

The Woman Warrior: Talking-story in Cultural Memory

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Abstract

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston takes an effective talking-story narrative strategy and a creative adaptation of Chinese myths, legends and other classic literature, which have deep connections with a nation's cultural memory. It is the cultural memory embodied in oral stories and their literary adaption that help Chinese American reassure and reconstruct their own identity under the cultural hegemony of mainstream society. However, it's also the cultural discrepancy between China and America that results in Kingston failing to achieve her writing purpose fully — speak up for the silent immigrants and establish a new image of Chinese American as a living American with particular identity. This essay will mainly analyze the power behind “talking-story” and the reason why this book was misunderstood by some Americans and critics from the perspective of Cultural Memory.

Keywords

The Woman Warrior; Talk-Story; Adaptation; Cultural Memory.

1. Introduction

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts, as Maxine Hong Kingston's most famous work, has been widely praised for the “postmodernist amalgamation of oral histories, myths, family stories, and fictionalizations” and its “intimacy and openness to interpretation” [1]. Putting aside temporally the annotation of its content from various perspectives and the dispute about Kingston's adaptation of Chinese myths, legends and other classic literature, this paper will first focus on “talk-story”, one of the novel's narrative strategies, which influenced greatly following Chinese American writers like Amy Tan and was also used in Kingston's later novels *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. Talking-story, as a traditional form of oral literature, is both the carrier and contents of people's cultural memory; at the same time, certain cultural memory shared by people decides the final effect of Kingston's adaptation.

Cultural memory is a concept first introduced by the German Egyptologists Jan Assmann, who drew further upon Maurice Halbwachs' theory on collective memory, as “a collective concept for all knowledge that directs behavior and experience in the interactive framework of a society and one that obtains through generations in repeated societal practice and initiation” [2]. Assmann defines cultural memory as the “outer dimension of human memory”, comprising “memory culture” and “reference to the past” [2]. Generally speaking, memory culture is “the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity”, and reference to the past can “reassure the members of a society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space—i.e. an historical consciousness—by creating a shared past” [3].

2. The Power of Talking-story

The Woman Warrior adopts a talk-story narrative pattern from the long-lasting tradition of oral story-telling, which is used by all the different narrators in this book: the first-person narrator of the novel, Mother and other third-person story-tellers, and the narrators in the literary adaptation of classic Chinese stories. At first, during the narrator's childhood, her mother told her lots of stories consisting myth, legend, family history and other memorials from China, as Kingston writes, "night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep" (p19) [4]. Then, like the mother's "talking-story", the author integrates oral story telling into "the written story telling of the novel" for structuring the novel and depicting the characters [5]. In the narration of this novel, the family and community stories told by Mother and other family elders were mixed with folklores and unreliable memories, and therefore the boundary is blurred between true family histories and fictional bedtime stories. Finally, even in the adaptation of those classic Chinese stories in the novel, the author still does not forget to stress this talk-story tradition. For instance, the heroine of the chapter "White Tigers" is asked to "talk-story about what happened in the mountains of the white-tigers".

Kingston has proved the importance of the "talking-story" tradition and the power behind the stories in her works. Brave Orchid, narrator's mother and a "champion talker", educated her American-born children by "talking-stories", explaining life experiences, Chinese history and culture in her eyes. "Talking-story" is not only immigrant children's pastime and consolation but also a considerable carrier and expression of Chinese cultural memory at the same time. For example, in the first chapter, the novel's narrator said that "whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories that ran like this one, a story to grow up on" (p3). About the influence of mother's story on the narrator's childhood, the narrator mentioned that "I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (p19). Brave Orchid, as a traditional Chinese woman and mother, sang her children "out of nightmares and horror movies" and comforted them with stories; what's more, she passed on Chinese culture in talking-story as well as in tradition food, festivals, and rituals. The stories of Fa Mu Lan and Ts'ai Yen, together with many other Chinese traditional cultural icons like dragon, ancestral temple and Confucius, all finds their way into the American-born Chinese child's mind.

From the perspective of Cultural Memory theory, the deed of talking-story functions as kind of "memory culture", being used by the mother to preserve ties with their own culture and history, while the content of the stories just as "reference to the past". These stories are mainly about myth and legend handed down for centuries, or ancient history and anecdotes, or traditional customs and ceremonies, which all can impress Chinese American, including the storytellers themselves, of China's past and its distinguish culture. Since individuals need obtain their collective memories through socialization, while those American-born Chinese Children are living in a completely different country from China, talking-story is a direct and effective way for them to learn their own cultural memory under the cultural hegemony of mainstream society. By telling the stories of China's past in the modern American society after World War Two, Mother's talking-story has achieved a lot in the following three aspects.

First, it helps cultural conservation and inheritance among the Chinese immigrant families. The elder generation often wants to tell their children not only local customs but social mores, not only Mulan's military legend but her courage and filial piety, not only Confucius the person but 2000-year-history Confucianism. In a word, they intend, from the very start, to tell the young generation not only where they came from but what they believes in that country – modesty, hardworking, bravery and other Chinese traditional social value and morality. At the same time, there is a gap between elder and young generations for their distinct cultural and social backgrounds of growing up, since the elders often had personal experiences of living in China while their children might be born in the USA. Under this circumstance, talking-story would be

a fun and easy way for young generation to accept the Chinese culture, and also a meaningful interactive mode of communication for parents and children and help enhancing the bond between them.

Second, it can also assist the young generation in coping with daily predicaments and figuring out their own identities in American society, as the young Chinese American could find their cultural roots in those stories. Although young generation of the immigrants was born in the traditional Chinese family, they did grow up, receive education and live in the modern American society. It's natural and easier for them to embrace the contemporary culture and mainstream values. Compared with the surviving problems of the elder generation, they are more often confronted with identity confusion under new circumstances of culture shock or stress. Mother's talking-story "White Tiger" helped her daughter establishing values of life, as the narrator said "When we Chinese girls listened to the adults talk-story, we learned that we failed if we grew up to be wives or slaves. We could be heroines, swordswomen." (p19) Mother's plausible experience of fighting against ghosts in "Shaman" gave the narrator courage in the face of the unknown world America, which "has been full of machines and ghosts" (p96).

Third, Chinese American, especially females, had stay in silence for a long time, while talking story can be a precious approach to express themselves in their own voice and discourse. Because of Chinese patriarchal culture and institutions, the narrator's aunt became a "no name woman"; because of survival stress and cultural discrepancy in America, Mother had to desert her decent career which could bring her honor and respect; because of the racial discrimination and language barrier, the narrator and many of the young generations were "silent at American school" (p168). Due to "talking-story" is kind of oral literature without strict limitations and fixed versions, Mother spoke out of the Aunt's story and put her thoughts, values and wishes all into the "talking-stories". The narrator, "silent daughter", finally learned to express herself, for she saw that "I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (p20).

Talking-story therefore plays a so helpful role in preserving family and Chinese traditions against the Western dominant culture in America and reconstructing their unique identity in a new world. However, this is not all the effects of talking-story, because "cultural memory is not about giving testimony of past events, as accurately and truthful as possible, nor is it necessarily about ensuring cultural continuity: it is about making meaningful statements about the past in a given cultural context of the present" [6].

3. Adaptation and Cultural Memory

When talking about the past in memory, John Elsner once wrote: "What matters ... is not that [a particular account of the past] be correct by our standards or anyone else's, but that it be convincing to the particular group of individuals ... for whom it serves as an explanation of the world they inhabit" [7]. Similarly, as the world the young generation grew up and lived in had changed hugely from the elder's, talking-stories, being used to explain traditional China, was confronted with new delimita in front of the young Chinese American. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston questions: "Chinese-American, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, your mother who marked your growing with stories, from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (p5&6)

In order to mirror the perplexing narrative of China and the plight of Chinese immigrants in reality, Kingston still takes the talking-story strategy but in a way of literature adaptation. This brave and creative writing brought doubt and dissent to Kingston, especially from another famous Chinese American writer Frank Chin. No matter what the criticism, the importance of talking-story raised great concern again. In fact, Franck Chin himself also emphasized the role of myth, legend, stories about history and traditional culture from homeland, particularly in

one's childhood. In Chin's essay *Rendezvous*, he considered that "if our genius, our wit, our licks don't have their seeds in the kid stories of our childhood, we have no people, no history, only the victim culture spawned by the white sociology..." [8]. Then, why did Kingston's adaptation cause controversy among some Chinese American writers and literary critics? It might have something with her way of rewriting and the extent of adaption, and also the cultural memory of average American readers.

There are many famous works using folklores or other classics, like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by G. G. Marquez. There are also works adapted from traditional literary with much alteration, even parody and subversion, which can still be accepted widely, like *Old Tales Retold* by Lu Xun. It's noticed that those works usually do not revise the basic meaning and moral values of the original source. Meanwhile, if the works do change a lot, their main readers would seldom feel confused or misconstrue the authors' intention, because they are quite clear about the background of the adaption as well as the original version from the content to the implication, *Old Tales Retold* being a typical example. *The Woman Warrior*, however, is another case.

On one side, 20th-century American readers lacked the necessary cultural memory or a shared past like Chinese Americans to understand the cultural signification and connotation caused by the differences between the adaption and the original version, not mention the author's exact writing purpose. In the novel, the narrator got stuck in an outermost position: not Chinese enough for her family and their community and not American enough either for the mainstream society. She therefore was stranded on the edges of both communities, with complicated cultural background, morals and values. Kingston decided to adopt talking-story tradition and adapt those classical literature works and folklores for bridging "the gap among different and often conflicting cultures, generations, languages, and gender roles" and crossing the social barriers that silence her both from mainstream culture and "centers of power in her own racial community" [9]. In the final chapter, the narrator pointed out before the last one of Mother's talking-story that "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine." (p206) Apparently, the daughter attempted to speak up for herself and establish a particular identity as a Chinese American female not as a stereotype of ethnic minority in the mainstream society. But, it's a pity that her wishes could hardly all realized in American society at that time. Scholars point that "in memory the past is actively constructed depending on certain social and mental conditions" [6]. As citizens of American mainstream society, ordinary readers never had the similar experience of the narrator struggling in conflicts between Chinese immigrant community and mainstream society, between the patriarchal tradition and modern civilization, between the parental bond and independence in growing-up. To this point, average American readers would be only impressed on the absurd traditions, superstition thoughts and incredible tales from a distant and exotic land; while the knowledgeable might be familiar with all the contents of origin stories, but they still could not empathize with the narrator and these stories' meaning to the establishment and inheritance of Chinese traditions, social values and even people's philosophy on life and world.

On the other side, the narrative strategy of talking-story and the creative rewriting of classic literature endow this book with exquisite structure and cultural depth, but also make the reading threshold higher. For example, some bookstores once labeled this book as non-fiction, but just as the narrator said to her mother that "You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference." (p202) [4], this book is not an autobiography but a fiction. It's obvious that the narrator's description of China is almost based on her mother's recollection in a talking-stories way. That is to say, the construction of China in this book is defined by Mother's narrative, which all comes from her memory influenced by her personal cognition and experience. Then, in continuing

paraphrasing and rewriting, Mother's narrative of China, which based on "the recollection of her direct experience of China", is "transfigured into a 'historical' text" [10]. As a result, the daughter's primary text has been a version with some transmutation, but still genuine one in American readers' eyes. This distance from the origin sources may do not effect the author's adaption, while it enlarges the American readers' misunderstanding of real Chinese culture. In this respect, the book itself satirizes the bias and stereotyped impression on China from the American mainstream society. At the same time, some critics misinterpreted the theme of this novel. Kingston didn't intend to reconstruct an authentic China just by this novel, and actually, she put more efforts to restore the actual life of a young female in a Chinese American community. She wants to help the silent Chinese girl develop the impendence and initiative of her personality, voice her own thoughts, reconcile with herself, and step into the mainstream society. Thus, in this novel's literature adaption, Fa Mulan became a woman with more characteristics of modern female – strong, brave and independent, more than a filial and loyal ancient warrior; Ts'ai Yen finally struck a chord with the barbarians in their music and achieved mutual understanding with her children by her singing. The novel speaks up for the silent immigrants and tries to establish a new image of Chinese American as a living American with particular identity.

4. Conclusion

The Woman Warrior has a successful talk-story narrative strategy and a creative adaptation, which, however, didn't have expectant effects on American readers at that time and even arose some misunderstandings from the critics, because of the discrepancy in cultural memory between China and America, because of the limitation of that age.

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