingston uses her femininity to foil and mislead her enemies. She takes the feminine stereotype of dishonesty and concealment and uses it against men who wish to do her and her family harm.*

The villagers enter the baron's home and drag his family out into the courtyard, "where they tried them next to the beheading machine." They search the house, hunting for people to bring to trial. Only guards who had joined the baron's house for a good reason, such as one who had joined to save a child hostage, are spared. Kingston / Fa Mu Lan search the house and find a group of "whimpering women" with "little bound feet." She gives them each a bagful of rice. They later become "swordswomen" who form "a mercenary army." According to legend, when "slave girls and daughters-in-law" run away, it is supposedly to join this army that "killed men and boys."

*Kingston uses a historical narrative similar to that of the French Revolution, which ended with a spate of beheadings, to create a scenario in which the village gets revenge against the baron and his family. The "whimpering women" with bound feet were probably concubines. Thus, they probably "killed men and boys" in revenge for their own mistreatment at the hands of men. Unlike Kingston / Fa Mu Lan, whose vengeance is largely based on class injustice, these women seek revenge for their sexual exploitation and that of other women.*

After the trials, the villagers "tore down the ancestral tablets" and Kingston / Fa Mu Lan declares that the baron's great hall will be used for operas and talk-story. Then she returns home to her in-laws and her husband and son. During a parade, her son marvels at the general, and Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's husband tells the boy that he is watching his mother. The child runs to her, and she gives him "her helmet to wear and her swords to hold." She later tells her in-laws that she will remain with them from now on, but her mother-in-law, "a generous woman," tells her to go see her own parents—her mother and father "and the entire clan" will be living well off of the money she has sent. Later, the villagers "would make a legend about [her] perfect filiality."

*Kingston / Fa Mu Lan's "perfect filiality," or dedication to her family and her village, is facilitated by her willingness to break with convention by becoming a general, and not only disguising herself, but conceiving a child and giving birth while in the midst of a war. Her willingness to break with convention would have reverberations: she would not be obligated to play the servile role of the daughter-in-law and she would have the gratitude of her village for taking care of it financially. Being a provider is also a traditionally male role.*

Kingston thinks that her own American life was "a disappointment." Brave Orchid complained about having a girl and acted as though she did not care that Kingston was a straight-A student, for one "can't eat straight A's." When Kingston threw tantrums, her mother would call her a "bad girl," which Kingston denied. Kingston thinks that she was denied certain privileges for being a girl. When her great-uncle, an "ex-river pirate" went shopping, he insisted on taking only the boys, who returned from these Saturday trips "with candy and new toys."

*The story of Fa Mu Lan protects Kingston against the painful sexism she endures in her family, in which she is not only unappreciated but made to feel guilty for the simple fact of having been born a girl. Her successes are not a source of pride for the family, whose traditions dictate that she will belong to another family one day and that her successes will then be "theirs." It does not occur to them that she has her own needs, or that her successes could be her own.*

Kingston went to study at Berkeley and protested against the Vietnam War, which her brother was fighting. She notes that this activity "did not turn [her] into a boy." Her parents interpreted her good grades as a benefit for her future family, not for them. She insisted that she did not want to marry and would show the "nosey emigrant villagers" that girls did not have an "outward tendency."

*Kingston develops a behavior of contrariness to show her parents and neighbors that their ideas of what makes a girl are not valid. She does not exactly wish to be a boy, but wants to be treated as individually as one—that is, to demonstrate that she can do things for her own benefit and principles.*

Kingston refused to comply easily and do the things that were expected of her. When she had to wash dishes, she broke a few. When people asked what she wanted to be when she grew up, she claimed to want to be a "lumberjack in Oregon." Even in adulthood, she burned the food when she cooked, unless she was happy, and generally avoided feeding other people. It angered Kingston not to be supported, and to be regarded as a burden.

*Kingston rebels against domesticity, or the activities to which women are typically relegated. She instead asserts an interest in being a lumberjack, because it is as far removed from Chinese culture and the fate of "wife and slave" as anyone could expect. Kingston carries this resentment of traditional roles into adulthood, for they compromise selfhood.*

Urban renewal led to Kingston's parents' laundry being torn down to make room for a parking lot. This angered her, but she could only act on her anger in her fantasies. She learned from "the fairy tales" who the enemy was, even in their "modern American executive guise." When she was a teenager, she worked in an art supply house that sold paints to artists. Her boss was racist. She also worked "at a land developers' association" that was planning a banquet dinner for contractors at a restaurant "being picketed by CORE and the NAACP." She refused to type the invitations and got fired.

*As often as she was at odds with her family, Kingston had advantages as an American—being native born, speaking the language fluently—that obligated her to protect them from its injustices. Moreover, "talk-story" had given her a context in which to understand good and evil. She saw her racist bosses as versions of the villains in the stories. Though she did not resist them with a sword, she withheld her talent with language, refusing to use it on their behalf.*

Kingston also felt responsible for avenging her family against those who had taken things from them—the Communists who had taken their farm in China and those who had taken their laundries in New York and California. The news from China about what her family was enduring was harsh. Her uncles had been tortured and executed for being landowners and an aunt had her thumbs twisted off. Shortly thereafter, the aunt drowned herself. The other aunts, mothers-in-law, and cousins disappeared, having been sent to Communist communes, while others went to Hong Kong. The old people were killed or were asked to kill themselves due to being "useless." A grandmother and Fourth Aunt escaped, but her husband, Fourth Uncle, was killed by Communists for trying to take food for his family. Oddly, Kingston thinks her family was treated like the baron's in the Fa Mu Lan legend.

*In an odd reversal, Kingston imagines that, in Communist China, her family was regarded as an unjust enemy, fattening itself off of the work of others. This is strange for her, given her personal commitment to social justice, and due to the relative poverty of her relatives. Kingston expresses that notions of heroes and enemies are not always as clear as in the stories; context matters. In the context of Communist China, her landowning family was portrayed as the enemy. In Kingston's country, the Communists are the villains for their disregard of human life.*

Kingston was not actually much of a fighter, she says. She fought the most during junior high and always cried. Brave Orchid tried to lock her children in the house to keep them from looking "at dead slum people," but they would always find ways to try to look at a body. Kingston thinks that she and the swordswoman are not so dissimilar. Kingston, too, has a desire to get revenge for all of the racial slurs that have been carved onto her back, but which "do not fit on [her] skin."

*The fantasy of Fa Mu Lan is incompatible with who Kingston actually is. Kingston shrank from violence, and her mother protected her from the violence that existed in their community. Kingston does not have the stomach to fight with a sword, but she can fight with words. She will take the slurs that have been used to define her and convert them into weapons in her fight for recognition and selfhood.*

## 3. SHAMAN

Four times, Brave Orchid has shown Kingston her medical diploma. Her family airmailed the metal tube that holds it from Hong Kong. There are three scrolls inside the tube. One is a medical diploma that says that Brave Orchid graduated from a school of midwifery. Another is a class photograph. She is twenty-seven and not smiling or "humorous," like one of the girls in the photograph, "who lifts her mocking chin to pose like Girl Graduate." Kingston contrasts her mother's image with early photos of her father in America, "in bathing suits at Coney Island beach" or posing "in the cockpit of a biplane." He and his friends were "always laughing." The third scroll is from the Department of Health, Canton." The words are printed on a photograph of Kingston's mother, the same photograph from her diploma. She was twenty-seven when she graduated.

*The photograph of Kingston's mother, which is serious and somber, contrasts with those of her father, which are light and reveal the fun and freedom he enjoyed during his early years in the United States—while Brave Orchid was working to earn a medical degree. She was young, but much more serious than Kingston's father. Her seriousness echoes the notion of women being rooted to the traditions of Chinese culture while men maintained the freedom to travel and transgress. The photos reveal their differences in obligation, despite the fact that they were both married with children at the time.*

Brave Orchid left her village by ship, just as Kingston's father had, and moved into a dormitory with five other women. She left most of her things behind, in her family's care. Medical school allowed Brave Orchid to live for two years, free from servitude. She befriended her roommates but did not tell them that she already had two children.

*Brave Orchid is misleading about her family history because she does not want them to know how old she is. However, the time with the younger women allows Brave Orchid to experience their relative freedom, which she gave up as a married woman.*

Brave Orchid went to a welcoming ceremony in the auditorium and listened to two hours of speeches from faculty members. Immediately after supper, she began to study. She usually stayed in her room and only dropped into the dining hall once in a while. Students fought over who could sit next to her in class, since glancing at her test papers helped them get back on track when they had forgotten something, and Brave Orchid did not mind this.

*Brave Orchid's discipline sustained her through medical school, and she maintained this discipline when she moved to California and worked long hours. Her discipline made her seem smarter than her classmates, who sought out Brave Orchid's guidance, despite her relative social isolation.*

To make up for not having the best memory—unlike Kingston's father, who could recite entire poems—Brave Orchid did a lot of "secret studying." She was older, so she knew that she was expected to know more. Her secret place for studying was a room that was supposedly haunted. Brave Orchid named all of the **ghosts** that haunted the dormitory, but did not believe that they were ancestors. Instead, they were possibly "an entirely different species of creature."

*Instead of avoiding that which made her afraid, Brave Orchid confronted it. She challenged her fear of ghosts by studying in their space. In her scientific manner, she also hypothesized that ghosts may not have traditionally been the spirits of dead relatives, but a different form of matter altogether. Though she was rooted in superstition, Brave Orchid maintained her own ideas.*

When the other girls in the dormitory worried over strange sounds, Brave Orchid would dismiss them as "the wind" and rose to the challenge of checking to see if she was right. When she returned, having seen nothing, another girl insisted that the haunting began at midnight. To prove that she was not afraid but to also get to bed at a decent hour, Brave Orchid agreed to sleep "in the **ghost** room." The other girls worried, but Brave Orchid promised to call out to them if anything bad happened. She refused to accept charms. She went back to her room and took her textbook as a weapon.

*Brave Orchid maintained her status as a leader among the girls by showing courage where they had none. She even refused charms to indicate that she was not afraid of the ghosts that occupied the study room. These "ghosts" were perhaps the girls' fears of failure, which Brave Orchid also shared. Thus, she takes the textbook—the only possible protection against flunking out of school—into the room with her.*

Brave Orchid pretended not to be afraid. She read aloud to prove that she was calm. Eventually, she fell asleep. Then something "alive" then crawled to "the foot of the bed." She recognized it immediately: a Sitting Ghost. She fought it, but it only absorbed her energy. She knew that everyone else in the dormitory was asleep, so no one would check on her. She tried another tactic with the **ghost**, which she called "Boulder." She spoke calmly to the ghost, assuring it that it would not win and that it did not belong there. She threatened to burn it. She ignored it and "chanted her lessons for the next day's classes." The ghost then "scurried off." When the students went to her the next morning, she told them to take hold of her earlobes to call her back into her body, and then she said that she would tell them a story.

*Sitting Ghost resembles a symptom of sleep paralysis, but is also perhaps a metaphor for the fear of failure. Instead of fighting against this fear, Brave Orchid "outsmarts" it by acknowledging its presence but then refusing to grant it power. The "ghost" then went away when she reinforced her commitment to her schooling. The fear of Sitting Ghost is more palpable in Brave Orchid, as she arguably has more to lose than the other girls if she fails—she is, after all, older, already married, and has had two children who died. It is possible that a sense of failing at motherhood is part of her fear of failing at school. To distance herself from this, she names the fear as a ghost.*

Brave Orchid told her classmates about how Sitting Ghost had "pounced" on top of her. It had no "head, no eyes, no face," but only "mounds of hair" which "hid its claws and teeth." She recalled that it was "bigger than an ape, and growing." She would have stabbed it, but this Sitting Ghost was a mutation that "wrested" the knife from her hand. At 3:00 AM, she died for a while and lost her way for "ten years." She walked from the Gobi Desert back to the To Keung School. She had to outwit the Wall **Ghosts** and "their side-to-side games along the way," which intended to divert her from her path. Altogether, she said, she had been gone for twelve years, but only an hour had passed in the room.

*As in Kingston's fantasies of Fa Mu Lan's spirit journeys and the woman warrior's fights with mythical creatures, Brave Orchid personifies her fear as a kind of beast—something inscrutable. As in Kingston's case, her sense of time collapses during her struggle to overcome her fear and "return" her spirit to the school. Wall Ghosts, or distractions, also attempted to divert her. Brave Orchid tells this story as a moral to demonstrate that fear can be overcome through concentration.*

Brave Orchid insisted that the danger was not over, for Sitting Ghost fattened itself at night and was listening as she spoke. Sitting **Ghost** was different because it fed on lives—not just those of babies, but also adults. It was "a serious ghost, not at all playful," with the ability to "conjure up enough substance to sit solidly throughout a night."

*Sitting Ghost, or fear, feeds on people's lives. Children are fearful, but do not offer enough to satisfy the ghost, which is "surfeited" on them. It listens at night, waiting to hear what makes a person afraid, then uses that to terrorize them throughout the night.*

Brave Orchid decided that she and her classmates had to rid the world of the "disease" of **ghosts**. She told them to scorn ghosts when they came to haunt them. They returned to the ghost room with buckets, and alcohol and burners from the laboratories. They smoked the ghosts out of the room. When the smoke cleared, Brave Orchid said that "the students found a piece of wood dripping with blood." When they burned it, "the stench was like a corpse exhumed for its bones too soon." The women laughed at the smell.

*Brave Orchid approaches the notion of ghosts as she would one of her topics of study in medical school. "Ghosts," she knows, are a manifestation of human behavior—they have nothing to do with the ancestors, but rather with the way in which people experience life in the present.*

When Brave Orchid got scared as a child, one of her three mothers would call her "frighted spirit" back by chanting her descent line. However, if the women at the dormitory had done that, they would have called Brave Orchid back to the wrong place—her village. Instead, they called out their own names, as well as "women's pretty names, haphazard names." In doing so, they created new directions, and Brave Orchid's spirit followed them. It is possible that this is why she "lost her home village and did not reach her husband for fifteen years." Brave Orchid later led her own children out of nightmares by chanting the names of family members, which brought Kingston comfort. An old-fashioned woman would have run into the streets, calling out for her child; but Brave Orchid was a modern woman who said her spells in private.

*Kingston does not use the adjective "modern" ironically, though the reader could interpret it as such, given the incompatibility between modernity and the belief in spells. However, calling the spirit back is merely a process of making one feel more at home. Brave Orchid's home at this time was with the girls in the dormitory; thus, she needed to hear their names to remember that she belonged with them in medical school. She later uses the same method to bring relatives, particularly Moon Orchid, comfort during periods when they feel lost.*

Though the peasants in her village were more impressed by those who finished three- and six-week courses, Brave Orchid was welcomed home with "garlands and cymbals" after becoming a doctor. Unlike the Communists, who wore only a blue uniform dotted with a "red Mao button," she wore "a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair." Brave Orchid always dressed well when she made her calls, and some villagers, she remembered, "brought out their lion and danced ahead of [her]." She tells her daughter, "You have no idea how much I have fallen coming to America."

*Brave Orchid was a source of pride in her community and asserted her individuality without fear of being punished by Communists. Both her status as a doctor and this assertion of personal style in a place that denied it, particularly to women, earned her admiration. She "fell" when coming to America because she could no longer be a doctor and was no seen as longer special, but was just one of many Chinese erased by discrimination and language barriers.*

Before moving to the Bronx, where Kingston's father was living, Brave Orchid worked in her village, yanking bones straight and delivering babies "in beds and pigsties." She "stayed awake keeping watch nightly during air raids." She did all of this dressed as elegantly as when she stepped out of her sedan chair. She also never changed her name, for professional women reserved the right to keep their maiden names. Even after she emigrated to America, she added no American name.

*Brave Orchid's desire to keep her name is a wish to hold on to a part of her past self and the status that she once enjoyed before immigrating to the United States to be with her husband. Taking an American name also would have been an indication that she belonged in the new country, when it had always been her intention to return home to China.*

When Brave Orchid went to Canton market to shop, she was free with money. One day, she bought a female slave, but she decided to buy one from a professional whose girls were neatly arranged. She stopped at a slave girl "whose strong heart sounded like thunder within the earth." Brave Orchid put the girl through a series of tests to judge her intelligence, and asked her what she would do with the loose ends of woven string. The girl intentionally gave an answer which indicated that she did not know how to finish weaving, so that Brave Orchid could buy her at a lower price. Brave Orchid decided that she would train the girl, who was sixteen years old, to become a nurse.

*Brave Orchid's relationship with the slave girl is one of kindred spirits—she claims to have been able to hear her heartbeat and they both instinctively knew how to play a trick on the slave girl's seller to ensure that Brave Orchid got the girl at her asking price. The slave girl is a foil for Kingston, it seems, due to her obedience and her understanding of customs, such as how to bargain, a practice that was always embarrassing to Kingston growing up.*

Kingston notes that her mother seems more grateful for having had the slave girl than for having had her own daughters. Kingston's younger sister, sensing this favoritism, said that when she grew up, she wanted to be a slave—which amused her parents. Brave Orchid bought the girl for one hundred and eighty dollars (fifty dollars in American money), whereas it cost two hundred dollars to have Kingston. Brave Orchid later found the girl a husband.

*The slave girl represented to Kingston's mother what a girl ideally should be—cooperative, obedient, and never a burden. Kingston's younger sister's naïve wish to be a slave contrasts with Kingston's wish that her mother could value her as much as the does the girl she bought at a market.*

For a time, Brave Orchid's village was "endangered by a fantastic creature, half man and half ape, that a traveler to the West had captured and brought back to China." One day, the ape man escaped. It was known to have attacked people. The ape-man had long orange hair and a beard, and was clothed "in a brown burlap rice sack." If Brave Orchid's father had not brought Third Wife, a black woman, back from the West, Brave Orchid may have thought that this ape-man was a Western barbarian. Brave Orchid chased the creature away for trying to scare her. The ape was soon recaptured, lured back to its cage with "cooked pork and wine." Sometimes, Brave Orchid visited the ape-man at the home of the rich man who had captured him. The creature seemed to recognize her. Brave Orchid thinks that it may not have been an ape-man, but maybe one of the Tigermen, "a savage northern race."

*This passage is representative of Brave Orchid's conflation of both myth and actual circumstances. It is not clear if the "creature" in her village was an actual "ape man" as she claimed or if it was something else that she misunderstood or something that she fabricated. Perhaps she combined her sightings of Westerners with an orangutan that the rich man brought back from his travels, and used these visions to create the notion of a yeti that haunted her village. In any case, this creature, too, was an object of fear that Brave Orchid successfully defeated, though she befriended this one.*

As a midwife, Brave Orchid found ways to fool the **ghosts**. She would refer to some infants as piglets to fool ghosts who were "on the lookout for a new birth." She would call beautiful, welcome babies ugly, dirty pigs to fool "the gods jealous of human joy." One infant had blue eyes, leading its mother to think that a ghost had entered him, but Brave Orchid "said the baby looked pretty." Other defects were more serious, such as that of an infant born with no anus. Kingston imagined the baby as a child, "grunting and weeping" in its effort to defecate. Because the child had been allowed to live, Kingston assumes that it was a boy.

*Though she was a woman of science, Brave Orchid knew how easily newborns slipped away into death and employed superstitious tricks to help avoid that fate. In some cases, children were born with anomalies so severe that death would have been preferable, as in the case of the infant with no anus. Kingston imagines that it was a boy because it was allowed to live, and because people listened to its grunts and sounds of suffering.*

During summer afternoons when it was especially hot, Kingston's parents would tell the children **ghost** stories "so that [they] could get some good chills up [their] backs." Brave Orchid told a story of a ghost that tried to knock her off of a swaying walking bridge. She did not encounter the ghost again. Kingston surmises that her mother won in ghost battle due to her ability to eat anything. Kingston compares her to other big eaters in Chinese legendary history. Big eaters always win.

*Once again, the ghost that Brave Orchid meets on the swaying bridge is a kind of fear—in this case, a fear of death. She did not encounter the ghost again, probably because she was never again in a similarly life-threatening situation. Kingston thinks that her mother's ability to consume (eating is a life-affirming practice) also protects her from ghosts.*

Kingston's mother cooked all kinds of things that were not normally eaten in the United States, including raccoons, skunks, snakes, turtles that crawled around on the pantry floor, and catfish that swam in the bathtub. She also boiled the weeds they pulled up in the yard. She kept a big brown hand "stewing in alcohol and herbs" in a glass jar on a shelf and used it to "rub [their] sprains and bruises." Brave Orchid said it was a bear's claw. She told Kingston that when Chinese people had the money, they bought monkeys' brains. She insisted that the children eat all leftovers and told them that if something tasted good, it was bad for them, whereas if it tasted bad, it was good for them.

*Kingston relates a childhood of cuisine far removed from what her American peers would have eaten. Brave Orchid was resourceful, but her eating and remedy habits did not fit well into her new home. Worse, she was cheap and forced her children to eat leftover food on their plates that was sometimes nights old. Duty was important in regard to eating as well. Perhaps to trick her children into maintaining healthy diets and discipline, or perhaps to scold them, she told them to avoid foods that brought instant pleasure.*

Kingston writes that her mother was content with hairy beasts, both **ghosts** and those made of flesh, because she could eat them. She also did *not* eat them on fasting days. Brave Orchid differed from the village crazy lady because she was a capable exorcist. The crazy lady was not, so she was stoned shortly before Brave Orchid left China.

*Kingston could "swallow" what made her fearful, thereby eliminating its power. The village crazy lady only knew how to respond to the things that frightened her, as though they were real. This in turn, frightened the villagers, who killed her.*

Brave Orchid was living in the mountains with other refugees when Kingston's father had finally saved enough money to send Brave Orchid travel fare to New York. It was 1939, and "the Japanese had taken much of the land along the Kwoo River." The Japanese were the only foreigners whom the Chinese did not regard as foreigners. Some believed that they were descended from Chinese explorers sent across the Eastern Ocean to discover a mythical island from which they never returned, out of fear of having their heads sawed off by the emperor for not finding "the herbs of immortality." Another story said that they were descended from an ape who raped a Chinese princess.

*These stories suggest that the Chinese felt a sense of kinship—but an antagonistic one—with the Japanese, which stemmed possibly from myth or from a similar physical appearance or both. The second story about the ancestry of the Japanese suggests an inherent barbarism. The Chinese may have encouraged this version of events to explain some of the Japanese military's abuses during the war.*

When she moved to the United States, Brave Orchid experienced the same war she had left behind in China. She warned the children to watch out for planes that came in threes, because in China, that had been a sign of an air raid. The bombings drove some people mad with fear. During the raids, the village crazy lady put on a headdress with small mirrors. She moved her arms in flailing circles and one villager thought that she was signaling the planes. They began to think that she was a spy for the Japanese, which Brave Orchid refuted, but to no avail. Though Brave Orchid tried to take away the headdress, the woman refused, and the villagers stoned her to death.

*Brave Orchid maintains some trauma, it seems, from having witnessed the war and the village crazy lady's stoning. Ironically, fear drives the villagers as mad as the village crazy lady, if they are not indeed madder, for their fears lead them to kill while her delusions cause harm to no one (unless she does indeed alert the Japanese planes, however unwillingly). In a period of war, when everyone is afraid of harm, the villagers could not tolerate the crazy lady's aberrations from the norm.*

Brave Orchid arrived in New York in January 1940. Kingston was born in the middle of World War II. As a child, she dreamed both about "shrinking babies" and "rows of airplanes" and other aerial vessels flying overhead. Her mother had taught Kingston to see every person and machine in America as a **ghost**. Newsboy Ghost, with his ability to call people out of their homes with his voice, frightened Kingston the most. Once Garbage Ghost, a man with "yellow and brown hair" who collected the trash, referred to himself as "Garbage Ghost" in Chinese. Brave Orchid warned her children not to speak in front of the White Ghosts again, for they had learned Chinese. She told them that they would go home again to China one day and "buy furniture, real tables and chairs" and that they would "smell flowers for the first time."

*By referring to Americans as "ghosts," Brave Orchid made them less real, but also placed them within a system she was familiar with, as she had defeated ghosts in the past. One day, she told her children, they would return to China and experience real things—America was the unreal. Its nickname—Gold Mountain—also suggested the fantastical. Thus, all of the people whom they encountered were not real people, but merely apparitions or ideas. Brave Orchid designated the "ghosts" by their race or function, which actually gave them a bit more distinction and humanity.*

Kingston's parents never considered America "home." She feared that once they were back in China, her parents would sell her, or her father would marry two or three more women who would spatter cooking oil on the children's toes and blame their crying on naughtiness. Furthermore, Kingston feared the size of the world, and how China was so far away.

*Kingston only knew China from the stories her parents told or the stories that came back from relatives. It did not seem like a place where she could be happy, but one in which she would be a part of a system in a world that was unknown to her.*

Kingston recalls her last visit to her parents. She had trouble falling asleep. Brave Orchid sat, watching over her, wearing "shawls and granny glasses, American fashions." Brave Orchid told Kingston about how much she worried after her and the other children, particularly because they never told her what they were up to. It had been a year since Kingston's last visit.

*Brave Orchid's wearing of "shawls and granny glasses" contrasts with her wearing a silk robe and western shoes. She has embraced age and the "American fashion" of showing it, though she could never embrace the fashion of Maoist China.*

While they are talking, Brave Orchid notices that she never calls Kingston "Oldest Daughter," but instead, "Biggest Daughter." Kingston asks about the two older children who supposedly died in China, but Brave Orchid denies that they ever existed.

*In creating a new talk-story for her new life in America, Brave Orchid erases her first two children, just as her husband's family erased No Name Woman.*

Brave Orchid had continued to work, though she was in her seventies. She dyed her hair black to appear younger, then stood in line on Skid Row to get chosen to do farm work. Brave Orchid said that the Urban Renewal Ghosts had given them money for tearing down the laundry, but they could not start over. Neither wanted to stop working, though Kingston's father is now retired. Brave Orchid calls the United States "a terrible **ghost** country" where one can never stop working. She did not want to leave China, where she had more leisure time and was treated with more respect, but she insists that Kingston's father would not have survived without her, for she was "the one with the big muscles."

*Brave Orchid's notion of femininity is similar to her daughter's for being unconventional. What is ironic is that neither realizes that they have this in common with each other. By describing herself as "the one with big muscles," Brave Orchid means she has the ability to endure the constant work in this new country, and has the energy to continue to work and send money to the relatives, though her husband no longer does.*

Brave Orchid tells Kingston that the family can never return to China—a dream Kingston's parents had been holding onto for forty years. The last of Kingston's uncles was killed. The villagers wrote to ask Kingston's father if they could take over the family's land, and he agreed. Brave Orchid insists that she does not want to go back to China anyway, because the Communists "are much too mischievous." She suspects the Chinese immigrants who work in the fields of being Communists too, though Kingston insists that they came to America to escape Communism.

*Brave Orchid resents the Communists for taking away her dream of returning home, for seizing her husband's land, and for making their country uninhabitable. Furthermore, she has never been able to distinguish the Chinese she meets in the United States from those who live in China. To Brave Orchid, they can never be American, but merely "overseas Chinese," which would make them Communists.*

Brave Orchid wants Kingston around more often, saying that she wants to live in a house where she "can't turn around without touching somebody." Kingston insists that she moved away because she feels better away from home. She does not get sick as often, and does not worry about **ghost** sounds. Her mother concludes that the weather in California must not be good for her, and accepts that Kingston should, therefore, live away. Brave Orchid calls her daughter "Little Dog," a term of endearment she has not used in years. Kingston suddenly feels much lighter, but still has the same dreams about "shrinking babies and the sky covered with airplanes and a Chinatown bigger than the ones here."

*Kingston cannot live at home for two reasons: firstly, Americans do not typically live at home with their parents when they are middle-aged; secondly, her mother puts pressures on her that make her ill—but Kingston doesn't tell Brave Orchid this. By revisiting her trauma on to her daughter, Brave Orchid causes Kingston, too, to worry about air raids and babies with painful birth defects. She worries less about "ghosts," or fears, when she is away, though.*

## 4. AT THE WESTERN PALACE

When she was around sixty-eight years old, Brave Orchid took a day off to pick up her younger sister, Moon Orchid, from the airport. Moon Orchid's daughter accompanied her and sat with her in the airport. Brave Orchid's American children, whom she had made come because they could drive, could not sit for very long.

*Kingston contrasts her mother's concentrated discipline to sit and be patient with the restless impatience of her children. It is yet another of the cultural and generational differences between them.*

Brave Orchid looked at the people around the airport. Some were soldiers and sailors. She wondered about her son in Vietnam, then asked Moon Orchid's daughter if he was there. The daughter replied that Brave Orchid's children had said that he was in the Philippines. She was not sure if this was true—her children may have been playing a trick on her with the cooperation of a Filipino whom they knew. When Moon Orchid's daughter assured Brave Orchid that her son could take care of himself, Brave Orchid was doubtful, due to his old habit of sticking pencils in his ears.

*Brave Orchid doesn't trust her own children not to mislead her, given how deeply ingrained she thinks this tendency is in Chinese culture. It is hard for her to think that her son, a young man whom she had to scold to keep pencils out of his ears, could be fighting in Vietnam. It is also possible that she maintains the silly image to hold onto the idea of him as a boy, instead of a soldier in constant danger.*

Brave Orchid's children ran to tell her that the plane had arrived. Brave Orchid pushed to the front of the waiting crowd. Brave Orchid searched for her sister and suddenly pointed out a younger woman, younger even than Moon Orchid's daughter. She mistook this woman for her sister, due to the woman's western clothes—she knew that Moon Orchid would wear western clothes now. When Moon Orchid's daughter saw her mother, she called out "Mama!" Brave Orchid then saw a very tiny, very thin, nervous woman appear. Moon Orchid's hair was in a gray knot and she wore a gray wool suit with pearls. Brave Orchid was surprised to see how old she was. The two women touched each other's faces and looked at how much they had both changed.

*Brave Orchid's error regarding her sister Moon Orchid's identity is an indication that Brave Orchid is not quite aware of how old she has gotten and of how much time has passed between them. Indeed, Moon Orchid does wear "western" clothes and jewels, reflecting a taste for finery that Brave Orchid rejected in favor of practicality and resourcefulness. It's immediately clear that the two sisters are very different.*

Back at Brave Orchid's home, Moon Orchid greeted Kingston's father, the scholar whom she had once regarded as an "ideal in masculine beauty." Moon Orchid then presented gifts to everyone. One of the gifts was a paper cutout of Fa Mu Lan that was green and beautiful.

*Moon Orchid's remembrance of Brave Orchid's husband and her presentation of gifts reveals a sensitive woman with an appreciation for beauty and fine things.*

Brave Orchid disliked that her children played with presents in front of the giver, and was further annoyed when they acted as though they did not want to eat the rock candy that she had chopped up. Moon Orchid presented her sister with "a pale green silk dress lined in wool," which Brave Orchid regarded as useless because it was "fancy." Moon Orchid also brought jade bracelets for the girls, which Brave Orchid insisted they not have because they were too young and would break them while playing baseball. Brave Orchid took the "useful" things that her sister had brought "into the back bedroom, where Moon Orchid would stay until they decided what she would do permanently."

*Brave Orchid is not concerned with Moon Orchid's gifts, for which Brave Orchid has no apparent use, but instead wants to ensure that her children mind their Chinese manners. In this way, Brave Orchid fulfills the expectation of women from her village—she maintains the past against the flood of time and cultural changes, insisting that her children follow social protocol that feels outdated and foreign to them.*

Moon Orchid walked around the house. She noticed that their grandparents' pictures were up. Brave Orchid told her that, in America, you could have pictures of anyone you wanted on the wall. Afterward, they had dinner. Brave Orchid refused to let anyone talk during dinner, but once everyone was finished, she insisted on getting down to the "business" of reuniting Moon Orchid with Moon Orchid's husband.

*Moon Orchid comments on how Brave Orchid honors their ancestors by having their grandparents' pictures up, which would have been unusual back home, it's suggested. Brave Orchid seeks to maintain family bonds, which is part of why she wishes to reunite Moon Orchid with her husband.*

For thirty years, Moon Orchid had received money from her husband. She never told him that she wanted to move to the United States. She waited for him to suggest it, but Moon Orchid's husband never did. So, Brave Orchid found a Chinese-American husband for Moon Orchid's daughter who was then able to do the paperwork to bring her mother over.

*Moon Orchid was cared for financially by her estranged husband, but she was never included in his new life in his new country. Brave Orchid arranged a marriage for Moon Orchid's daughter to help her mother gain entry—taking action on behalf of her sister, whether Moon Orchid wanted it or not.*

Brave Orchid instructed her sister on what to do when she confronted her husband. Moon Orchid was reluctant to "bother him," given how well-supported she had been for so many years and because he had sent their daughter to college. Brave Orchid insisted that she make Moon Orchid's husband feel bad for marrying someone else and for leaving his parents behind in China. She insisted that Moon Orchid go to her husband's home and install herself as First Wife.

*Brave Orchid and Moon Orchid's respective uses of language around Moon Orchid's husband reveal the pair's personality differences: Brave Orchid is forceful, while Moon Orchid is passive; Brave Orchid insists on what she wants, while Moon Orchid tolerates what is given to her.*

Brave Orchid told Moon Orchid that, when she arrived at the house, she should throw out the new wife's things and declare their sons her own. Brave Orchid also suggested that Moon Orchid get a job to show how helpful she could be, such as being a maid at a hotel. However, Brave Orchid regarded her "delicate sister" and decided that she would need "to toughen up" to find work. If Brave Orchid were in her position, she thought, she would be on the phone demanding a job in Chinatown.

*With her characteristic resourcefulness, Brave Orchid suggests that her sister could take any job to prove herself useful to her husband, without accounting for the fact that Moon Orchid has never worked and does not know how to look for work in the United States. She imposes her own ideas of what ought to be done on a sister who cannot function as she does.*

Moon Orchid wondered what to do if her husband did not remember her. Brave Orchid instructed her to give details of their life together. She also told Moon Orchid to dye her hair black so as not to look so old. Moon Orchid's daughter held her mother's hand throughout this lecture. She, too, was unhappy after marrying a rich, tyrannical man whom her aunt had arranged for her. Brave Orchid thought her niece was like her mother, "the lovely, useless type."

*To Brave Orchid, these women were incapable of work, so at the very least, they could use their beauty and other charms to secure husbands who would care for them. Brave Orchid does not think it matters if the husband is cruel or distant; the tradition of marriage must hold.*

The next day, right after breakfast, Brave Orchid talked about taking the direct route into Los Angeles. She insisted that Moon Orchid make life unbearable for the second wife, if necessary. Moon Orchid countered that she would not mind if the woman stayed, for she could comb Moon Orchid's hair, take care of the boys, and do most of the chores. This response made Brave Orchid think that her sister was not very bright. She insisted that Moon Orchid's job as a wife was to make her expectations clear and to scold her husband into becoming a better man.

*Moon Orchid takes an unconventional view in thinking that she and the second wife could live together, with Moon Orchid as a grandmotherly type for whom the second wife would care. Again, Brave Orchid insists that Moon Orchid assert a forcefulness that she does not have in her instruction to dominate her husband, despite not seeing the man for decades (and his clear resistance to seeing Moon Orchid again).*

Moon Orchid hoped that "the summer would wear away while her sister talked" and that Brave Orchid would find the sudden autumn too cold for travel. In the meantime, she studied Brave Orchid's children, recalling all of their idiosyncrasies based on what Brave Orchid had detailed about them in her letters. She followed them around, watching them while they were studying or cooking with appliances. Moon Orchid noticed that they were not happy "like the two real Chinese babies" who died. When Brave Orchid scolded them about their manners or told them to dress better, Moon Orchid defended them, thinking that they enjoyed "looking like wild animals."

*Moon Orchid is fascinated by the manners and habits of her nieces and nephews who have had access to the conveniences of life that did not exist in the part of China where Moon Orchid lived. To her, the children seem sullen, not as happy as Brave Orchid's first two children, despite the fact that those were two babies and not typically moping teenagers.*

Brave Orchid and her husband woke at 6:00 AM and prepared for a day's work at the family laundry. Brave Orchid walked Moon Orchid and her niece to the laundry via Chinatown, pointing out things along the way. Moon Orchid called the Chinese that she saw "Americans," which Brave Orchid found stupid—they were "overseas Chinese."

*Though Moon Orchid is visiting the United States for the first time, she is more open-minded than Brave Orchid about notions of who can be American. She sees the Chinese in Chinatown as other Americans, whereas for her sister, they can only be Chinese.*

When they got to the laundry, Brave Orchid assigned Moon Orchid a task to perform, though all of the jobs seemed too difficult and Brave Orchid worried that her sister might burn herself. Moon Orchid tried ironing but burned a shirt, causing her sister to send her out for a walk because she complained of it being too hot to breathe. Moon Orchid asked her sister to accompany her back to Chinatown, but Brave Orchid insisted on working. To appease Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid set a crate out front for her sister to sit.

*Moon Orchid is not capable of working in the laundry or of spending any time on her own, even among people who look like her and speak her language. This co-dependency suggests not only that Moon Orchid has never worked, but she has never experienced any real independence.*

After lunch, Brave Orchid and her sister walked back to Chinatown for some fun. She introduced Moon Orchid to her friends and told them that her sister had come back to reclaim her husband. The women had a wide range of advice to give, including blackmailing and beating him. Moon Orchid took all of this for a joke. They then played a game of Mahjong.

*Moon Orchid takes the women's words as a joke due to the seriousness of what they are saying, and because of her inability to cause harm to the man she married—however neglectful he has been of her.*

Moon Orchid later started visiting the laundry late in the afternoons when the towels were dry, and she could fold them. She spent most of the summer evenings continuing to observe Brave Orchid's children. Each day, Brave Orchid asked Moon Orchid if she was ready to go reclaim her husband. Moon Orchid said that she was not. When Moon Orchid's daughter announced that she had to return to her family in Los Angeles, Brave Orchid saw this as an opportunity to go.

*Brave Orchid ignores her sister's wishes not to go back to her husband. Though she has finally found a task for Moon Orchid to perform, and despite Moon Orchid taking great interest in her nieces and nephews, Brave Orchid does not see the benefit of her sister remaining close, but chooses instead to place her with her husband.*

Brave Orchid assigned the task of driving to her eldest son. The two old ladies and Moon Orchid's daughter sat in the backseat. During the drive, Brave Orchid began to tell the story of the emperor's four wives. She told Moon Orchid that she was the good Empress of the East who would free the Earth's Emperor from the Western Palace. The second wife, like the Western Empress, had connived to win Moon Orchid's husband; Moon Orchid had to win him back.

*Moon Orchid was the true wife, according to Brave Orchid, because Moon Orchid and her husband had married in China where everything was more "real" to Brave Orchid. Again, Brave Orchid sees the West as false but alluring. Moon Orchid, like the Empress of the East, has to win her husband by reminding him of his roots.*

Moon Orchid worried over what would happen if she showed up to her husband's house. Perhaps he would throw her out. Brave Orchid insisted that they be "routine," though they might have to climb through the window to get into the house. Moon Orchid should behave, her sister encouraged, as though she belonged in his home and had never really left. Moon Orchid sometimes played along, saying that maybe she could be folding towels when he arrived. Then, she thought better of it and said that she could not go through with the confrontation. She tapped her nephew on the shoulder and asked him to turn back.

*Brave Orchid encourages her sister to break into the house and behave as though she belongs there—a strange action that surely would not have been met with a positive response. Brave Orchid is so fixated on getting Moon Orchid reunited with her husband that she ignores not only her sister's feelings but also the feasibility and legality of her suggestions.*

Moon Orchid's daughter insisted on being dropped off at home first. Brave Orchid had tried to get her to confront her father five years earlier, but all she had done was write him a letter. He could visit her, or she could visit him, but he had not wanted to see her. When they arrived at Moon Orchid's daughter's home, Moon Orchid asked to see her grandchildren, but Brave Orchid insisted that they go see to Moon Orchid's husband first. Brave Orchid's son drove to a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles.

*Brave Orchid learned nothing from Moon Orchid's daughter's failed attempt to connect with her father. Unlike Kingston, who would see the value in seeking acknowledgement through a letter, Brave Orchid is a talker who thrives on confrontation and has little patience with those who do not share her boldness.*

Moon Orchid was too nervous to go in. Brave Orchid decided to scout the building and come back out when she had a plan. She entered a doctor's office. A woman in a pink and white uniform emerged when Brave Orchid proved unable to speak to the receptionist. She told Brave Orchid that her husband was a brain surgeon and did not take drop-in patients. It occurred to Brave Orchid that Moon Orchid's husband had simply left her for a younger woman.

*It becomes evident to Brave Orchid that Moon Orchid's husband did what many men do when they become as rich and successful as he—they seek younger wives as status symbols. Moon Orchid's husband chose a younger, Western wife to show how far he has come from his village.*

When Moon Orchid claimed to be too scared to go into his office and announce herself, Brave Orchid instructed her son to go up and claim that his "uncle" was in an accident on the street. Brave Orchid's son found the plan ridiculous, but obeyed. Moon Orchid burst into tears at the prospect of seeing her husband. Brave Orchid insisted that she was just tired, and began to slap and pinch her sister to get blood back into her cheeks.

*What Brave Orchid insists on seeing as tiredness is the fear and pain of seeing the man who abandoned Moon Orchid years ago. Worse, Brave Orchid's insensitivity is made worse when she tries to make Moon Orchid look younger and rosier by slapping her cheeks, physically abusing her sister at the very height of her emotional crisis.*

Brave Orchid's son returned, accompanied by a man in a dark western suit. He saw no accident, but looked the old women's "awful faces" and asked the "grandmothers" what was wrong. Brave Orchid was outraged that he did not recognize his wife. Moon Orchid's husband then asked Moon Orchid what she was doing there. Brave Orchid made up a story about getting her on a Red Cross list to have her sent to California.

*Brave Orchid's lie is an attempt to make Moon Orchid look too pitiful to turn away, especially after it becomes obvious that Moon Orchid has aged more than her husband and that he is angry to see her. The narrative describes him through Brave Orchid's eyes as a man "in a dark western suit," symbolic of his transgression.*

Moon Orchid's husband insisted that she did not belong because she did not "have the hardness" for America. He did not wish for Moon Orchid to return to China, but he said that she could not live in his house, for he was living like an American and could get arrested if anyone knew he had another wife. He told Brave Orchid that he did not write because he had become a different person, and his family in China were like people he had read about in a book long ago. He bought them lunch, and then Brave Orchid's son drove his aunt back to her daughter's house, where she wanted to live. Moon Orchid never saw her husband again.

*Her silence in the car parallels her husband's silence during all of Moon Orchid's years in Hong Kong. That silence, however, was a welcome one, accompanied by blissful ignorance. That silence was then broken by Brave Orchid's interference, which forced her sister to acknowledge the truth of having been abandoned and rejected. Even now, though, Brave Orchid doesn't sympathize with her sister in her time of pain.*

Several months went by with no letters from Moon Orchid. When she lived in Hong Kong and China, she had written "every other week." One day Brave Orchid called, and her sister answered the phone, but she whispered about people listening to her phone calls and hung up. Moon Orchid's daughter said that her mother had talked about Mexican **ghosts** plotting on her life.

*The loss of her illusion about her marriage causes a paranoid break in Moon Orchid. The difference in her behavior is indicated by her lack of writing, which had previously been her preferred mode of communication. Silence is again a marker of losing one's sanity.*

Brave Orchid decided that her sister should return north to live with her. When she arrived, Moon Orchid talked about being "in disguise." Brave Orchid tried chanting Moon Orchid's name, her new address, and all of the names of her family members to call her spirit back. Brave Orchid concluded that her sister had "misplaced herself" and "her spirit [was] scattered all over the world."

*Brave Orchid (somewhat rightly) blames herself for bringing her sister across the Pacific, then sending her up and down the coast to retrieve her husband without knowing or asking what Moon Orchid wanted. By the time Brave Orchid acknowledges her sister's place with the family, it is too late.*

Despite Brave Orchid's efforts, her sister slipped further into insanity. She said that the Mexicans had followed her to Brave Orchid's house. She went around the house turning out the lights, as though there had been an air raid. She also became afraid for the children. To appease her sister, Brave Orchid told the children to come home straight away so as not to legitimize Moon Orchid's worry that they would be taken away. Finally, Brave Orchid realized that the situation was hopeless, for Moon Orchid had lost all "variety" and only had one talk-story. Sane people, she told her children, had variety when they did talk-story, whereas insane people only had one story that they told over and over again.

*Moon Orchid's paranoia traps her both in the past, with her memories of air raids, and in a present that she does not understand or recognize, which explains her paranoia about Mexican ghosts. Moon Orchid's absence of a new "talk-story"—an experience that was not rooted in fear—means that she has gone completely mad. Brave Orchid could control her ghosts by refusing to give them power, but like the village crazy lady, Moon Orchid did not know how to exorcise her fears.*

Brave Orchid gave up when Moon Orchid started badmouthing her children. She wondered if Moon Orchid had already left her body and a mean-spirited **ghost** now inhabited the shell of the woman who cursed Brave Orchid's children. Nevertheless, Moon Orchid's daughter had her mother committed to a state asylum. Moon Orchid was happy there, because no one ever left, and they spoke "the same language." Alas, Moon Orchid "had a new story," but died soon thereafter.

*Moon Orchid finds comfort in the asylum, for she no longer worries about people she loved abandoning her or leaving her alone for too long. Moreover, they all speak the language of madness, which makes them a kind of family. Thus, Moon Orchid finds a new village in the asylum. She experiences a second "homecoming" of sorts before her death.*

Brave Orchid told her children that they must never allow their father to marry another woman. She did not believe that she could handle it any better than Moon Orchid did. Brave Orchid's husband insisted that he was too old for a second wife, and Brave Orchid's daughters decided that they would never tolerate unfaithful men—they and the rest of her children would major in science or mathematics.

*Moon Orchid's experience is a tale, based on real events, that Brave Orchid uses to caution herself and her children against the disrespect of infidelity. To protect themselves against the chaos it could wreak, the girls take refuge in the rationalism of math and science.*

## 5. A SONG FOR A BARBARIAN REED PIPE

Kingston's brother reported to one of his sisters what had happened in Los Angeles when Moon Orchid saw her husband, and that sister reported it to Kingston. Kingston thinks that his story may have been better than hers, for it would not have been "twisted into designs." Kingston thinks that this may have been why Brave Orchid cut the frenulum under Kingston's tongue, though there was no obvious evidence of this. Brave Orchid insists that she cut the tongue so that Kingston would never be "tongue-tied" and so that she would be able to speak any language.

*It is unclear if (and probably unlikely that) Brave Orchid actually cut Kingston's tongue. Whether she did or not, telling her this story is an effort to avoid her daughter experiencing Moon Orchid's fate—being abandoned by her husband due to a lack of language—and her mother's fate, which was losing her career due to an inability to speak a new language.*

In kindergarten, when she had to speak for the first time, Kingston was silent. As an adult, she still has difficulty finding her voice, even to say "hello" casually. She flunked kindergarten for not speaking to anyone, not even asking to use the restroom. Her sister also said nothing for three years. Kingston hated having to talk, but she also hated being silent. Reading aloud was easier because she did not have to make up the words. When her second-grade class put on a play, the Chinese girls were not included because their voices were too soft, and their parents did not sign the permission slips anyway. One Chinese girl, however, did win a spelling bee.

*The silence Kingston expresses in English is out of fear of hearing her voice in a language that she has not yet claimed completely as her own. She and other Chinese girls feel ill at ease in English due to not hearing it at home, and have difficulty finding their voices and speaking English without fear or embarrassment. In the book, this is only a problem among the girls, who seem to struggle with pressures to be polite but also not wanting to sound foolish.*

After American school, Kingston and her siblings went to Chinese school from 5:00 to 7:30 PM. There they used their voices. Boys who were very well-behaved in American school talked back, and the girls screamed during recess and sometimes had fist-fights. There was no play supervision.

*When they were in Chinese school, the children could be themselves, and even gave themselves license to break rules and be ornery. Kingston here associates speech with Chinese culture, and silence with American culture.*

Kingston notes that not all of the students who were silent at American school "found voice at Chinese school." Both Kingston and her sister struggled during recitation exercises. Their voices sounded like that of "a crippled animal." Another girl whispered.

*Kingston and her sister do not feel entirely at ease in Chinese either, which does not conform to how they see their American selves. They are stuck somewhere in between.*

When a delivery boy accidentally brought Crazy Mary's pills to the laundry, Brave Orchid sent Kingston to go to the drugstore to "stop the curse" that the boy had brought. Kingston was to ask for "reparation candy," sweetness in exchange for the threat of illness that he had brought. She still struggled to speak to the druggist in an audible voice.

*Kingston is embarrassed to ask for candy based on her mother's silly superstition; an incorrect delivery would not bring insanity into the house. However, Brave Orchid had a fear of madness due to her experiences in China and with Moon Orchid.*

On the other hand, Kingston contemplates the loudness of the Chinese. Her father once wondered if he could hear Chinese people talking "from blocks away" because he understood the language or because he was so loud. To Kingston, it is not just that the language was loud; it was also ugly. Normal Chinese women's voices were "strong and bossy." To sound more "American-feminine," girls had to whisper. Most of them eventually found some kind of voice, "however faltering," except for one girl.

*The typical Chinese woman's voice was incompatible with the standard of Western feminine voices when Kingston was growing up. "Feminine" women at that time and place barely spoke audibly, fulfilling the desire for women to be seen but not heard. This voice did not suit Kingston, but neither did the strident Chinese one that her mother used.*

The quiet girl was a year older than Kingston and in her class for twelve years. Her older sister was usually with her. Kingston's younger sister was in the class below her. They were very much like the quiet girl and her sister, but their parents kept them home from school when it "sprinkled" and they did not work for a living, but they were similar in other ways, such as sports.

*The quiet girl and her sister are treated extremely delicately compared to Kingston and her younger sister, reminding readers that there were very different ways to raise daughters in Chinese families—Brave Orchid was not the standard Chinese mother. Kingston's parents taught her and her sister to work, while that was not expected of these other girls.*

Kingston hated the quiet girl. Kingston hated that she was the last chosen for her team and that Kingston was also the last chosen for *her* team. One afternoon in the sixth grade, Kingston, her younger sister, the quiet girl, and the quiet girl's older sister stayed late at school for some reason. Kingston ran back into the girls' yard and past the quiet girl into the lavatory. The girl followed her there. Once there, Kingston demanded that the girl talk, and called her a "sissy-girl" for her refusal to speak.

*Kingston picks on the girl largely because she is the embodiment of Kingston's own fears about silence and passivity. With her delicate hands and sensitivity, the girl could be a miniature version of Kingston's aunt, Moon Orchid, who had been driven into madness by silence, as far as anyone could tell. Kingston also finds herself in a rare position of power in her relationship with the girl, and takes pleasure in there being someone else "below" her.*

Kingston examined the quiet girl's face. She had "baby soft" skin with "pink and white cheeks." She seemed fragile, and Kingston hated "fragility." Kingston pinched the girl's cheek to coax her into talking. When that didn't work, she pulled the girl's hair and made a honking noise. She even tried to get the girl to say, "Ow!" to indicate that she was hurt. When the girl began to cry, Kingston did not stop tormenting her, but told the girl how much she did not like her for what Kingston perceived as weakness. She was bigger even, and refused to defend herself.

*Kingston's abuse of the girl for her weakness is a form of mockery similar to Brave Orchid's mockery of Sitting Ghost. Kingston pinches and pulls at the girl as though she is not real, for in this way, Kingston can convince herself that her fears, which the girl embodies, are also not real, or can simply be slapped around and defeated.*

Kingston became so frustrated with the quiet girl's refusal to speak that she began to cry and plead with her to speak. She told the girl that no one would ever marry her if she didn't speak, and that no one would ever notice her or employ her. Suddenly, the quiet girl's sister appeared, and they found Kingston's sister and all walked home together. On the way, Kingston advised the quiet girl's older sister not to "pamper" the girl, but to make her speak.

*Kingston mimics her mother's bossiness by dictating how the quiet girl ought to be treated by her relatives. Like her mother, she has no patience for the "delicate, useless" type who tends to be pampered. The word "pamper" recalls Kingston's sense of the girl as "baby soft" and the inability of babies to speak.*

Kingston fell ill for eighteen months and could not go to school. When she did return, she saw the quiet girl again; she had not changed. She wore the same clothes and had the same haircut. During a time when other Asian girls were starting to tape their eyelids, she wore no makeup. She continued to read aloud in class, but there was less of that when they got older. Kingston was wrong about the girl not having anyone to take care of her. Her older sister became a typist and did not marry, but lived with their parents. The quiet girl did not go out, except to the movies.

*Unlike Kingston's family, which scattered apart despite Brave Orchid's wish for them all to remain close, the quiet girl and her family remain close-knit in a more traditionally Chinese way, and all live together. The quiet girl could remain silent and, like Kingston, take refuge in movies.*

Kingston began to hate the secrecy of the Chinese. In her culture, she surmised, even the good things became unspeakable. Talking and not talking, Kingston thought, "made the difference between sanity and insanity." She thought about the insane women she knew, such as the woman next door who "was chatty one moment [...] and shut up the next." There was also Crazy Mary, who "wore pajamas" and "[lurched] out of dark corners." She was eventually "locked up in the crazyhouse" and never released. Finally, there was the woman Kingston's brother had named Pee-Ah-Nah, who picked for orange berries in the "slough" (swamp) along with Kingston, her mother, and her siblings. Pee-Ah-Nah chased the children around and rode with a broom between her legs, leading them to refer to her as a "witchwoman."

*Kingston believes that not speaking could lead to madness. Though she mentions madwomen in her neighborhood, the relationship between madness and silence is most palpably expressed through the example of Moon Orchid. Silence, Kingston surmises, is a form of repression. She simplifies the madness of each woman, thinking that the cure to lunacy is to talk, especially when what one wants to say is a source of shame or fear.*

Kingston thought that every neighborhood or house had "its crazy woman or crazy girl," or its "village idiot." Kingston wondered if she would fill that role at her house. She continued to think about how girls were referred to as maggots, and her mother's reasons for cutting her tongue. One day, a woman who was "the giver of American names" walked into the laundry and said that Kingston had "a pressed-duck voice" and that her mother ought to do something about it or they would not be able to marry her off. Kingston refuted the woman's claim, and Brave Orchid admonished her for talking back.

*Kingston's wish to speak is not diverted by the "namer," who insists that Kingston's voice is not attractive enough to be heard. Just as she had bickered with her mother about not being a "bad girl," Kingston bickers with the woman about the sound of her voice. The woman's criticism reinforces the message that girls were unwanted, like "maggots."*

Kingston learned that young men—FOBS, or Fresh-off-the-Boat's—were placing ads in the *Gold Mountain News* for wives, and Kingston's parents started answering them. Brave Orchid took one home from the laundry and showed him her daughters' pictures, focusing on Kingston, the eldest. Kingston intentionally made herself seem incapable domestically so that the young men would lose interest. She dropped dishes and spilled soup on them.

*Kingston's suspects that her parents are trying to marry off her and her sisters. To make herself appear unsuitable for marriage, she reverts to her former habit of breaking dishes and performing other acts that make her seem domestically-handicapped—assuming that young men only want a wife to do chores for them.*

At Chinese school, a "mentally retarded boy" who liked to hand out toys, supposedly from his parents' stores, began to follow Kingston around school. He was large and had a tendency to bark. When "the hulk," as Kingston sometimes called him, found out where Kingston worked, he began to sit at the laundry. His parents allowed him to sit on the cartons he set up for himself. Kingston was outraged that, despite her straight-A's, no one could see that she had nothing in common with "this monster, this birth defect." One day, he left his boxes for a long time and Brave Orchid opened up the boxes. They were stuffed with pornography. Brave Orchid concluded that he was not too stupid to want to know about women. The old women talked about him being stupid "but very rich."

*Kingston's shunning of the boy is rather cruel, and her suspicion that her parents seek to marry her to him is likely a projection of her own feelings of inadequacy and mistrust toward her parents. Kingston uses her scholastic achievement to position herself as superior to the boy, whom she refers to as a "monster" for his awkwardness and a "birth defect" for his disabilities. As with the quiet girl she abused, Kingston's own experience with disability in regard to speech does not make her more sensitive to those worse off than herself.*

Kingston decided to mimic the habit of confession that she had learned from her Mexican and Filipino Catholic friends, and tell her mother all the true things she had ever done or thought. Kingston picked a time of day when Brave Orchid was alone, and decided to tell her one thing per day. One day, her mother asked her to stop all of her "whispering" and "senseless gabbings every night." Kingston thought that maybe her mother asked her to leave her alone during her quiet time when there were few customers.

*Kingston's attempt to grow closer to her mother by telling Brave Orchid everything backfires. Kingston forgets how incompatible the notion of confession is with Brave Orchid's culture, which survives (or so she thinks) due to the willingness to keep secrets or to mislead.*

The hulk returned with another crate. This time, Kingston looked at her mother and screamed for them to send the boy away. She then went on a tirade, in which she told her mother that she could take care of herself and that she would not allow her to turn her into "a slave or a wife." Finally, she accused Brave Orchid of trying to cut out her tongue so that she would not talk. Brave Orchid, "a champion talker," was shouting, too, saying that she cut her daughter's tongue to make her "say charming things," but Kingston did not even say "hello." Kingston demanded to know why her mother called her ugly. Her mother insisted that it was merely Chinese habit to say the opposite of the truth.

*When confession does not work, Kingston confronts her parents with anger, figuring that they will understand her this way. The confrontation only results in more misunderstanding about the difference between Kingston's American upbringing and the standards of Chinese culture. Brave Orchid's story of cutting her daughter's tongue was supposedly not committed to make her talk freely, but to encourage her to say things that would please others, thus reinforcing the repression of Kingston's true self.*

To learn who she really was and what she liked, Kingston says, she had to leave home. It turned out that she preferred conventional aspects of American life: plastics, periodic tables, and TV dinners with peas and carrots. She looked up "Ho Chi Kuei," which is what Brave Orchid called her at dinner. "Kuei" meant "**ghost**." When directed at boys, it could mean "dog ghost," which was almost affectionate. When directed at girls, it was more akin to "stink pig ghost."

*Ironically, being referred to as a "ghost" gives Kingston freedom. She is banished from her household in a way that is similar to how No Name Woman was banished from her grandparents' home. The reference to "stink pig ghost" also recalls the "pigsty" in which Kingston's aunt gave birth.*

Kingston remembered that the day after she "talked out the retarded man, the huncher," she never saw him again. She wondered if she made him up. One day, she says, she wants to go to China and find out who is lying—the Communists who claim to have jobs for everyone or the relatives who cannot buy salt. Brave Orchid sends the money she earns from working in the fields to Hong Kong, and the relatives there send it on to the remaining aunts and to the children and grandchildren of Kingston's grandfather's "two minor wives." Kingston wonders if her grandmother really lived to be ninety-nine, and if all the babies really wore a Mao button "like a drop of blood on their jumpsuits." She thought that it would be good if the Communists took better care of themselves so that she would not have to send them money and could buy a "color t.v." instead.

*Kingston wants to visit and learn about the country she has only heard about in stories. She questions what she has heard, even the stories about her own family, wondering what was invented to mislead her. She is skeptical, based on the tone of this passage, that life in China is as dire as they describe. However, her mother believes the stories, continuing to send money home, perhaps out of guilt for leaving the others behind to suffer under Mao. For Kingston, the experience of Communism is unknown, merely stories she sees on the TV that she hopes to buy with the money her relatives demand.*

Kingston recalls a talk-story that her mother told her recently. Her grandmother loved the theater. One evening, a bandit raided the theater and nearly kidnapped Kingston's youngest aunt, Lovely Orchid, but they let her go for a prettier girl. Kingston's grandmother and Brave Orchid got home safely, proving to Kingston's grandmother that the family would be "immune to harm as long as they went to plays."

*Kingston's grandmother established the family's tradition of seeking refuge through stories, believing that fiction could secure them from the harsh realities of the real world. It is a superstition, but no less of a superstition than Kingston's belief that No Name Woman disapproves of her niece "telling on her."*

Kingston likes to think that her grandmother and aunts heard the songs of the poetess Ts'ai Yen at some of these plays. Ts'ai Yen, the daughter of a scholar, was kidnapped by a southern barbarian. During her twelve years with the barbarians, she had two children who did not speak Chinese. She tried to speak to them in Chinese, but they mocked her "sing-song" voice. The barbarians liked to sit on the sand and play flutes. When they reached a high pitch, the music disturbed Ts'ai Yen, and she returned to her tent and began to sing. The barbarians heard a sound that matched the flutes in pitch. Ts'ai Yen sang about China and her family there. Her words were in Chinese, but the barbarians understood her "sadness and anger." Later, her children began to sing the songs with her when she sat "by the winter campfires." After twelve years, she "was ransomed and married to Tung Ssu so that her father could have Han descendants." She brought her songs back from the savage lands, including "Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," which translates well.

*Kingston identifies with the wish of Ts'ai Yen to find her voice among the barbarian tribe, who mock her manner of speech in a language that they do not understand. The communion between the poetess and the barbarians, different not only in language but also in background, occurs when they share music. Ts'ai Yen singing about her longing for China attracted their attention because her voice matched the high pitch of their flutes. Suddenly, her "sing-song" voice mattered less than the emotion she conveyed through song. Kingston suggests that voices, when listening to with feeling and not fear of difference, can convey a human experience that is relatable and timeless.*

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