

THE MATRILINEAL STAIRCASE:
THE ROLE OF THE MOTHER IN THE CHINESE AMERICAN
WOMAN'S SEARCH FOR VOICE

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This project began over thirty years ago, when my mother left Hong Kong to come to college in America. I will tell her story later; this is my time to talk-story, to tell how I chose this project and why it excites and frightens me. My family, my face, my eyes often speak first, announcing that I am Chinese American, for my voice and my actions assimilate to the American standard. Now I want to scream and shout the joys I have found in Chinese American literature, to cry the appreciation I have discovered for my mother, and to celebrate the experience of being a woman. I feel that nagging desire to write, the painful struggle to put my thoughts into words and combat the silence that surrounds Chinese American women. So I look to my mother for strength, and I see her pulling, pulling a long piece of silk out of my open mouth from my gut, and my words fall out slowly but with power.

My interest in this subject and my desire to write about it both stem from my desire to read. This love of literature and the act of reading are extremely meaningful to me, assuming a role of religious significance that fulfills ritual, social, and spiritual needs. Literature places me in context with the rest of the world, giving me the sense of place and community in the larger order of things in the manner of the myths of the different world religions. I read to expand my mind to greater truths and ideas, but more fundamentally for a sense of identification, community, and relation. I argue that literature is fast becoming our modern mythology; Gatsby and Ishmael usurp the old gods. However, much of academia is overflowed with the "Norton Anthology of Dead White Men," and I recall an old Smiths lyric, "The music that they constanly play/ Says nothing to me about my life/ Hang the blessed D.J."

More striking to me than the need for universities to implement

more courses on minority literature is the beautiful desire of the reader to connect with the literary works on this level of religious significance. Before anyone exposed me to Chinese American literature, in high school, I tried to create my own. I convinced myself that the Esther of Plath's The Bell Jar was half-Chinese. At angst-filled fifteen, I so desperately wanted to connect, to identify with the mythology of literature, that in my head I made the character look like me. It was years later when I tried to defend my mind's creation to a friend through a passage in the book that I realized what I had done, that I had taken a sentence about yellow skin tone and embellished the blanks.

When I got to college my first English class read Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior, and a whole new world opened up for me. The possibility of Chinese American literature as an emerging genre was amazing to me, and I could look into the pages and laugh and cry "Yes! My mother talks like that!" In the pages were my shouts and my silences. I next read Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club, and I began to realize how I related to the text not only as a Chinese American but as a Chinese American woman. This personal connection marks when the spiritual awakening through this literature truly began. Certain themes kept resurfacing in my mind: the Western stereotype of the Asian woman, the assimilation to American culture, the concept of silence, the complexities of racism, the role of the mother, and the other world of men.

As this formal project urged me to look further into the genre of Chinese American literature, many questions I had never considered arose. A multitude of questions developed concerning the term "Chinese American." Is the classification founded on being born in America, having lived in America, or even studying in Great Britian

before settling in New York? The variety of circumstances among this field of writers is enormous, and the process of determining my selection of authors was difficult. I knew that I had a highly personal interest in the project and that I wanted the works involved to be related to my experience and my mother's experience here in America. I first eliminated all translations from the Chinese, as works intended for an audience beyond the scope of this study. Next I discarded pieces by Chinese American men; though this group is certainly an important part of the emerging force of Asian literature, their experiences were different from what I knew. I also found many of their positions attack the voices I was attempting to celebrate. Frank Chin, for example has repeatedly criticized the efforts of Kingston. The men have their story, but in regards to this study they are included only as they relate to the women. They are the adjectives to the nouns.

I then sadly put aside a great wealth of Chinese American literature by women such as Mai-Mai Sze whose works mainly relate events in China. While much of this literature unfortunately remains buried in the juvenile sections of libraries, I recognize these writings as an important element in the development of Chinese American literature. However, this project focuses on the Chinese American experience in relation to this country. Stories from China are included, but only when they connect to the stories from America. Other Chinese American writers such as Diana Chang were removed from this project because their works, likewise, do not center on Chinese American issues. I recognize these writers and do not criticize them for their subject choices. They too are essential to the development of the movement, as Black and Jewish writers are who venture to subjects outside the race issue.

My project now centers on the development of voice in the works of the two most prominent modern Chinese American women: Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. In the works of these women I see a critical development in the emergence of the literary genre that validates and celebrates a matrilineal expression buried by centuries of patrilineal control. The existence of Chinese American women's writing reclaims the experiences silenced by race and gender. This is their time to speak, to shout, to sing.

I finally return to why I write, why I chose this project. I was born in 1973 in a small town in Tennessee. My experience was far different from that of a Chinese American in San Francisco or Stockton; there were no other Chinese in our town. There were whites and blacks, who rarely mixed, and then there was my mom, my brother, and me. Because of the military situation at the time, many people assumed that I was half-Vietnamese and that my father had been in the service. My mother was called a "jap" and a "gook" in K-Mart, and I quickly learned that most people thought "all them foreigners look alike." I remember my best friend telling me in eighth grade that when she first saw our family many years before, she didn't know how we could differentiate one family member from another. We were the Other.

The process of assimilation is quick and subconscious. My brother and I grew up speaking "perfect American English," Southern style, and made friends easily with the other kids. Young women's magazines like Sassy taught me how to use shading on the sides of my nose to create the pert American ideal, to "blend and blend" my makeup and my races. My brother and I forgot the Chinese songs my mother taught us when we were young, ran when she resorted to screaming at us in Chinese, were bored when she taught us to count in Cantonese.

Things Chinese became an embarrassing secret, something kept in the closet or under the bed. I turned red when my mother put soy sauce on the fried eggs she made for my best friend's breakfast when I had a sleepover. Maybe my shame made my mother develop her shame. Later when I asked to have a slumber party, she screamed, "Ai-yah! Why you want invite friend see Chinese mom and retired father! Traitor!" I was a traitor. I was ashamed. And my shame and my mother's shame grew and grew. One night it exploded and my mother wrote "Why should I be ashamed of you?" all over her bedroom wall.

Outside the family the racial issues followed me no matter how hard I ran. In my picture as co-captain of the junior varsity cheerleading squad, I see American clothes, American make-up, American hair, but Chinese eyes, Chinese face staring back. Unlike language, unlike songs that can be escaped, my Chinese looks have stayed with me. If it had been possible, I would have lost them when I was thirteen as well. My face has stayed with me, and I have seen both sides of Asian racism.

When I was in the second grade Terry Fitzsimmons attacked me with pseudo-karate, assuming I could retaliate. I cried. When I was in high school, an ex-boyfriend had all of his football buddies yelled "Chink" at me when I played a tennis match. I also got nasty notes in my locker, saying I looked like I had been hit in my face with a bus. Last year, while my boyfriend and I stayed with his family in a cabin in the mountains, I overheard his mother explaining how hard scholarships were to come by--that Esther had a scholarship, but it was a **minority** scholarship. The examples are endless and everyday, creating shame and anger and the desire to shout, shout, shout.

The other side of Asian racism is a misguided conception of what it means to be Chinese. When I was in elementary school, I found

myself trapped into all kinds of racial stereotypes. Everyone wanted me to be a classical piano prodigy, a straight-A student. That "Chinese-whiz" fallacy has accompanied me my whole life, admittedly often to my advantage. Another Chinese racial misconception specifically concerns being a Chinese American woman. I find myself increasingly wary of specifically Aryan looking men who are attracted to me. Too often it is the exotic, the sexual, and especially the submissive stereotype of Asian women that interests these men and not me at all. Flooded with a "Miss Saigon" image of Asian women and encouraged by the "me so horny" depictions of women in the onslaught of recent Vietnam movies, society often embraces the concept of Asian women as China doll prostitutes with hearts of gold. When I told my mother I was dressing as Suzie Wong for Halloween in an attempt to criticize and to reclaim the stereotype of Chinese women, she said, "Nah! Nobody understand what you mean wear this." I said, "I will tell them."

Thinking about my costume for Halloween, I realized how much of the outfit will be costume, how much will be real. My aunt gave me the yellow silk dress last year, made especially for me, but I haven't worn it yet. My jacket will be my mother's, the real thing, brought from Hong Kong many years ago. The hair will be Miss Clairol, to darken the red I inherited from my father. The face is my own.

With this costume image I begin my study of a history that is part mine and part borrowed, the feeling of being caught between cultures, between worlds. Fully aware of the popularity Asian Americans are receiving recently, with "All-American Girl" a prime-time sitcom and The Joy Luck Club a major motion picture, I do not want to embrace something that is not my own, and yet I do not want to ignore the uniqueness of my experience. I am not Chinese. I

am Chinese American, raised in small-town Tennessee instead of Chinatown. I have created my own land among both worlds, and this is my story. I chose this subject with personal interest and concern. I am not detached; I am involved. The connection I feel with the project material is what frightens and excites me. I read these women's experiences, and I hear my own echoed back. They are my voice, and through this project I am theirs. In turn, I am the voice of my mother, my aunt, and my grandmother. This is our time to fight the silence surrounding the image of the submissive Chinese American woman. This is our time to speak.

The Chinese American woman has been placed in the sound proof box of her own body. Silenced as a gender in China and further as a race in America, she has been told "shut up," "don't tell," and "learn English." Unable to communicate, her wrongs have gone untold, her victories uncelebrated, and her experiences unvalidated. While the powers in control present the silent box as submissive and demure by speaking for her, inside her box she whispers and murmurs, strengthening her voice and remembering her tale. Yet these are echoes of cries, reverberating only within the sound proof box. Discovering that no one can hear her, that no one is listening, she raises her voice a notch; the forces of the whispers and murmurs gather and build in power. Finally she is screaming, the echoes culminating in a war cry. The walls of the sound proof box shatter, and her words come tumbling out onto the page.

The silence oppressing all women is documented from the beginning of the women's movement. In Mary Wollstonecraft's novels the act of writing is essential to her character's sense of self. Two hundred years later, women's fight to be heard continues. In the much acclaimed study, Women's Ways of Knowing, the authors acknowledge the role of voice in the struggle of modern women, stating, "We adopted the metaphor of voice and silence as our own. It has become the unifying theme that links the chapters in our story of women's ways of knowing..." (19)

The emergence of Chinese American women's writing as a new literary genre is an act of force against the silence that undermines and oppresses her experience in the world. Without a voice, her worth is negated-- she is a non-being. In her study on women writers of

Chinese ancestry, Amy Ling concludes, "Without their words, their experiences and emotions would have no existence" (179). The very act of speaking and writing is an act of validation and empowerment.

The struggle of Chinese American women for a voice parallels that of the African American woman; not only is she traditionally oppressed as a gender, but in America also as a race. In Their Eyes Were Watching God Zora Neale Hurston writes, "De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see" (14). Likewise, the Chinese American woman emerges from a culture in which she is silenced as a woman, to a world in which the silence is multiplied against an ethnic woman. In the search for a voice, she must fight the oppression of both cultures. First, she must free herself from the tradition of silence perpetuated by a historically male-dominated culture that has repeatedly expressed its attitude toward the feminine by binding her feet, drowning female babies, and selling women as slaves and concubines. The difficulty in finding a voice then intensifies as she experiences the silencing of her race in America.

Not surprisingly, with the emergence of women's literature comes a resurgence of importance placed on the role of the mother. Under this new matriarchal structure, women often find voices that have been silenced or subdued under the influences of a patriarchal order. This emphasis becomes especially true of women of color; as these women have experienced the silencing effects of their position as a double minority, their voices are often found under the guidance of a godhead most like them--their mothers. Amy Ling quotes Alice Walker to describe her own critical voice on Chinese women's literature, citing a need to go "in search of our mothers' gardens" (xi). In the spirit of a unifying bond/bondage, these women work within the new matriarchal order to liberate tongues and uncover stories. The

desired communication that validates the existence of the Chinese American woman occurs first within the matriarchal circle of shared experience.

Working within the tradition established by Jade Snow Wong and other women of Chinese ancestry, in 1976 Maxine Hong Kingston published The Woman Warrior and brought the Chinese American woman's difficult journey of self expression deserved recognition. The mere concept of the novel, an autobiography, affirms the importance of the experiences and perspectives of a Chinese American woman. The telling of a story asserts that the tale is worthy of being told, that the story matters.

Initially recognizing the value of the communication of her experience, Kingston then shares the difficulties of breaking the power of silence dominating generations of Chinese American women. Mothers and daughters, heroines and ghosts, women and girls all fight the same battle, a war to reclaim lost voices. Kingston writes, "What we have in common are the words at our backs" (53). As a woman warrior, Kingston calls women to arms to win back the words that embody their experiences.

Thirteen years after Kingston's publication of The Woman Warrior, Amy Tan's first novel, The Joy Luck Club, broke into the arena of contemporary American literature, joining the emerging chorus of Chinese American women writers in the celebration of a new literary genre. Like Kingston, Tan employs her fiction as a force against the silence surrounding women of Chinese ancestry; the work itself is a group of tellings, a collection of talk-stories, each validating the experiences of a previously unheard minority and letting the lives of the forgotten be known by others. In many ways, Tan's voice as expressed in The Joy Luck Club builds upon a foundation established by

Kingston, as Kingston drew from the literature of Jade Snow Wong before her. Amy Ling suggests an intrinsic connection between Tan's first novel and The Woman Warrior, stating that "The Joy Luck Club is in parts an echo and a response and in parts a continuation and expansion of Kingston's book" (130).

Where Kingston takes up the sword of the woman warrior, angrily seeking revenge for past wrongs and forcefully carving a path for her voice in the future, Tan's expression of the unheard stories of Chinese women assumes a much gentler tone. After the war comes the diplomat, the peacemaker. Because of the battles fought and won by the woman warrior, Tan can progress towards peaceful discussions, still working to amend the wrongs against the silent.

The expanded focus of Kingston and Tan on the mother as a vehicle in the search for voice distinguishes them among the growing genre of Chinese American women writers. Viewing their emphasis on the maternal as an reaction against the forces of gender and race oppression, the establishment of communication and celebration of voice achieved in their novels allows other women of Chinese ancestry to push the expressions of voice beyond the limitations of gender distinctions. For example, differing from Jade Snow Wong's attention on the father which stems from a patriarchal silencing of the mother, and Kingston and Tan's search for a matriarchal voice, Gish Jen's Typical American of 1992 moves toward a more balanced treatment of mother and father.

Looking at the larger emergence of Chinese American women's voices through literature, the flow toward the maternal initiated by Kingston and continued by Tan marks a dramatic period in the rich and evolving canon of Chinese American women's literature, further distancing the Chinese American woman's voice from the "echoes of

cries" caught within the tradition of silence. The emerging forces of women writers of Chinese ancestry support the continuing trend away from a language of patriarchy toward a distinct voice of their own.

Kingston's silence emerges with its roots deeply embedded in a patriarchal oppression of women. Supporting the theory that silences are learned and not innate, Kingston describes how she was raised to think of her voice and her position in society. Through the Chinese proverbs that she heard as a child, Kingston relates, "There's no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls," (46) and "There is a Chinese word for the female I--which is 'slave'" (47). Kingston's voice struggles to rise from the depths of a sociocultural order in which boys are celebrated as social security to continue family lines, and girls are sold as slaves to prevent the family additional expense. Kingston recalls her great-uncle's lament that targeted the very existence of her sisters, her female cousins, and herself. "Maggots! Where are my grandsons! I want grandsons! Maggots!" he screams (191). The intensity of this male-dominated tradition lies at the heart of Kingston's search for voice; much of her later breaking of silence simultaneously grows out of and responds to these formative verbal attacks against women.

The imposed silences on the women of Chinese ancestry therefore serve as a starting point in Kingston's quest for the liberation and validation of female voice and experience. King-Kok Cheung reasons, "That the injunction to silence should provoke expression is not so paradoxical as it might seem, for the relief sought by those frustrated by silence...can only come through articulation" (172). Since Kingston's silence originally develops as a facet of gender oppression, her initial reaction in backlash is a move to a feminine circle in which she can develop both self and voice. Kingston draws comfort from the sisterhood established by the uniting plight of women of Chinese ancestry, all struggling with the forces of a tradition of silence. She states, "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so

I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). By focusing on the shared voicelessness of the Chinese women around her, Kingston finds that she is not alone and eases her fear that the inability to speak originates only within her.

Initially, the sense of community provides Kingston a feeling of safety and unity, though she soon fearfully discovers that her silent doubles ultimately remain victims. Kingston sees in her reflections, her extended selves, that many women of Chinese ancestry never find their voices--hence, that she may never find her voice. She writes, "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity...There were many crazy girls and women" (186). The cherished bond of identification no longer provides assurance when Kingston comprehends the tragedy of her inarticulate doubles like Crazy Mary and Moon Orchid; the bond becomes a bondage that chains her to silent madness or death.

For example, in relating the story of No Name Aunt, Kingston recognizes that silence links her personal struggle for voice to the memory of her aunt's tragic death in China. Observing that "the real punishment was not the raid swiftly inflicted by the villagers, but the family's deliberately forgetting her," (16) Kingston realizes that unless she breaks the silence, she will suffer the same fate as her aunt and will be denied, abused, and forgotten. Therefore where Kingston acknowledges the similar circumstances that lead to No Name Aunt's "life branching into her own," (8) she seeks to prevent the same pattern of events in her life. Kingston develops an ambivalent attitude toward her secret sharer. She explains, "I do not think she always means me well...The Chinese are always very frightened of the drowned one, whose weeping ghost, wet hair hanging and skin bloated, waits silently by the water to pull down a substitute" (16). Although

the sisterhood of women-as-victims provides Kingston with a basis of support, it ultimately haunts and threatens her with her own potential death through silence.

In her search for voice, Kingston deliberately seeks to break from the tradition of silence in which she will remain a victim and searches for a female figure of liberation, a victor with whom she can identify and align herself. Fleeing from a patriarchal regime of silence, Kingston turns toward a maternal source of power. Throughout the novel, Kingston reminds herself of the voice and strength of her mother, a Chinese American woman who appears to have fought the silence and won.

Structurally in the novel, Kingston appropriately places her mother's voice immediately after her withdrawal from the threat of "No Name Woman." Contrasting the imposed silence on her aunt's tragic experience, Brave Orchid's ability to "talk-story" draws intricate images of empowered women. "My mother told stories that followed swordswomen through woods and palaces for years. Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep...her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep," remembers Kingston (19). Kingston embraces the figure of her mother, a woman of Chinese ancestry with whom Kingston can identify with pride. She writes, "At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (20).

Her mother's narratives encourage Kingston to participate in the breaking of silence; Kingston begins to "talk-story" herself. Cheung observes, "The author inherits the craft of storytelling from Brave Orchid" (98). While her mother tells of swordswomen in distant woods and palaces, in "Shaman" Kingston draws strength from the expression of her mother's experiences in far away China. The story of Brave

Orchid's pursuit of her medical degree manifests with no less heroism than the mythological warrior women who can "jump over houses from a standstill" (19). In this women's story, Kingston's mother leads the women doctors in a verbal exorcism of the ghosts that haunt them, asserting that women can heal themselves from the violence of silence. Kingston writes, "'I told you, Ghost,' my mother chanted, 'that we would come after you.' 'We told you, Ghost, that we would come after you,' sang the women" (75). Kingston seeks identification with her mother the teller, the chanter, the healer.

Throughout the novel, Kingston continues to uphold Brave Orchid, "a champion talker," (202) as an ideal for the female expression of voice against a tradition of imposed silences. Repeatedly, Kingston juxtaposes her mother's breaking of silence and self-articulation with instances of voicelessness and oppression, simultaneously motivating herself toward her mother's example and reminding herself of the voiceless alternative. Counteracting the implications of a patriarchal denial of the name of her aunt, Kingston champions how her mother effectually names herself by keeping her maiden name despite patriarchy and by maintaining her Chinese name despite racism. "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," extols Kingston (77). Later, when Kingston relates the inarticulate silence of her mother's sister, Moon Orchid, in the face of masculine American, she balances Moon Orchid's expression of the struggle for voice with her mother's angry cries. "Brave Orchid shouted," writes Kingston, "Brave Orchid could not keep silent" (152).

In her search for voice, self, and validation Kingston moves toward a unification with her mother's established successes. She

asserts that "I am really a Dragon, as she is a Dragon, both of us born in dragon years" (109). Yet her attempt at identification stops with arrested development. The sociocultural gap between a Chinese-born mother and an American-born daughter isolates both mother and daughter and undermines the power of the bond. Though Kingston desires identification with her mother through the telling of "the list" and explains, "If only I could let my mother know the list, she--and the world--would become more like me, and I would never be alone again," (202) she discovers that her voice and experience differs from her mother's and suffers from the alienation of the heroine with whom she seeks communion. Kingston hears her mother repeatedly referring to China as home, yet China remains for Kingston an oppressive and silencing land for women. "Whenever my parents said 'home,' they suspended America...but I did not want to go to China. In China my parents would sell my sisters and me," explains Kingston (99).

When the confessional list pours out of Kingston's mouth, she finds that her "sins" are a rejection of all things Chinese and an affirmation of her Americanism. She screams that she will never be a wife or a slave and that she is leaving her Chinatown home. She shouts that she is quitting Chinese school and that she plans to get a scholarship to attend an American university. Cheung notes, "More and more the narrator polarizes Chinese and American cultures, censuring the one and sanctifying the other" (92). However, her aspirations to be a "typical American girl" are only beginning to be explored. As she speaks, Kingston finds her voice trapped in the complex land "between worlds," a critical term applied to the Chinese American multicultural experience by Amy Ling. "Therefore, a minority individual's sense of alienation results not only from rejection by

the dominant culture but also rejection of parental strictures," reasons Ling, (123). Kingston's vocalization of her sense of self separates her from the Chinese tradition of her mother with whom she sought acceptance, and simultaneously places her outside of the American society to which she aspires. When in the aftermath of the list, Brave Orchid clearly distinguishes Kingston as "you" and separate from her use of "we Chinese," Kingston discovers that she is alone in the gulf between the Chinese and American cultures, without community or identifying heroine. She writes, "And suddenly I got very confused and lonely because I was at that moment telling her my list, and in the telling, it grew. No higher listener. No listener but myself" (204). Though Kingston asserts her voice, she can not be heard. In breaking from the sound proof boxes enclosing the women of both cultures, Kingston finds herself imprisoned between worlds.

As Kingston regroups herself in disappointed response to her unfulfilled identification with her heroine, she bitterly begins to blame her mother for her alienation, reasoning that if her mother is not her liberator, she conversely must be her oppressor. Though she continues to recognize the strength of her mother's voice, she now realizes that it has not said what she wanted to hear. The infinite explanations and stories that would be necessary to bridge the cultural gap and enable her to identify with her mother have gone untold. Kingston writes, "Mother would pour Seagram's 7 into the cups and, after a while, pour it back into the bottle. Never explaining" (185). While she criticizes her mother for failing to tell her the secrets that would make her Chinese, she also blames her mother for withholding information that would make her American. "Why didn't you teach me English?" she demands, "You like having me beaten up at school, don't you?" (46). She attacks her mother's lack of

explanations and guidance as a deliberate silence that produces her thwarted identification, her between-world predicament, and her lack of voice.

Kingston's developing ambivalence towards her mother's role in her search for voice causes Kingston to criticize not only what her mother has left unsaid that could have freed Kingston from silence, but also to explore how her mother has used her voice to foster the voicelessness. The case against her mother as oppressor increases as Kingston recognizes her mother's potential to be an active contributor through speech to the silence in addition to being a passive participant through silence. Kingston fears that her mother, her would-be-liberator, has supported her father's words of oppression, even adding negations to the load that Kingston carries. Brave Orchid tells Kingston, "Senseless gabblings every night. I wish you would stop. Go away and work. Whispering, whispering, making no sense. Madness. I don't feel like hearing your craziness" (200). These words against Kingston's voice confuse Kingston, and she feels betrayed by the maternal force that she had hoped was on her side.

The novel begins with Kingston's forceful rebellion against her mother's injunction to silence. The opening words of the novel are "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said..." (3). Brave Orchid appears to support the tradition of silence in the punishment of No Name Woman and extends the chains of oppression to other women by inflicting the command to silence precisely when Kingston arrives at the female coming-of-age experience of her first menarche. The double-consciousness of her mother is innate; Brave Orchid is Chinese, a ethnicity that Kingston primarily views as harmful to her search for voice, and yet she is a woman, part of Kingston's foundational sisterhood. Her mother's seeming betrayal to the cause

links her to the masculine, patriarchal degradation of women by Kingston's father, thereby including Brave Orchid in Kingston's general antipathy toward the Chinese culture. Kingston writes, "They only say, 'When fishing for treasures in the flood, be careful not to pull in girls,'...I watched such words come out of my own mother's and father's mouths...And I had to get out of hating range" (52).

The issue of maternal participation in Kingston's silence fully manifests in Brave Orchid's powerful act of cutting her daughter's tongue. Ling concludes that "the cut tongue becomes the symbol of the mother's overwhelming power over the daughter, in a sense, a castrating power" (127). Although Kingston celebrates the achievements of her mother as doctor, fearing her mother's allegiance to the patriarchal silence, she grows wary of her mother's meaningful surgery on her voice. For Kingston, the violence of the cutting supports Brave Orchid's menacing role within her struggle to speak. She describes, "I felt sorry for the baby whose mother waited with scissors or knife in hand for it to cry--and then when its mouth was wide open like a baby bird's, cut. The Chinese say 'a ready tongue is an evil'" (164). When cultural alienation removes her mother-as-victor from her side and places mother and daughter in opposition, Kingston again envisions herself as victim.

However, the condemnation of Brave Orchid as silencer develops without an understanding of the complexity of the situation. When Ling asserts that "Brave Orchid did so much talking, was so much commanding a presence, and 'never explained anything that was really important' (121) that her children lapsed into silence around her," (127) she ignores the role of Brave Orchid as liberator and therefore the nature of Kingston's ambivalence. If Kingston fully accepts her mother as oppressor, the search for voice would be more clear, and she

could distance herself from her mother as she separates herself from her father. The struggle emerges from her painful awareness of her mother's double consciousness as a Chinese woman. She expresses her contradicting interpretations by writing, "Sometimes I felt very proud that my mother committed such a violent act upon me. At other times I was terrified--the first thing my mother did when she saw me was cut my tongue" (164).

The enigma of Brave Orchid's simultaneous role as liberator and oppressor permeates the talk-story that is the entire novel. Cheung observes, "One grants that the oral tradition is far from smooth: the dissonance between the lip service Brave Orchid pays to the Chinese precepts regarding female silence and her own oral pyrotechnics perplexes her impressionable daughter" (99). Kingston's retelling her mother's story of No Name Aunt demonstrates the interrelationship between maternal speaking and silence. The first sentence of the novel reads in its entirety, "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (3). Though Brave Orchid's words propagate the tradition of secrecy and silence, she actually participates in its telling. Notably, Kingston reveals the story through the perspective and voice of her mother; literally, Kingston's words are her mother's words, her defiance possible through her mother's more subtle defiance. Relating that "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes," (29) Kingston struggles to accept her mother's multidimensional influence on her voice.

An exploration of Brave Orchid's own voice suggests a variety of less conflicting explanations for her words of oppression. On one level, an interpretation of Brave Orchid's words requires understanding of the Chinese cultural practice of humility and modesty

by criticizing that of which one is most proud. She tries to explain to Kingston "That's what we're supposed to say. That's what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite," (203) acknowledging the cultural gap between herself and her daughter in the non-inclusive "we Chinese." Furthermore, since Brave Orchid can not separate the "Chinese" from the "woman," she works within the language of her oppressive culture to express her voice. Cheung undermines any criticism of Kingston's mother's participation in the tradition of silence by recognizing her repetitions of the injunctions to silence as mere "lip service." As in her communication of the story of No Name Woman, her words imply a subversive objective. This use of language's capacity to hold double implications largely relates to the concepts of "signifying" and of the "signifying monkey" found in the African American tradition. The signifying monkey manipulates words and meanings through trickery and technique. Henry Louis Gates explains in his study on African American literature, Figures in Black, "The monkey speaks figuratively, in a symbolic code; the lion interprets or reads literally and suffers the consequence of his folly, which is a reversal of his status as King of the Jungle" (241).

A detached critical perspective can explain and excuse Brave Orchid's participation in the forces of silence, but Kingston, viewing the maternal dichotomy at close range, wrestles with the paradox.

The threat of Brave Orchid's voice as an oppressor in Kingston's search for voice produces an interesting response by Kingston. Though she celebrates and repeats her mother's words of liberation, she tries to silence her mother's voice when it suggests betrayal through allegiance to a patriarchal Chinese culture. In one sense, Kingston's attempt to suppress her mother's Chinese voice indicates her original aspiration to identify with her mother, as if by silencing that which

she does not understand will resolve the cultural gap's potential to confuse and exclude and ultimately unite mother and daughter. She tells her mother, "And I won't listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories" (202). Seeking control, Kingston ironically attempts to participate in the cultural silencing. Cheung employs the words of Gloria Anzaldua to describe, "When we, the objects, become the subjects, and look at and analyze our own experiences, a danger arises that we may look through the master's gaze, speak through his tongue, use his methodology" (93). To reestablish her mother as ally by removing her voice from its alienating ethnicity, she adopts the controlling power of silence. "The immigrants I know have loud voices...I have not been able to stop my mother's screams in public libraries or over telephones," explains Kingston (11). However full of good intentions and unsuccessful, her intent to silence her mother pulls Kingston into the paradox.

Furthermore, Kingston expresses elements of jealousy over the voice of her mother; she covets Brave Orchid's Chinese voice, "strong and bossy," in contrast to her own "inaudible squeak," a whisper she has created to make herself "American-feminine" (172). If the cultural gap causes Kingston to feel that she receives no ancestral help from her mother, no hope through identification, then her mother's voice beckons only as a mocking reminder of her own silence. Kingston therefore casts shadows over her mother's explanations and stories, suppressing what she can not emulate. Though Brave Orchid clearly tells Kingston that she cut her tongue to free her voice and not to silence it, Kingston criticizes, "If my mother was not lying she should have cut more, scraped away the rest of the frenum skin, because I have a terrible time talking" (164-65). Kingston's limited

identification and subsequent "othering" of her mother causes Kingston's American voice to develop in competition with her mother's Chinese voice, and Kingston attacks the power her mother holds.

The complexity of Kingston's ambivalence toward her mother's role in her search for voice leads her ultimately to align herself with another feminine figure of liberation, Fa Mu Lan--the woman warrior. Fa Mu Lan's modern existence through myth's nonreality places her above the inhibiting contradictions of the everyday world of Brave Orchid. Kingston can idealize, embellish, and manipulate the story of the woman warrior to suit herself, creating a heroine who will never disappoint or betray her. Nevertheless, she recognizes that Brave Orchid originally provides the story of Fa Mu Lan. Speaking of her mother, Kingston relates, "She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the warrior woman, Fa Mu Lan. I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (20). As she breaks from her identification with her mother and establishes a new heroine for herself, she ironically assumes the powers she negates in her mother. "Maxine declares her refusal to listen to her mother, but the author has been listening carefully all along. Much as the child Maxine resents her mother's jumble of fact and fancy, Kingston does not scruple to conflate myth and reality" (98). Kingston uses her mother's scissors to cut her tongue from the apron strings, and she develops her mother's talk-story into an allegory for her own struggle for voice.

Kingston identifies herself with the mythological Fa Mu Lan to a degree that she never achieves with her biological mother. Within the text she assumes the inclusive first-person "I" in her telling of the woman warrior's story, contrasting the exclusive third-person "she" of Brave Orchid's story. In fact, the shift from Kingston as Maxine to

Kingston as Woman Warrior develops so completely and so suddenly, it poses a narrative potential to shock and to confuse first-time readers. Kingston quickly embraces her long-desired, liberating double, disguises herself as the woman warrior, and rides into battle.

Through the story of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston openly declares war on the masculine and Caucasian cultures that deprives Chinese women of their voices. She declares, "I am a female avenger" (43). Looking into the feminine symbol of a water gourd, Fa Mu Lan sees the specific enemies that she must defeat. She trains as a warrior, and the language of violence replaces the outwardly submissive tongue of the Chinese American woman. "I bled and thought about the people to be killed; I bled and thought about the people to be born," relates Kingston as the warrior (33). Images of gender vengeance against voicelessness flow throughout the myth. Fa Mu Lan's first battle is with a giant whose true self is a snake, and she exposes her breasts to the baron before decapitating him. The opponents of Fa Mu always attack her throat, threatening her voice with their phallic swords. Violence and voice are intertwined as the fighting emerges specifically as a war for words and through words. Of her armies the woman warrior explains, "We would always win, Kuan Kung, the god of war and literature riding before me" (38). Kingston therefore carries the indefeatable Fa Mu Lan into her real-life struggle for voice. When she is fired by a racist, sexist boss she envisions, "If I took the sword, which my hate must surely have forged out of the air, and gutted him, I would put color and wrinkles into his shirt" (49).

Yet here, in the removal of her warrior heroine from myth's idealism, the concept of her liberated voice falters. She follows her retelling of Fa Mu Lan's story with the harsh reality that "my American life has been such a disappointment" (45). Kingston's fight

against the silence, as captured in the story of Fa Mu Lan, remains trapped within the structures of a patriarchal conceptualization of voice. In his article "Don't Tell," Cheung reasons, "While the warrior legend opens Maxine to an unconventional way of asserting herself--both fighting and writing being traditionally male preoccupations--it still sanctions patriarchal values" (166). Though this dichotomized association of one gender as violent and the other as victim justifiably has been challenged by critics like Martin Denahay, the specific association of violence with voice does follow the methodology of the masculine tradition of silence.

As Kingston identifies with Fa Mu Lan in hopes of escaping the contradictions of Brave Orchid, she limits herself to a masculine expression of voice. In addition to the confines of speech enforced by violence, the character of Fa Mu Lan is caught in the tradition of patriarchy. In order to lead armies, she must disguise herself as a man, because "Chinese executed women who disguised themselves as soldiers or students no matter how bravely they fought or how high they scored on examinations" (39). Under men's clothes the woman warrior hides her breasts, her child, and her femininity. While Fa Mu Lan emerges victorious, she continues to play by the rules of a masculine game, asserting voice through superior fire power and inflicting silence on the weak and defeated. In retrospect Kingston amends during an interview in 1991, "...she (Fa Mu Lan) comes home and becomes a woman again--a feminine, beautiful woman--with makeup and with flowers and with silk clothes. So I think I should have included that. But then I was at a different stage of feminism at that time" (Backtalk, 180).

In The Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan's legacy continues as Kingston attempts to become more masculine in response to gender silence. She

explains, "I refused to cook. When I had to wash dishes, I would crack one or two. 'Bad girl,' my mother yelled, and sometimes that made me gloat rather than cry. Isn't a bad girl almost a boy?" (47). Like her aspirations to find her voice by separating herself from the Chinese culture, Kingston tries to escape silence by disassociating herself from stereotypes associated with her womanhood. Following the sexist maxim that only men can succeed at math and science, Kingston and her sisters all decide to become scientists and mathematicians (160), and Kingston's other childhood career decision to be "a lumberjack in Oregon" (47) indicates an early recognition and emulation of masculine expressions of strength. This acceptance of a patriarchal hold on power follows Kingston into adulthood. Kingston describes, "I went away to college--Berkeley in the sixties--and I studied, and I marched to change the world, but I did not turn into a boy. I would have liked to bring myself back as a boy for my parents to welcome with chickens and pigs" (47). Kingston's identification with violence and voice in the myth of Fa Mu Lan ultimately supports the values of a patriarchal system and brings Kingston into the midst of a paradoxical participation in the tradition of silence.

The implications of Kingston's employment of a masculine vehicle for liberation manifest in her encounter with "the quiet girl." Nameless, the quiet girl serves as an extended self for Kingston and the sisterhood of victims that extends back to China and No Name Woman. As Kingston uses Fa Mu Lan to embody characteristics of strength and voice that she desires in herself, she utilizes the quiet girl to displace her weakness and silence. "I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team," writes Kingston (173). Seeking violent control over her own voice, Kingston attacks her doppelganger with a cruel and knowing accuracy

that stems from her personal identification with voicelessness. Furthermore, Danahay observes ironically that "the silent Chinese girl functions as a nightmare double for Kingston, who tries to exorcise her through an act of violence of her own" (72). Applying what she has learned through the myth of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston associates speaking with physical power. She orders, "I am going to make you talk, you sissy girl" (175). The warrior woman manipulates her sword to poke and prod the quiet girl into voice.

Drawing from the masculine methodology of violence and voice, Kingston eventually assumes the negating language of the tradition of silence. She tells the quiet girl that she is nothing--powerless, dumb, and disgusting. "Look at you," degrades Kingston, "snot streaming down your nose, and you won't say a word to stop it. You're such a nothing" (178). Torturing the girl because of her silence, Kingston pulls the girl's hair, pinches her skin, and squeezes her face. Without realizing the inherent contradiction of coerced speech, Kingston commands the girl to talk while threatening her to remain silent. She urges, "Don't you dare tell anyone I've been bad to you. Talk. Please talk" (181). The effectiveness of a violent pursuit of voice proves to be limited; the quiet girl never speaks to stop the punishment.

While the mythological image of the woman warrior initially empowers Kingston in her search for voice, the ultimate test of the patriarchal avenue to voice fails in Kingston's life. She acknowledges that "A dumbness--a shame--still cracks my voice in two, even when I want to say 'hello' casually, or ask an easy question in front of the check-out counter, or ask directions of a bus driver" (165). In many ways, the limitations of the myth preordain Kingston's unfulfilled voice. Even though Fa Mu Lan emerges from battle as the

winner, she discovers that her victory exists on the terms of her oppressors. At the end of the war, Fa Mu Lan returns to the patriarchy, kowtowing as a proper, subservient wife at the feet of her in-laws. She acquiesces to the male-dominated structure and states, "I will stay with you, doing farmwork and housework, and giving you more sons" (45). Kingston's own exploration of violence and speech eventually harms her, and in the aftermath of her experience with the quiet girl, she suffers from a prolonged and mysterious illness. Still searching for voice, Kingston then returns to the figure of her mother for liberation.

In the closing pages of The Woman Warrior, Kingston again seeks identification with her mother. Realizing her own participation in the tradition of silence and capacity for paradoxes, she renews allegiance with her mother. For the first time since the alienating effects of the cultural gap, Kingston's voice develops not in competition, but in harmony with the voice of her mother. She explains, "Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her that I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending, mine" (206). In the allegory of Ts'ei Yen, Kingston acknowledges the potential for silence between the Chinese mother and her "barbarian" children, yet suggests that in the "song for a barbarian reed pipe," communication can be achieved. "Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along," writes Kingston (209). Kingston's final collaboration with her mother creates the most promising expression of her voice throughout the entire novel; the success of the maternal song counters the failure of the masculine battle that Kingston has waged

throughout the novel. The Woman Warrior ends with the emphasis on the mother, and not the swordswoman, as the liberating source in the search for voice.

While Kingston's struggle against the silence moves toward a matriarchal liberation of voice, her speech falters in its attempt to bridge the cultural gap and ties itself to a patriarchal tradition of silence. By assuming the methodology of Fa Mu Lan, Kingston binds her search for voice to the limitations of violent, coerced speech. Still swinging in backlash from masculine oppression, Kingston's progression to a consummating, maternal source of validation and voice remains unfulfilled. In its failures and in its successes, The Woman Warrior points to the mother as the key to release the Chinese American woman from silence.

The connection between mothers and daughters and the search for voice by Chinese American women emerges as a primary motivating force in Amy Tan's The Joy Luck Club. Not only is the subject a dominant theme in the lives of the characters in the novel itself but also as a theme in the creation of the novel on Tan's part. Though Tan's works are not autobiographical fiction in the manner of Kingston's China Men or Woman Warrior, the writing of the novel nevertheless celebrates the voice of the author, and the influence of the mother is deeply felt as well. Marina Heung quotes Tan explaining that, "When I was writing, it was so much for my mother and myself...I wanted those words to fall off the page so that she could just see the story, that the language would be simple enough, almost like a little curtain that would fall away" (598-99). The writing is directly linked to the mother and daughter who are bound by blood and circumstance, telling the story of Chinese American women so that the "little curtain" of silence covering their lives will be lifted. Tan further nods to her own personal relation to the matrilineal story in the dedication to the novel. She writes, "To my mother and the memory of her mother. You asked me once what I would remember. This and much more." Though Tan distances herself from the I-protagonist precedent set by Wong and Kingston and moves into a search for voice in fiction (as does Kingston in Tripmaster Monkey), the compelling theme of matrilineage continues to link author and character.

Within the text of the Joy Luck Club, the search for a voice through the stories of mothers and daughters emerge as the dominant motif in the lives of the characters. In each of the four mother-daughter relationships, a transcendental unity thematically

underlines their tale. "She and I have shared the same body. There is a part of her mind that is a part of mine," explains Ying-Ying of her connection with her daughter Lena, and An-Mei strongly reminds June, "Your mother is in your bones!" (242, 40). Using the language of biology and genetics, these women articulate the intensity of the uniting force of mothers and daughters. Though The Joy Luck Club clearly recognizes a sisterhood among all women of Chinese ancestry--an expansion of Suyuan Woo's "idea to have a gathering of four women, one for each corner of my mah jong table" (23)--the novel emphasizes the matrilineal bond between mother and daughter. While the novel refers to friendships among the women of each generation, their relationships never rise to the level of mother and daughter. Walter Shear observes, "Strangely, given the common problems presented, there is little concern with peer communication among the daughters" (195). Rose remains unable to articulate her feelings about her divorce to her friends Waverly and Lena, and June continues to foster her feelings of inferiority through her rivalry with Waverly.

Without undermining the bond among all Chinese American women, the novel focuses on the initial connection between mother and daughter, and by including the stories of grandmothers and alluding to the prospects of granddaughters, the story has no limits to its implications. Lindo's daughter Waverly describes the power of her ties to her own daughter Shoshana: "From the very moment she flung her fist away from her mouth to cry, I knew my feelings for her were inviolable" (175). Compelled by both the special relationship between mother and daughter and the search for voice within a history of silencing oppression, for the characters the concept of a matrilineal staircase dominates. The novel opens, for example, with the idea of daughters fulfilling the roles of the mothers. "My father has asked me

to be the fourth corner at the Joy Luck Club. I am to replace my mother..." begins June (19).

Yet with the staircase comes the descending possibility that the daughters inherit the traits that imprison the mothers, as in the case of An-Mei Hsu, who has "too little wood." Bending too easily from the forces of winds, An-Mei laments her condition as she watches it manifest itself in her daughter. She explains, "...I was raised the Chinese way: I was taught to desire nothing, to swallow other people's misery, to eat my own bitterness. And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way" (215). Here, unfortunately, the nature of the maternal bond appears to triumph over nurture. Indeed the mothers often see themselves and the potential of a repetition of history reflected in their daughters. Lindo Jong relates, "I look at my face in the beauty parlor mirror. I see my reflection. I cannot see my faults, but I know they are there.

I gave my daughter these faults...Her character, it came from my circumstances" (265). Nevertheless, even in the negativity of this samsara, a sense of community and comradeship forms. The mothers and daughters fight the forces that oppress them with the power of two instead of one. As Ying-Ying and Lena St. Clair help each other along, they choose the same metaphors to describe their actions. In her chapter in "The Twenty-six Malignant Gates," Lena describes, "And the girl grabbed her mother's hand and pulled her through the wall," while later in "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," Ying-Ying explains, "It is the only way to penetrate her skin and pull her to where she can be saved" (115, 242).

Also integral to the essential union between mother and daughter and the recoil from the tradition of silence exists the hope that the daughter will serve as the mother's "second chance" for liberation and

happiness. In the swan feather story that prefaces the first section of the novel, the Chinese woman anticipates: "In America I will have a daughter just like me. But over there nobody will say her worth is measured by the loudness of her husband's belch. Over there nobody will look down on her, because I will make her speak only perfect American English" (17). This idealized expectation of the potentiality of the daughter later creates problems but also demonstrates beautifully a fertile hope that the Chinese woman will speak out triumphantly against the words of her oppressors. From this perspective, the matrilineal stairs appear to be ascending, stories that lead future generations up from histories of racism and sexism.

As Marina Heung notes in her essay, "Daughter-Text/Mother-Text: Matrilineage in Amy Tan's Joy Luck Club," much attention already has been directed to the theme of matrilineage in women's literature (597). However, the unique characteristics of the Chinese American mother-daughter relationship lend themselves to special analysis. The stories of these mothers and daughters repeatedly communicate tragic experiences in which they are separated against their will. An-Mei Hsu first is torn away from her mother by her father's family and then by her mother's suicide brought on by the family of her stepfather. Likewise, Lindo Jong is forced to leave her mother because of the politics of arranged marriages in China. Suyuan leaves her twin daughters so that she will not have to watch them die in wartime, and later, a sudden death takes Suyuan from June. All of the women, furthermore, are distanced from China, the motherland, "a thousand li away" (17).

Therefore, Tan begins not with the theme of unified matrilineage but with a maternal structure fragmented and disrupted. Ultimately, the death of Suyuan forms an immediate symbol for all the lost mothers

in the novel, and as Marina Heung notes, the void of absence initiates the recoil to the mother. Using death loosely in relation to the traumatic separations central to the mother-daughter experiences in Joy Luck Club, the return supports Heung's theory that "a mother's death inspires women writers to begin to explore the meaning of the maternal" (609, 615). Amy Ling theorizes, "Perhaps the more conciliatory tone of Jing-mei Woo as compared to Maxine's anger may be attributed to the fact that Jing-mei's is an absent, silenced mother, irrevocably separated from her daughter by death, while Maxine's mother is still very much alive and very vocal" (137). Working in The Joy Luck Club from the background of these forced separations, many the result of larger patriarchal oppressions of the feminine, the women create an inevitable flow to the mother. The common matrilineal theme of "inviolable feelings" between mother and daughter in Tan therefore heightens in intensity, as both generations swing away from a history of masculine domination.

This recoil begins with the search for voice and the telling of stories. Daughters tell the stories of their mothers, to give validation to experiences long silenced. As June's aunts reveal their plan involving her lost sisters, they adamantly select June, and not her father, as the communicator of her mother's story. In the closing pages of the first chapter, the words "tell them" create an echoing reminder of the validating power of stories; through the telling, the mother's experience is remembered. June relates, "I hear more choruses of 'Tell them, tell them' as each Auntie frantically tries to think what should be passed on" (40). Furthermore, the mothers offer their stories to the daughters to help the daughters understand their own lives. Jeanne Barker Nunn writes, "But the most compelling reason for telling their mothers' stories is that it is through and against

those stories that they come to understand themselves" (58). Yet the novel does not begin with the telling of stories but with the absence of stories.

Like the women of Woman Warrior, the women of The Joy Luck Club are silenced as a gender in China and as a double minority in America. While An-mei tells the story of her mother, one of the many Chinese women who "had no choice. They could not speak up," (241) Tan demonstrates how the silence of these women continues in a "father knows best" America. One of the most tragic examples is that of Ying-ying St. Clair, who even after she escapes her oppression in China is silenced by her husband in America. He takes away her Chinese name of Gu Ying-ying and renames her "Betty St. Clair," demonstrating an American version of the silencing of Kingston's No Name Aunt. Furthermore, he insists that she learn English, and when she struggles with the language, he simply speaks for her. Lena recalls that "my father would put words in her mouth" (106). The silence continues to function like an heirloom in the daughters' relationships with men. Lena experiences the same deafness in her husband that she witnessed in her father.

Though the silence of masculine Chinese and American societies continues to oppress the women of The Joy Luck Club, instead of embracing the weapons of patriarchy to combat the silence as does Kingston, Tan suggests an emphasis on finding a voice through a feminine conversation, a breaking of silence with the mother. Furthermore, this development saves Tan's daughters from Maxine's taxing battle in which she places her mother as her opponent. Tan briefly alludes to Kingston in the post-warrior approach of her characters. Waverly describes that "in the brief instant that I had peered over the barriers I could finally see what was really there:

an old woman, a wok for her armor, a knitting needle for her sword" 183-84). For Tan, then, the character of liberation is not the warrior but the mother.

Therefore, while The Joy Luck Club directs attention to both the silencing effects of Chinese patriarchy and of American society, the novel focuses specifically on the silence that blankets the mother-daughter relationship. Given the simultaneous emphasis on and disruption of the theme of matrilineage, the lack of communication between mother and daughter is especially troubling. The relationships, marked by the unique situation of being in an "inbetween world," demonstrate that there are many divisions in the world of women of Chinese ancestry. The mothers are more influenced by their Chinese heritage, while the daughters are affected by their American present. Culturally alienated from the daughters, the mothers' hope for a matrilineal perfection in the daughters becomes threatened. For example, the opening parable contains symbolic implications concerning the novel's central struggle. The woman with the swan feather and aspirations for "a daughter just like me" soon realizes that the influence of culture has created "a daughter who grew up speaking only English and swallowing more Coca-Cola than sorrow" (17). As Amy Ling comments, "Ironically and tragically, the achievement of the mother's dreams for her daughter, which entailed physical removal from the motherland, results in the alienation of mother and daughter, for the daughter readily and entirely adapted to the customs and language of the new land while the mother still held onto those of the old" (133).

As with Kingston's Woman Warrior, the first hurdle in the search for voice concerns language, a force that threatens intercultural matrilineal communication. Though the novel includes grandmothers and

granddaughters, Tan directs attention to the special circumstances of the four pairs of Chinese-born mothers and American-born daughters. Both mothers and daughters speak in combinations of English and Mandarin which betray their position in an inbetween world. The mothers often slip into the comfort of their Chinese dialect while including bits of colloquial English like "arty-tecky" for architect. Conversely, the daughters rely on standard English yet include words like "hulidudu" and "heimongmong" for concepts that they "never thought about in English terms" (188). Therefore, while both mother and daughter speak in the infused language of an inbetween world, their alternating emphasis on English and Mandarin suggests that there exist languages within languages that need translation. "In The Joy Luck Club, 'multilanguedness' bears the imprint of their speakers' unique positioning, but this assertion of difference is also vexed by its potential to confuse and exclude," writes Heung (606).

This linguistic "potential to confuse and exclude" develops as a tremendous threat to the search for voice. Returning to the parable of the swan feather that opens the novel, one sees that the inarticulation brought about by language is clear. The story of the woman's travels to America and hopes for her daughter which are symbolized in the swan feather remains silent and untold. As Tan describes, "For a long time now the woman had wanted to give her daughter the single swan feather and tell her, 'This feather may look worthless, but it comes from afar and carries with it all my good intentions.' And she waited, year after year, for the day she could tell her daughter this in perfect American English" (17). The restrictions of language thus characterize the silence that impedes the necessary conversation between mother and daughter.

The linguistic chess match played between the mother Lindo and

daughter Waverly also captures many of the dialectics in the struggle to be understood. Both mother and daughter are extremely strong-willed and firmly encamped in their inbetween world locations and languages. Lindo criticizes her daughter, "So now the only Chinese words she can say are 'sh-sh,' 'chr fan,' and 'gwan deng shweijyau.' How can she talk to people in China with these words? Pee-pee, choo-choo train, eat, close light sleep...Only her skin and hair are Chinese. Inside--she is all American-made" (254). Meanwhile, Waverly belittles her mother's ability to speak English; when Waverly explains to a hair-stylist how her mother would like her hair fixed, Lindo thinks, "Why does my daughter think she is translating English for me?" (255). All attempts at communication between mother and daughter are blocked by the barrier of language. The prospect of a matrilineal staircase diminishes as both players cling to their own dialects and become frustrated with their attempts to bridge the language gap.

For example, Waverly's hopes for a "normal conversation" with her mother shatter when she incorrectly confuses her mother's native Taiyuan, the capital of Shansi, with the island Taiwan. Waverly describes her mother's reaction, "'Ai!' she cried loudly. 'I'm not from Taiwan!' And just like that, the fragile connection we were starting to build snapped...We sank into silence, a stalemate" (183). The language gap poses a very real problem to mothers who attempt to pass the stories of their lives to their daughters. Lindo laments the great misunderstanding of the daughter she hoped to be "just like me" when simple details like birthplace are mistranslated, and Waverly becomes angry at her mother's inability to make clear the meanings of her words. Heung observes, "The mothers in the novel worry that the family history and knowledge preserved in their hybrid language will

be elided after their deaths," while, "it is the incomprehension enforced by silence that keeps mothers 'othered' in the eyes of their daughters" (606). Therefore, though the desire for communication exists for both mother and daughter, the means for communication struggles within the limits of their unique English-Mandarin dialects.

Similarly, while June begins to fulfill the role of rememberer, validator, and inheritor of her mother's story, she realizes that her voice is restricted by her lack of knowledge of her mother's life. June begins the novel by articulating not what she knows about her mother but what she does not know. Through a simple discourse about dinner, the barrier of language and the resulting silence emerge. June recalls, "She said the two soups were almost the same, 'chabudwo.' Or maybe she said 'butong,' not the same thing at all. It was one of those Chinese expressions that means the better half of mixed intentions. I can never remember things that I didn't understand in the first place" (19). The incomprehension evidenced by the language gap over soup extends to June's greater incomprehension of her mother as a person and thereby indicates her inability to "remember" and to tell her mother's story. The silent distance between June and Suyuan later appears irreversible as Suyuan's sudden death prohibits any mutual attempts at understanding.

The end of the first chapter presents a crisis for June who is urged by her aunts to "tell them," the literal and symbolic lost daughters of her mother. Confronted with her task to "talk story" and to fulfill her place on a matrilineal staircase, June realizes the extent of her ignorance about her mother. Again the language gap illustrates the greater misunderstanding of mother and daughter. June comments, "My mother and I never really understood one another. We translated each other's meanings and I seemed to hear less than what

was said, while my mother heard more" (37). Vocalizing to her aunts her doubts about her ability to articulate and capture the essence of her mother's life, June finds her aunts horrified. She explains,

They are frightened. In me, they see their own daughters, just as ignorant, just as unmindful of all the truths and hopes they have brought to America. They see daughters who grow impatient when their mothers talk in Chinese, who think they are stupid when they explain things in fractured English. They see that joy and luck do not mean the same to their daughters, that to these closed American-born minds "joy luck" is not a word, it does not exist. They see daughters who will bear grandchildren born without any connecting hope passed from generation to generation (40-41).

The silence initiated by the language gap forms restrictions on the daughter's ability to communicate the stories of women of Chinese ancestry. Therefore, the dream of a new world in America merely echoes the nightmare of a tradition of silence; in both cultures the women discover that their stories will remain untold.

The implications of the suppression of the mother's story spread not only to the other aunts but to the daughters as well. Viewing the reunification of daughter to mother as an reunification of daughter and ethnicity, the gap left by incomprehension and misunderstanding of her matrilineal past leaves a silence in the daughter's search for her own voice. June's sense of ignorance concerning her mother, who is "a part of her bones," deprives June of the necessary self-knowledge to tell her own story. Seeking identification with her mother, she is met by her mother's lament, "You don't even know little percent of me!

How can you be me?" (27). The silence and faulty translations of the living are reinforced by the finality of the silence of death. As June realizes that her mother never explained the meaning of a jade pendant, her "life's importance," she regrets that her mother's explanation is lost forever. June laments, "And she's the only person I could have asked, to tell me about life's importance, to help me understand my grief" (197).

The permanence of the silence of death motivates the telling of stories by both mothers and daughters that forms the basis of the novel. Just as Heung notes that the death of a mother can initiate a movement toward the maternal (609), King-kok Cheung recognizes that the threat of silence can lead to the discovery of voice: "That the injunction to silence should provoke expression is not so paradoxical as it might seem, for the relief sought by those frustrated by silence...can only come through articulation" (172). Therefore, as mothers and daughters recoil from the threats to matrilineage by death and silence, the result is a swing toward the mother and toward speaking. As June promises, "I will remember everything about her and tell them," she starts the pattern of breaking silence (41). Though full of doubt, she is determined to continue on the matrilineal staircase and to voice her mother's story. Symbolically, she takes her mother's place at the mah jong table, "the East, where things begin" (41).

For the other daughters, the search for voice develops before articulation with the realization of a symbolic "list," reminiscent of Kingston's "list of over two hundred things," to tell their mothers. The concept of a list in and of itself provides certain insight into the daughters' fight against silence. Importantly, the nature of the creation of a list implies that something exists that needs to be told

while simultaneously remaining untold. Guilt, hesitation, and procrastination characterize the struggle for voice. In one light, the self-inflicted silence of the daughters reflects a certain learned helplessness on the part of women of Chinese ancestry. Like Kingston's silent first years of school and the silent girl's speechlessness in the face of torture, one facet of the list suggests an attraction to the alienation and safety of silence. On another level, the unarticulated list indicates a pattern of the attraction and recoil from an identification with the mother. Just as June's return to her mother is initiated by her mother's death, the flow toward the mothers of the other women begins with a recognition of the mothers' weaknesses. Amy Ling states, "Once the daughters are aware of their mother's vulnerability, their weakness, then all danger is past and the mother may be invited in" (140). Perhaps the different approaches to the mother and to the search for voice in Tan as compared to Kingston can be attributed to this insight into the mother. Regardless, in the mother-daughter relationships of The Joy Luck Club in which the mother is still living, the creation of a list and the acknowledgment of the mothers as fellow victims instead of oppressors often characterizes the breaking of silence.

The story of Waverly and her mother fully demonstrates this aspect of the telling. For Waverly, the first item on her list is her new engagement. Despite her repeated attempts to communicate this important development in her life to her mother, the engagement remains unannounced, silenced, and invalidated. At this stage, the act of telling becomes a power struggle between Waverly and Lindo, as Waverly still associates words with fighting and sees her mother as a "warrior" in full armor. The search for voice emerges here in the language of Kingston, Kuan Kung, and the metaphors of a chessboard

war. Waverly recounts, "I had to tell my mother-- that I knew what she was doing, her scheming ways of making me miserable. By the time I arrived, I had enough anger to fight off a thousand flying cleavers" (180). The silence of the list threatens to erupt into the reactionary violence of a suppressed voice, limiting the success of the communication. However, arriving at her mother's house with the notion of her mother as opponent, Waverly finds her mother in a death-like sleep on the couch: "She had no weapons, no demons surrounding her. She looked powerless. Defeated. And then I was seized with the fear that she looked like this because she was dead" (180). Though her mother awakens from her temporary death, the suggestion of her mortality powerfully initiates the acceptance of the mother by Waverly. Immediately Waverly finds the voice for which she has been searching, and her words are not of violence and vengeance but of communication and love. The silence is broken.

Tan also uses this concept of a list in her second novel, The Kitchen God's Wife. Pearl desires to tell her mother about her multiple sclerosis, and her mother Winnie wants to tell Pearl about her biological father. Yet these details only serve as McGuffins for the real stories at hand; the items on the list act as a catalyst for the essential telling between mother and daughter. The unsatisfactory language of battle is again replaced with the language of a peacemaker because of the threat of the loss of the mother-daughter bond through death. Grand Auntie Du's death, Auntie Helen's fear of a brain tumor, and Wen Fu's distant death all initiate the telling of the list as mother and daughter recoil from the permanent silence of dying. The revelation of her mother's tragic past furthers Pearl's understanding of her mother as ally instead of opponent, and ultimately, communication progresses.

As a telling counterpoint to the struggle for voice in The Joy Luck Club the struggle to listen emerges. Though the mothers often talk-story to their daughters of their lives and experiences in China, the daughters often meet the telling with a deaf ear. While speaking, the mothers effectually remain silenced by their audience. As if the mothers' lives in China were untranslatable, the daughters hear only incomprehensible sounds instead of words. Shocked into reality by the discovery of her two sisters, June relates, "I never thought my mother's Kweilin story was anything more than a Chinese fairy-tale" (25). Therefore, when June comments that "I seemed to hear less than what was said, while my mother heard more," she refers directly to the deaf-mute lack of communication between mother and daughter (37). The parable that opens the section entitled "The Twenty-Six Malignant Gates" also comments on this aspect of the silence. Not only does this deafness work against the mother but also harms the daughter. The girl who symbolically wrecks her bicycle as the result of not listening to her mother merges with the very title of the section to suggest that bad fortune can be avoided by learning from the experiences of the mothers.

Like the antagonistic motivation that characterizes the creation of the list, the daughters' decision not to hear their mothers suggests a willful desire to silence the maternal that the daughters must address before the silence can be broken. This theme finds expression in a childhood dream of Rose. She remembers,

...I came to a giant playground filled with row after row of square sandboxes. In each sandbox was a new doll. And my mother, who was not there but could see me inside out, told Old Mr. Chou she knew which doll I would pick.

So I decided to pick the one that was entirely different.

'Stop her! Stop her!' cried my mother. As I tried to run away, Old Mr. Chou chased me, shouting, 'See what happens when you don't listen to your mother!' (186).

Rose also chooses not to listen to her mother's recognition of her condition of "too little wood." Just as June listens to her mother's story as a fairy tale with little or no connection to the real world, Rose fails to comprehend the implications of her mother's words. Drawing distinctions between listening as hearing and listening as comprehending, Rose describes, "I still listened to my mother, but I also learned how to let her words blow through me. And sometimes I filled my mind with other people's thoughts--all in English--so that when she looked at me inside out, she would be confused by what she saw" (191). Wrestling with the bond-bondage of the mother-daughter relationship, the daughter first must distinguish her own voice from the seemingly omniscient one of the mother.

For Waverly, Rose, and Lena, dissatisfaction with their relationships with the men in their lives sparks a renewed interest in the words of their mothers. Waverly seeks her mother's opinion about her new fiancé, Rose needs support in the midst of her divorce, and Lena desires help with the inequality of her relationship. In crisis against modern American forms of patriarchy, the daughters draw back to the support of the matrilineal staircase. Meanwhile, in light of the crises, the mothers strengthen their attempts to communicate with their daughters. Ying-ying clearly states, "Now I must tell my daughter everything" (252). The mothers relate their own experiences with new power, knowing that the telling will this time be met with listening and that the communication will be affirming for both mother

and daughter. Heung notes, "For An-Mei and Ying-Ying, self-articulation remedies early teachings in silence and self-denial. Both begin to recall painful memories when they see how their speech can save their daughters" (607).

The Joy Luck Club systematically progresses through the stages of breaking silence, moving from the language of war to that of peace. The final section, "Queen Mother of the Western Skies," fulfills the interplay between mother and daughter that is essential to mutual understanding. The breaking of the silence of the list by the daughters in the middle sections of the novel initiates a telling by the mothers and a new listening on the part of the daughters. The speech now surpasses the limitations of mother-as-teller or daughter-as-teller, as mother and daughter become both teller and listener. Mothers and daughters triumph over the deaf-mute isolation and reach a level of interactive conversation.

Once the needs to speak and to be heard are fulfilled, the search for voice triumphs over the more superficial barriers of language. Mothers and daughters work together to bridge the gap between Mandarin and English. To reconcile Waverly's confusion of "Taiyuan" and "Taiwan," Lindo allows, "Now listen. You can also say the name of Taiyuan is Bing. Everyone from that city calls it that. Easier for you to say" (183). Later, as June requests a retelling of her mother's "fairy tale" from her father, she urges, "No, tell me in Chinese. Really, I can understand" (281). The initial breaking of silence between mother and daughter begins the efforts to overcome the intrinsic difficulties of "multilanguedness." The inability to communicate through language thereby manifests itself as only the symptom of a deeper problem. When the mothers and daughters attack the problem, the symptoms subside.

The creation of an open dialogue between mother and daughter holds great implications for the voices of these women of Chinese ancestry within society at large. As the daughters' silence in their relationships with the men in their lives indicates a larger problem with speaking in a racist, patriarchal America, their individual expressions of voice within these situations is of special importance. An-Mei expresses Rose's inarticulation by stating, "I am not telling you to save your marriage. I only say you should speak up" (193). Meanwhile, Lena explains how she is not heard: "Harold looks at me, as if I, too, were speaking Chinese and he could not understand" (163). The breaking of silence with their mothers initiates for the daughters a breaking of silence within their relationships. As the communication begins between mother and daughter, the daughters then find their voice in society. After a poignant conversation with her mother, Rose speaks out to her husband. Upon voicing her feelings on the divorce, she realizes, "He was 'hulihudu.' The power of my words was that strong" (196).

Furthermore, the mothers find that with the new communication their stories will be remembered. The problematic request to "tell them, tell them" posed in the first chapter of the novel achieves resolution. Tan gives the conflict ultimate expression in the final chapter in which June travels to China to serve as proxy for her mother. She fulfills the tradition of a matrilineal staircase, communicating her mother's story and finding her own voice. Her long-unanswered questions of "How can I describe to them in my broken Chinese about our mother's life? Where should I begin?" reach a conclusion: June describes, "'Mama, Mama,' we all murmur, as if she is among us" (287). The silence is broken.

An-Mei Hsu captures the essence of Chinese American women's

literature in the statement: "And even though I taught my daughter the opposite, still she came out the same way! Maybe it is because she was born to me and she was born a girl. And I was born to my mother and I was born a girl. All of us are like stairs, one step after another, going up or down, but all going the same way" (215). The creation of this genre implies the existence of a common story long silenced. The concept of talk-story remains central, passing from mother to daughter a validation of the experience of the mother and information for the lives of the daughters. The effects of the tradition of silence and the continuing challenge as a double-minority in America to be heard remain the uniting force behind this literature, in Tan as in Kingston as in Wong--all stairs going the same way.

A couple of months ago, my mother looked around her car as she stopped at a traffic light on the way to work. She looked at the person driving the car to her right and saw a white ghost. She looked toward her left and to the car in her rear-view mirror--white ghosts. A week later, I was visiting home and she told the family about the experience. "I realized I was the only Chinese, that I was surrounded by ghosts," she said. My father, my brother and I listened as she sat cracking nuts at her favorite seat in the living room, and I knew that there too, she was surrounded by ghosts.

As I looked to my mother for help in the fall when I began this study, I returned to her repeatedly as the project developed. When I told her that I wanted to write a section on her life and that I needed her to help me, I heard the same astonished outcry from my mother that the mothers lamented in Tan and in Kingston's "Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." "If you don't know me then who knows me?" my mother yelled as I avoided her eyes by looking in the refrigerator. I tried hard to remember what she had told me about China and her past, but all that I could recall were more ghost stories, about people and places I didn't know or understand.

So for spring break, I drove home. In my mind, I envisioned my mother weaving long and tragic stories about China and Hong Kong, clearly articulated, full of many layers of meaning, and waiting for me simply to record as a grand finale to my project. For a couple of days I went on walks with my mother, went to work with my mother, waiting impatiently for her life story to come pouring out and meanwhile only hearing stories about the neighbors, or customers, or a recent Donahue show. Whenever the project came up, I could tell that she was happy that I have been taking an interest in her life, but that she also was embarrassed at the new level of attention she was

receiving. Shifting the conversation abruptly away from her babbling plans to find a sire for our dog and have a litter of puppies, I shyly asked, "Why don't you tell me now about your life?" "My life?" she responded, "there's nothing to tell."

Sitting at the kitchen table one night after dinner and ready for business, my mother pushes, "Do you have your questions for me written out?" I didn't have questions written out. I was still waiting for her story to tumble poetically and spontaneously from her lips. Frustrated about my inability to fulfill my own goal to "tell them" about my mother's life and stressed about my project, I snapped back, "Can't you just talk?"

Then I felt like I was Kingston, torturing the silent girl in the bathroom. I poked and prodded and pulled my mother, demanding that she speak, not even for her glorification, but so that I could finish my project. My voice, my writing, was caught up in her silence about her past, and I childishly became angered at the way my idealized plan was turning out in reality. "Humph!" my mother commented on my sour attitude, and she padded off down the hall. I descended into our basement, to escape from her and from myself.

Seeking mindlessness, I started piddling through the endless towers of stored away dishes and junk, shopping for camp, vintage items I could use in my apartment. When I came upon trunks and bags of my mother's old clothes, I stripped down and began trying on her old shirts and dresses from the sixties and seventies. My project and my frustration immediately were forgotten in my excitement at finding my own private thrift store. An hour later, I heard my mother's steps on the stairs, and I heard her call my name.

My mother watched, amused, as I happily modeled my new outfits for her. As I pulled off a dress that was too tight in the chest and

realized how tiny my mother once was, I looked at her rounded, maternal figure that stood before me and realized that she had looked like me, that I would soon look like her. We both smiled in the middle of the dressing room-thrift store I had made of the basement, and she told me about when she wore each dress. Upstairs, she pulled out the family album and showed me a picture of her wearing the tiny dress I had put aside. In the photo, she's holding my older brother as an infant, and I saw my face staring back at me. The same eyes, the same cheeks, the same smile. Throughout the weekend, we talked more and more about her life. She told me about old boyfriends and her first roommate, about growing up in Hong Kong and going to college in Louisiana. The project became an excuse, an incentive to break the silence about her past.

When I began this study, I was concerned with my ability to wear a Chinese dress for Halloween. I wondered with the costume, how much was real, how much was pretend. My mother told me around Christmas time that I was a banana, yellow on the outside and white on the inside. Now, as I wear my mom's western dresses from the seventies, I wonder how much we are both eggs, with the yellow at the very core.

My mother was born in Hubei, China in 1941. She was the first of three children, the last being the long-awaited male heir, my uncle. When my mother was seven, her family left China and fled to Hong Kong to escape the communist revolution. In 1960, she came to the United States to go to college, where she met my dad and moved to a small town in East Tennessee. She has lived for twenty-five years in a town where there are no other Chinese. Though she has taken classes in public speaking and is fluent in English, she still doesn't like to speak on the phone to order a pizza and only uses her Cantonese when she speaks to my aunt or grandmother on the telephone. When I was

home last, she told me that her accent was getting worse, and that she was regressing back to Cantonese in her old age.

While my mother's story is individual and unique, it is also a part of the development and creation of this project. Looking back at the introduction and the emphasis I initially placed on her role in my search for voice, I find it amazing that I didn't immediately see in what direction the project was moving. The writing of this study of the theme of silence in Kingston and Tan has initiated a breaking of silence for both my mother and myself. This spring, we go in search of our mother's gardens and find the flowers beginning to bloom.

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