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Lies that Tell the Truth: Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*

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Although she labelled her first work "Memoirs," when Maxine Hong Kingston published *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* in 1976, she intended to write in "a form which [...] can neither [be] dismiss[ed] as fiction nor quarrel[ed] with as fact" ("Cultural" 64). Kingston's definition of her work as a memoir, however, proved to be unsatisfying, as its distinction from autobiography still remains too vague (Cheung 12). Being published as a nonfiction work, it thus opened the way for questions about the autobiographical genre: how could such a text, full of imagined, and hence fictitious passages and rewritings of Chinese legends, be called nonfiction? The abundance of such passages suggests that lies in Maxine Hong Kingston's texts cannot have been unconscious nor unintentional.

Was Maxine Hong Kingston and her editor's aim to tease readers' curiosity so as to boost sales? It certainly did attract more readers curious to know more about the life of a Chinese-American woman. Defining Kingston's work as nonfiction most probably enhanced the exotic dimension associated with her origins, and made it even more fascinating for people who were not familiar with Chinese culture. On the other hand, *The Woman Warrior* was not well received by either American or Chinese critics: the former condemned the work for not respecting the conventions of the autobiographical genre, the latter condemned Kingston for having tried to create a work too similar to that of American writers. So much criticism and contradiction inevitably raises questions: how can a work be both too American and not American enough?

In this article, I will study Kingston's intentional blurring of the limits of the autobiographical and mythological genres. I will first examine her use of Chinese myths, especially the legend of Fa Mu Lan. I will then analyse the "talk-story" in Kingston's narrative and focus on her reconstruction of the missing parts in her family history in order to discuss the idea of an inexact or partial truth in *The Woman Warrior*. I will argue that the recurrent use of lies in her work makes it is necessary for her to give a new definition of the life writing genre.

The Pivotal Role of Chinese Legends

Based on Philippe Lejeune's definition in *Le Pacte autobiographique*, an autobiography is a retrospective account of a person's life written in prose by that person. Such an account focuses on the person's life as an individual, and in particular on the making of/history of the person's personality/character.[1] As Lejeune himself has remarked, despite this seemingly simple definition, many exceptions show how difficult it is not only to define autobiography, but also to stick to a definition. Following Rousseau's description of his autobiographical project, modern autobiography is not supposed to contain lies intended to mislead the reader:

> I will present myself, whenever the last trumpet shall sound, before the Sovereign Judge with this book in my hand, and loudly proclaim, "Thus have I acted; these were my thoughts; such was I. With equal freedom and veracity have I related what was laudable or wicked, I have concealed no crimes, added no virtues; and if I have sometimes introduced superfluous ornament, it was merely to occupy a void occasioned by defect of memory: I may have supposed that certain, which I only knew to be probable, but have never asserted as truth, a conscious falsehood […]."[2] (Rousseau 43)

Such a rule is easy to formulate but more difficult to respect: for some people, telling the truth is not so simple. Due to the subjective nature of autobiography, what is true for one person may not be true for someone else. Aware of such difficulties, Lejeune focuses more on the autobiographer's intentions than on the account itself: although the events related may not be entirely truthful, it may still be considered sincere if such was the autobiographer's intention. Sissela Bok corroborates this theory by explaining that "[t]he moral question of whether [the writer-narrator is] lying or not is not *settled* by establishing the truth or falsity of what [he/she] say[s]. In order to settle this question, [the reader] must know whether [the writer-narrator] *intend*[s] [his/her] *statement to mislead*" (6). To put it simply, lies, or at least unfaithful accounts may be found and accepted in an autobiography. Eakin suggests that autobiography today is not only about telling the truth, but it is "increasingly understood as both an act of memory and an art of the imagination; […] memory and imagination become so intimately complementary in the autobiographical act that it is usually impossible for autobiographers and their readers to distinguish between them in practice" (6). He goes even further by affirming that real, intentional lies are acceptable in an autobiography, as "[a]dventurous twentieth-century autobiographers […] readily accept[ed] the proposition that fiction and the fiction-making process are a central constituent of the truth of any life as it is lived and of any art devoted to the presentation of that life" (5). In *The Woman Warrior*, while some passages may raise the reader's doubts as to their truthfulness or accuracy, other elements are undeniably fictional. The best example to illustrate this point is Kingston's constant use of Chinese legends, blended with the narration of her own story. One of the folktales that she uses and that may be known to the reader (namely the American reader) is the story of The Woman Warrior, Fa Mu Lan. Kingston's rewriting of this legend takes up most of the second part of her memoirs, entitled "White Tiger." Based on the famous legend (adaptations such as Disney's in 1998 widely contributed to its popularity in the Western world), Fa Mu Lan is a young woman who decides to replace her father who has been drafted and disguises herself as a man so as to go to war. After years of fighting, she returns home as a heroine and resumes her normal life as a woman and wife.

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[1] "*Récit rétrospectif en prose qu'une personne réelle fait de sa propre existence, lorsqu'elle met l'accent sur sa vie individuelle, en particulier sur l'histoire de sa personnalité*" (Lejeune 14).

[2] "*Que la trompette du Jugement dernier sonne quand elle voudra, je viendrai, ce livre à la main, me présenter devant le souverain juge. Je dirai hautement : 'Voilà ce que j'ai fait, ce que j'ai pensé, ce que je fus. J'ai dit le bien et le mal avec la même franchise. Je n'ai rien tu de mauvais, rien ajouté de bon, et s'il m'est arrivé d'employer quelque ornement indifférent, ce n'a jamais été que pour remplir un vide occasionné par mon défaut de mémoire ; j'ai pu supposer vrai ce que je savais avoir pu l'être, jamais ce que je savais être faux*'" (Rousseau 43).

According to Kingston, this legend was told to her by her mother when she was a child: "I remembered that as a child I had followed my mother about the house, the two of us singing about how Fa Mu Lan fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village. I had forgotten this chant that was once mine, given me by my mother" (*Woman Warrior* 20). Apart from the fact that the reader, in an attempt to sort out the truth from fiction, may question the exactness of this memory, what is striking in Kingston's narrative is that she makes the legends *hers*. First, whether or not her memory of the scene of her mother and her chanting is accurate, her version of the legend is not, since it mixes different legends. In the 1991 anthology *The Big Aiiieeeee! An Anthology of Chinese American and Japanese American Literature* that he co-edited, Frank Chin vehemently criticizes Kingston's story combining the legends of Fa Mu Lan and Yue Fei, a male general whose mother inscribed words on his back. In Kingston's version, there is no trace of Yue Fei, and it is Fa Mu Lan whose back is carved: "'We are going to carve revenge on your back,' my father said. 'We'll write out oaths and names'" (*Woman Warrior* 34). Had the conflation been unintentional, such approximate veracity could have been accepted and forgiven by the reader, as Lejeune suggests; after all, the writer may indeed have been confused and mixed up the different legends she was told in her childhood. However, Kingston never once hints at the possibility that she might have forgotten part of the legend or combined it with others. As a result, for a reader who may not be familiar with the legend, Kingston's mixed version of the two legends might well seem very close to the original folktale, as King-Kok Cheung remarks: "Because the mainstream audience is unfamiliar with these well-known tales about Mulan and Yue Fei, however, many assume erroneously that the fantasy created by the narrator is the traditional story" (12). The writer's transformation of the myths inevitably triggered severe reviews from Chinese American writers such as Jeffery Paul Chan or Benjamin R. Tong who saw her imprecise use of Chinese legends as an insult to Chinese culture. Secondly, Chin denounced

Kingston's reinterpretation of the legend as a way to transmit messages and values that were originally not part of the legend. According to him,

> Kingston, with a stroke of white racist genius, attacks Chinese civilization, Confucianism itself, and where its life begins: the fairy tale. She, the victim of Chinese misogyny, says that "The Ballad of Mulan," the children's game chant, a fairy tale playing on the sounds of weaving, is the source of the misogynistic emphasis of Chinese ethics. She takes Fa Mulan, turns her into a champion of Chinese feminism and an inspiration to Chinese American girls to dump the Chinese race and make for white universality. (*Aiiieeeee* 27)

Chin strongly disapproves of the seemingly underlying feminist values advocated in Kingston's interpretation of the legend that are, in his opinion, not only a misinterpretation, but most of all an undesirable deformation of the values transmitted through the original legend. And indeed, Kingston's writing has been interpreted as conveying such ideas: Ruth Y. Jenkins for instance understands the narrator's retelling of the story of the No-Name Aunt as a way for the writer to "[take] revenge on the culture that denies female voice" (66). She further analyzes Kingston's use of the fantastic (i.e., ghosts) as "a counter current to the province of patriarchal control, investing women (or other outsiders) with individual authority and opportunities to articulate alternative experience" (70). On the contrary, Yuan Shu believes that Kingston "never critiques patriarchal values or institutional racism" (202). He does acknowledge, however, that Kingston's work should "[call] for a new feminist reading and writing strategy" (219).

Last but not least, Kingston's very narrative style became the target of many critics. Indeed, in *The Woman Warrior*, memories of her family's history and retellings of Chinese legends are blended so that the narrator slowly–or suddenly–shifts from her own identity to become the character of the legend. By simply moving on to the next paragraph, the reader unknowingly moves from the narrator's to the character of the legend's point of view: "I would have to grow up a warrior woman. The call would come from a bird that flew over our roof" (*Woman Warrior* 20). There is no transition from one paragraph to the next, but the reader has surreptitiously switched to Fa Mu Lan's point of view. The whole story of Fa Mu Lan, the Woman Warrior, thus starts through the use of the first-person narrative, the "I." Although the life writing genre has evolved since Rousseau's *Confessions*, such appropriation of legend literally makes no sense, creates incoherence as far as the construction of the narrator's character is concerned, and may even seem ridiculous: How could Kingston expect the reader to believe that the narrator was the Woman Warrior? She may, of course, have compared herself to her; but using the "I" to take up a legendary character's role is unconventional in an autobiography. From this point of view, the reader may feel betrayed and cheated by the writer's use of such stylistic devices.

Yet, the writer herself does point to the fact that she has trouble making the distinction between fiction and reality: "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (*Woman Warrior* 6). According to Cheung, this warning "gives the author the poetic license to mingle fact and fiction" (12): in other words, the legend of Fa Mu Lan "is not presented as a traditional Chinese story but as the narrator's *fantasy* of herself morphing into the legendary warrior" (Cheung 12). Kingston's narrator "[cannot] tell where the stories left off and the dreams began" (*Woman Warrior* 19). It is thus very clear that Kingston's intention is not to give the most faithful account of the legends that constituted her childhood: rather, she shares them with the reader as she wishes to remember and narrate them, and does not seem to mind meddling with facts and legends.

Talking-Story

There are different forms and degrees of lying, as shown by Arnaud Schmitt: whether the information is wrong due to the writer's ignorance or is the result of an intentional lie (*Je réel* 33), it is up to the reader to decide whether what is written is believable or not. Maxine Hong Kingston questions our relation to truth and reality throughout her text, hinting at the fact that what the reader calls truth may not correspond to her own definition of truth; or rather, that her definition of truth might not meet the reader's expectations. However, unlike many autobiographers who more or less discreetly use lies in their work, Kingston does not try to hide hers. Her text mainly relies on hesitations and gaps in her knowledge of her family's history, giving her the possibility to complete it with her own imagination.

One of her most blatant lies regarding her family history is the story of the No-Name Woman: her father's sister no one talks about because she has brought shame on the family. Having lost the right to exist in the family members' memories because she got pregnant by a man other than her husband, this aunt has no name, and should never be mentioned: "'You must not tell anyone,' my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you'" (*Woman Warrior* 3). These are the very first words of *The Woman Warrior*. The mother then goes on telling her about this No-Name Aunt whose husband had gone to the Gold Mountain in America, and who got pregnant long after he had left. By insisting on the dishonour brought on the family by the aunt's adultery and her tragic end (she committed suicide by drowning in the family well with her new-born baby), the narrator's mother aims at "warn[ing] [her children] about life" by telling them "a story to grow up on" (*Woman Warrior* 5). The goal, then, is not to tell stories, or tell the narrator about her family or life in China: it is to teach her a lesson. What Sau-ling Cynthia Wong calls "the code of Necessity," which is "a legacy from [the narrator's mother's] native land, where scarcity of resources has given rise to a rigid, family-centered social structure" ("Necessity" 5), is what leads the narrator's mother to give only the information necessary for her daughter to learn a lesson from her aunt's terrible destiny: "My mother has told me once and for all the useful parts. She will add nothing unless powered by Necessity, a riverbank that guides her life" (*Woman Warrior* 6). The story of the No-Name Woman, therefore, has missing parts that have been judged irrelevant to the lesson taught, and that the narrator will never get.

What is striking in the narrative of the No-Name Woman is the way the narrator's mother dramatizes the story, first when narrating the arrival of the villagers:

> "[…] On the night the baby was to be born the villagers raided our house. Some were crying. Like a great saw, teeth strung with lights, files of people walked zigzag across our land, tearing the rice. Their lanterns doubled in the disturbed black water, which drained away through the broken bunds. As the villagers closed in, we could see that some of them, probably men and women we knew well, wore white masks. The people with long hair hung it over their faces. Women with short hair made it stand up on end […]." (3-4)

The comparison ("Like a great saw"), the exaggeration ("files of people," "Their lanterns doubled") and the staging of the scene ("Some were crying," "some […] wore white masks," "The people with long hair hung it over their faces. Women with short hair made it stand up on end") aim at impressing both the narrator and the reader by enhancing the power of the whole community, and insisting on the danger of a woman's misconduct.

The mother then highlights the losses the family underwent during the raid:

> They threw eggs and began slaughtering our stock. We could hear the animals scream their deaths—the roosters, the pigs, a last great roar from the ox. […] Their knives dripped with the blood of our animals. […] One woman swung a chicken, whose throat she had slit, splattering blood in red arcs about her. […] We could hear them in the kitchen breaking our bowls and banging the pots. They overturned the great waist-high earthenware jugs; duck eggs, pickled fruits, vegetables burst out and mixed in acrid torrents. (4-5)

The villagers have destroyed all the food they could find, and the family is left starving. Because of the harshness of the story, the reader may call into question its credibility: did this aunt really exist? Did she truly kill herself and her baby by drowning in the well? Did the whole family really decide to forget about her existence? Did it really all happen this way?

Even the narrator points out to the impossibility of her mother witnessing the events: "My mother spoke about the raid as if she had seen it, when she and my aunt, a daughter-in-law to a different household, should not have been living together at all" (7). The narrator's mother's narrative seems not to rely on veracity, then, but on the act of talking-story as a way to bequeath the family's history to her daughter.

Respecting the mother's instruction on the importance of secrecy, the narrator does not dare ask for the details that her mother fails to give her: "If I want to learn what clothes my aunt wore, whether flashy or ordinary, I would have to begin, 'Remember Father's drowned-in-the-well sister?' I cannot ask that" (*Woman Warrior* 6). This impossibility of asking for details, however, does not stop the narrator from wanting to know more; but being unable to get the complete story from her parents, she takes on her mother's talk-story skills and invents the missing parts. The supposedly true story of the No-Name Aunt somehow becomes *at least* partly fictitious as the narrator inserts her imagination in the missing parts. The transformation is obvious, as the narrator does not even try to hide it. In the following passage, in which the narrator tries to imagine where her aunt could have met the other man, the use of the adverb "perhaps" three times and the use of the modal "must," for instance, underline her ignorance and her attempt at making up for what she does not know:

> Perhaps she had encountered him in the fields or on the mountain where the daughters-in-law collected fuel. Or perhaps he first noticed her in the marketplace. He was not a stranger because the village housed no strangers. She had to have dealings with him other than sex. Perhaps he worked an adjoining field, or he sold her the cloth for the dress she sewed and wore. His demand must have surprised, then terrified her. She obeyed him; she always did as she was told. (*Woman Warrior* 6)

What is noticeable, however, is that she progressively moves from assumptions to affirmations. The absence of modals in the last sentence ("She obeyed him; she always did as she was told") and the use of the adverb "always" reveal a shift in her position as narrator: she no longer wishes to hint at the fact that she may not be entirely reliable because she does not know the whole story, but instead becomes a more assertive narrator who invents the missing parts without worrying about their truthfulness. In other words, she goes from fabulation (i.e., imagining the missing parts of her aunt's story) to lying (*Je réel* 33).

By deliberately using what might be considered lies (events not having actually taken place), Kingston strays away from the conventions of the genre: as Mary Zeiss Stange writes, "the rejection of conventional narrative and interpretive modes of understanding is precisely Kingston's point" (19). For the writer, life writing texts cannot be separated from the act of story-telling that she has inherited from her mother, but story-tellers, as Sherwood Anderson warns, do not rely on truth: “I have a confession to make. I am a story teller starting to tell a story and cannot be expected to tell the truth. Truth is impossible to me” (5).

Through the act of talking-story, Kingston values the legacy she received from her family: “Kingston inscribes talk-story as a means through which narrative, cast in the shifting relations between speaker and audience, text and context, can reconstruct the very foundations of familial history and communal tradition” (Tensuan 38). The writer breaks away from autobiography as “a distinctively Western, and, throughout much of its history, a predominantly masculine genre” (Stange 15) and from Christian men whose “goal of autobiographical narrative is to bring the ‘I’ (hero, narrator, and author) into sharp focus, and, thereby, into relation with God” (Stange 16). Instead, she distinguishes herself by choosing to put this “communal tradition” at the heart of her autobiographical act, thus inscribing herself in the tradition of female autobiographers who “try to define themselves in their individuality, over against inherited models which do not fully accord (perhaps do not accord at all) with their inner experiences” (Stange 17).

Even her refusal to comply with a chronological organization of the events reflects the importance of talk-story in her work:

> [in *The Woman Warrior*] [c]hapters are arranged in blocks against opposing chapters, some gaps bridged with cries of self-doubt or victory, while others are left for the reader to interpret. Kingston breaks up time as she breaks up the usual distinctions between fact and fantasy, and in doing so, separated her book from more traditional, chronological autobiographies. (Homsher 93)

The Woman Warrior is divided into five different parts of unequal length, each chapter focusing on a particular female character. As mentioned above, the chapters are not organized chronologically, although they do show the evolution of the narrator and her progressive understanding of her past in relation to her present. The text starts with a family story told to the narrator by her mother when the former was a child, and ends with the mother telling the narrator another story–but this time, the narrator is not merely a listener anymore. She finishes the story her mother has started: “Here is a story my mother told me, not when I was young, but recently, when I told her I also talk story. The beginning is hers, the ending mine” (*Woman Warrior* 206). In other words, the whole text shows the narrator’s transformation into a story-teller, like her mother.

As expected in a self-referential text, Kingston relates autobiographical events; but by taking up story-telling, she underlines the fact that lies are constitutive of her autobiography.

Thanks to her mother who has cut her frenum, the narrator is free to say whatever she wants, however she wants, as her mother explains: "'I cut [your frenum] so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language. You'll be able to speak languages that are completely different from one another. You'll be able to pronounce anything [...]'" (*Woman Warrior* 164). The cutting of the frenum is a metaphor for Kingston's success in finding her own voice in the genre and giving a faithful account of her life by oscillating between truth and lies.

Towards a New Definition of the Genre?

As many other autobiographical works, *The Woman Warrior* was bound to be subject to criticisms. Leigh Gilmore explains: "Because testimonial projects require subjects to confess, to bear witness, to make public and shareable a private and intolerable pain, they enter into a legalistic frame in which their efforts can move quickly beyond their interpretation and control, become exposed as ambiguous, and therefore subject to judgments about their veracity and worth" (7). Although Gilmore's analysis mainly deals with trauma in autobiographies, it can also apply to works that do not deal with trauma. One judgment passed on Kingston's work is the inadequacy of combining Chinese culture with the autobiographical genre. According to Chin, the two are not even compatible; indeed, the autobiographical genre is mostly a Western one:

> The autobiography is not a Chinese form. Dr. Sun Yat-Sen's revolutionaries of 1911 wanted more than an end to the Manchu Empire, more than an end to dynastic imperial government. They wanted to Europeanize China. The literary leaders wanted even more than that. They wanted to Christianize China through new Chinese writing. Hu Shih wrote that the Chinese had to develop biography and autobiography for their inspirational moral effect. In his own *Autobiography of a Man at Thirty*, Hu Shih stated, "Writing my autobiography makes me feel very Christian." It should: autobiography is a Christian form, descended from confession and, Hu Shih believed, from testimony. St Augustine's *The Confessions* is generally acknowledged as the first autobiography; Hu Shih said the Gospels of the New Testament—the books of Matthew, Luke, and John—were the first autobiographies. To the Chinese, the autobiography is definitely a Christian form. (*Aiiieeeee* 11)

While Wong explains the necessity for Asian-American writers to turn to the autobiographical genre to have a chance to be published,[3] Chin asserts that Chinese American autobiographies have "destroyed Chinamen history and culture" ("Autobiography" 109). To him, autobiographies like Maxine Hong Kingston's are a nuisance to Chinese culture as they do not present it as it truly is and, instead, give to white readers the stereotypical image they already have of China and of Chinese people.[4] First, Chin's claim that there is no Chinese autobiography can be called into question, as Cheung rightfully demonstrates:

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[3] In her essay "Sugar Sisterhood," Wong takes the example of Amy Tan and analyzes her popularity as the result of her acceptance of and ability to adapt to the demands of her white readers.

> I take issue with Chin's claims that there is no indigenous autobiographical tradition in China [...]. Many Chinese autobiographical works, such as the postscript to the *Shiji*/*Shih-chi* (史记) (c. 91 BC) by historian Xima Qian/Suu-ma Ch'ien (司马迁) and "The Life of the Sire of Five Willows (五柳先生传)" (AD 392) by poet Tao Yuanming (陶渊明), predated St. Augustine's *Confessions* (AD 398), which Chin considers to be the Ur-autobiography. Even if we fast-forward to the 20th Century, "My Autobiographical Account at Thirty (三十自述)" by Liang Qichao (梁启超), the Chinese reformer on whose head the Empress Dowager put a price, was written in 1902, seven years before the publication of Yung Wing's autobiography. (2)

Chinese autobiographies do exist, and some critics consider Kingston's work to be one of them: to Paul Gray, "*The Woman Warrior* did [...] what all great autobiographies do: it turned self-knowledge into art" (67); likewise, Cheung affirms that for Kingston, using this typically Western genre is a way to "contest rather than conform to dominant culture" (16).

The Woman Warrior belongs to the life writing genre to a certain extent only, but it cannot be fully considered as fiction either. Despite John Barrett Mandel's claim that "autobiographies and novels are finally totally distinct–and this simple fact *every reader knows*" (54), autobiographies and novels have tended to merge in recent decade as we all know. *The Woman Warrior* is difficult to define, but many have tried to do so as precisely as possible; Patricia Blinde for instance describes the book as "at once a novel, an autobiography, a series of essays and poems. But while the work capitalizes on the conventions of various genres, it also evades the limitations of any one genre" (52). Marjorie Lightfoot, for her part, believes that Kingston "insists through form and content that reality is part actual, part fantasy, and that the dividing line is often obscure. Imaginative inference is necessary and unavoidable" (58). Most of those attempts nonetheless remain unsatisfactory, either because they do not fully grasp the complexity of the text, or simply because using different terms defeats the whole point of trying to coherently define Kingston's work.

The Woman Warrior cannot even be completely considered an autobiographical novel, defined by Lejeune as a fictitious text in which the reader suspects more or less vague similarities with the writer's real life. Unlike autobiography, in which the writer is contractually bound to the reader ("Self-narration" 129), the autobiographical novel is not always accurate. What is noticeable, though, is that in the autobiographical novel, the writer chooses *not* to be known as being the main character as well:

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[4] Chin's criticism of *The Woman Warrior* is as virulent as opposite viewpoints are numerous. David Li for example argues that *The Woman Warrior* has underlined the "representational issues that have accompanied the growth of Asian American creative and critical production" (62).

> The autobiographical novel includes all texts of fiction in which the reader may reasonably believe there is a correlation between author and character, based on resemblances he/she might have found. On the other hand, the author has chosen to deny this correlation, or at least not to confirm it. Thus the autobiographical novel's definition is based on its text. Unlike autobiography, it is made of various degrees. The alleged resemblance found by the reader may go from a vague and blurry similarity between the character and the author, to an almost complete transparency. Autobiography has no degree: it is either the same or different.[5] (25)

Even if the distinction between the writer (Kingston) and the narrator (usually called Maxine) is made, Kingston has never denied the autobiographical dimension of her work. Moreover, Philippe Gasparini affirms that in the autobiographical novel, the aim is to *convince t*he reader that what is narrated is true;[6] Kingston's episode of Fa Mu Lan, on the other hand, was meant to be "a sort of kung fu movie parody" ("Cultural" 57) and did not aim at convincing the reader of its truthfulness at all.

The Woman Warrior cannot be considered a "failed autobiography" either; it would be utterly inaccurate and a denial of Kingston's talent as a writer. It seems that a new or reviewed definition of the autobiographical genre that would include works like Kingston's is indispensable. The term that to me seems to come the closest to an accurate analysis of Kingston's writing is Arnaud Schmitt's notion of *self-narration*. Self-narration as defined by Schmitt refers to the idea that autobiographers would be free to get away from *their own truth* (and not truth in general) by using what one would describe as fictitious elements:

> Self-narration should be seen then as a loosely-referential literary genre. Referential because there is no protective distance between the narrator and the author, consequently there is also a degree of assumed responsibility for the text's content. Literary because it resorts to every formal weapon offered by novels and does not make it one of its duties to be true to life. ("Self-narration" 129)

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[5] "*[J]'appellerai [roman autobiographique] tous les textes de fiction dans lesquels le lecteur peut avoir des raisons de soupçonner, à partir des ressemblances qu'il croit deviner, qu'il y a identité de l'auteur et du personnage, alors que l'auteur, lui, a choisi de nier cette identité, ou du moins de ne pas l'affirmer. Ainsi défini, le roman autobiographique [...] se définit au niveau de son contenu. À la différence de l'autobiographie, il comporte des degrés. La 'ressemblance' supposée par le lecteur peut aller d'un 'air de famille' flou entre le personnage et l'auteur, jusqu'à la quasi-transparence qui fait dire que c'est lui 'tout craché'. [...] L'autobiographie, elle, ne comporte pas de degrés : c'est tout ou rien*" (Lejeune 25).

[6] "*[le roman autobiographique] doit impérativement convaincre le lecteur que tout a pu se passer logiquement de cette manière*" (Gasparini 29).

The text would then still be self-referential but written more like a novel: "Self-narration allows authors to tap into the intensity and the directness that the narrative of undisguised personal experience yields while enjoying the wide-ranging plasticity of the novel" (130). In that sense, the term "self-narration" would be quite similar to James Olney's term "autofictography," an "autobiography in which techniques of the novelist play a prominent part" (Miller 25). However, I will argue that Schmitt's term is more appropriate in that it is not just about the stylistic devices the writer uses; it also takes into account the writer's own relation to truth, thus implying that what is true to the writer might not be perceived as true by the reader. But in that case, the possible gap between the writer's intentions and the reader's expectations would not be an issue as it would be in a traditional autobiography; the writer's duty towards the reader to be as close to truth as possible does not exist anymore in a self-narration, as a self-narration is "aware that every life narrative, as honest as it purports to be, is flawed simply because our memory is also by definition flawed. We forget, we misunderstand or only partially understand, we lie, we use our imagination to escape our limited empirical experience" ("Self-narration" 129). This echoes John Fowles's words: "A character is either 'real' or 'Imaginary'? If you think that, *hypocrite lecteur*, I can only smile. You do not even think of your own past as quite real; you dress it up, you gild it or blacken it, censor it, tinker with it… fictionalize it, in a word, and put it away on a shelf–your book, your romanced autobiography. We are all in flight from real reality" (82).

By using Schmitt's definition, Kingston's use of obvious lies and Chinese legends becomes more acceptable as they are part of her *own truth*. Although her writing may look like fiction at times, it still remains self-referential as references to her past and family are not only real, but also show an effort to depict them in the most truthful way. Homsher observes for instance that "Kingston's expansion of [the No-Name Woman] story comes very close to the work of fiction, but it is always done as part of the effort to make her own past and her kinfolk real" (94). Kingston's own truth is composed of events taken from her own life, but also of her rich and complex multicultural background (born in the United States to Chinese parents) that not everybody can relate to and that makes writing about oneself so difficult.

The opposition between the American and the Chinese legacies that appears in Kingston's work perfectly echoes this "conflict between a discarded East and a rejecting West," as Shirley Geok-lin Lim puts it, and reflects "the theme of doubleness which runs so deeply in Asian-American writing" (Lim 62). Kingston's lies may not be lies, after all; and if they are, they are meant to underline the inadequacy of the autobiographical genre, as readers commonly know it, to her own personal experience. Lies, in *The Woman Warrior*, are used on purpose: they enable the narrator to "separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, one family, [her] mother who marked [her] growing with stories, from what is Chinese" (*Woman Warrior* 5); they enable her to differentiate between "what is Chinese tradition and what is the movies" (*Woman Warrior* 6). Paradoxically, through lies, the writer gets to understand more about her past and what constitutes her multicultural identity. Lying enables her to break away from silence and taboos in her family as well as in the American society at that time and establishes her truth as a Chinese-American in the 1970s. As Nicoleta Alexoae-Zagni states,

> After all, what matters most for Kingston is not to have given a name and a subjectivity to the aunt, but to have tried out her power of completing her mother's silences and playing with different identities. By freeing the No-Name Aunt, the narrative voice frees her own and opens the way for a better understanding of herself. The act of putting into words turns out to be potentially redemptive as it marks the end of silence and the forbidden.[7] (119)

As a Chinese-American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston is not silenced anymore and succeeds, through lies, in portraying her real self that otherwise could not have been accurately depicted.

Conclusion

Depending on the liar, lying can take different meanings. Lies may be acceptable, and even useful, in certain autobiographical cases. Throughout her work, and even in her next work, *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston shows that lies are necessary to her writing process so as to attain some form of truth and empower her to find her voice as a woman, a Chinese-American, and a writer.

Kingston's use of lies in *The Woman Warrior* undoubtedly calls into question the definition of the autobiographical genre that supposedly rejects an extensive use of lies due to the very fact that its authenticity relies on the autobiographer's sincere intentions *not* to lie. Just because Kingston has overtly included what most readers would call lies does not mean her narrative is completely false. As Schmitt remarks, lying is part of our everyday life: it is then not surprising to find lies in an autobiography. However, one must note that Kingston does more than just put a few lies in her text: lies become a part of who she is and how she became who she is today. It is thanks to lies and imagination that Kingston has managed to collect the missing parts of her family history and put them back together to make it hers and be able to transmit it through her writing. *The Woman Warrior* is not a life story then, but "the story of an attempt to reconcile one's life with one's self" which is therefore not meant to be "taken as historically accurate but as metaphorically authentic" (Adams ix).

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[7] "*Ce qui apparaît comme le plus important, ce n'est peut-être pas le fait d'avoir donné un nom […] et une subjectivité à la tante […], mais d'avoir testé son propre pouvoir, celui de combler les silences de la mère et de jouer avec des identités différentes. Car, en libérant la tante sans nom, l'instance énonciatrice libère surtout sa propre voix et ouvre le chemin pour une compréhension d'elle-même. La verbalisation s'avère ainsi potentiellement rédemptrice en ce qu'elle marque la rupture du silence et de l'interdit*" (Alexoae-Zagni 119).

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