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KING-KOK CHEUNG

Self-fulfilling Visions
in *The Woman Warrior*
and *Thousand Pieces of Gold*

Coming from a culture that favors male over female offspring and living in a society as members of an ethnic minority, the Chinese American protagonists in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* and Ruthanne Lum McCunn's *Thousand Pieces of Gold* exemplify the importance of "self-invention" (to borrow John Paul Eakin's term) in producing positive identities. Both works are based on real lives: Kingston's book is classified as autobiography; McCunn's book is a biographical novel about a historical figure. Yet both are given shape and coherence by the authors' imaginative visions. Although the two books are colored by the authors' Asian heritage, what enables the heroines to prevail at the end (and what distinguishes Kingston and McCunn as writers) is not so much the resources inherent in the Chinese culture as the power of personal imagination to translate Asian inspirations into American opportunities.

Critics frequently approach literature by Asian Americans as though it were necessarily representative of the ethnic group. Often overlooked are the shaping fantasies of the particular writers. But as Michael M. J. Fischer observes, "ethnicity is something reinvented and reinterpreted in each generation by each individual" (195) and "the search or struggle for a sense of ethnic identity is a (re-)invention and a discovery of a vision" (196). This essay analyzes how ethnicity is being reinvented by Kingston and McCunn, and more specifically, how they make use respectively of an old myth and a traditional metaphor to discover new possibilities for their protagonists—Maxine and Lalu—whose personalities depart radically both from the original Chinese models and from the stereotypes of Asian women in America.¹

A close reading of the two texts, with special attention to the significance of the titles, will reveal the authors' innovative and subversive uses of their Chinese legacies. Maxine and Lalu both grow up in families that devalue daughters. To salvage self-esteem, they conjure up positive images of women. Maxine engages in a warrior fantasy; Lalu clings to her image as a "thousand pieces of gold." The visions encapsulated in the titles of the two books convey both the frustrations and aspirations of the two protagonists. "The Woman Warrior" alludes to the legendary Chinese warrior Fa Mu Lan, who disguises herself as a male soldier so as to spare her sick father from battle. "Thousand Pieces of Gold" (*qianjin* in Chinese) is a polite and respectful reference to another person's daughter.

Ironically, the actual status of daughters in both narratives has little in common with the images evoked by the glamorous titles. The warrior's renown runs counter to the invisibility and even enforced anonymity of women in China. Maxine's own aunt, who drowns herself in China after giving birth to an illegitimate child, has become a "no name woman." The myth of the dashing woman warrior also contrasts sharply with the actual childhood memories of Maxine, who is told repeatedly by her parents that "girls are maggots in the rice," that it is "more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (51), that "feeding girls is feeding cowbirds" (54). Cowbirds lay their eggs in the nests of other birds; to feed young cowbirds is to feed what belongs to others. The analogy implies that daughters belong to their future husbands, that food is therefore wasted on them. Though the warrior legend inspires bravado in Maxine, the daily reminders of her kin produce only self-contempt and resentment.

McCunn's title is equally ironic considering what actually happens to the protagonist. The metaphor "Thousand Pieces of Gold" connotes value and preciousness, but Lalu—the *qianjin* in the novel—is a poor farmer's daughter who is repeatedly sold—as a prostitute and as a slave. Rather than signaling lofty status, *qianjin* backhandedly connotes degradation as chattel.

The humiliation experienced by the two characters prompts them to seek refuge respectively in legend and in metaphor, and subsequently, to endow both with new significance. The original legend of Fa Mu Lan celebrates not so much military prowess as filial piety: the warrior is commemorated for taking her father's place in battle. Maxine, on the other hand, fantasizes at great length about the warrior's rigorous training and triumphant vengeance; she turns the heroine into everything she herself wishes to be. While the warrior is a grand illusion, a

tantalizing dream, the fiction that Maxine invokes gradually shapes reality. As Suzanne Juhasz points out, it is “the urge to legitimize the truth of the imagination, especially because it is so often in conflict with the truth of society, that informs Kingston’s book” (69).

McCunn’s *Lalu* seeks solace in the term *qianjin* by reinstating its literal meaning. Long-established as an honorific term, *qianjin* has become dissociated from its literal meaning as a “thousand pieces of gold.” (To give an English analogy, when we use the word *breakfast* today, we no longer think of how it is etymologically derived from “breaking one’s fast.”) Yet *Lalu* ponders on the literal meaning because it cushions harsh circumstances. Like young Maxine, *Lalu* as a child is acutely aware of her utter dispensability as a daughter. Whenever food is scarce, she worries about being sold by her parents. To allay her fear and to reassure herself of her worth, she dallies with the root meaning of *qianjin*.

Her father plays along in this delusive word game. When *Lalu* asks him whether he would dispose of her should the family starve, he pinches her cheek affectionately: “‘Of course not. Aren’t you my *qianjin*, my thousand pieces of gold?’ he asked. And he had tickled her until she had laughed, ‘Yes, yes, yes.’” (20) The father uses *qianjin* as a term of endearment promising protection, and the daughter feels reassured by the term. But it proves inadequate as a talisman against harm. When hard times strike, and a bandit seizes *Lalu* in her father’s presence, the father sacrifices his daughter for two bags of seed. *Lalu* registers her sense of betrayal:

He [the bandit] threw a bag in front of *Lalu*’s father. It burst, scattering soybeans.

Lalu stared at her father, willing him not to pick them up. He reached out, hesitated, then looked up at *Lalu*, his eyes pleading for understanding. She twisted her face away, a sob strangling in her throat. Behind her, she heard him snatch the bag and scoop up the spilled seed.

“Two bags,” her father begged. “She’s worth two bags of seed.” (50)

To hear such belittlement from her own father is bad enough, but *Lalu* is to face worse denigration. In the camp of the bandits she becomes a “prize” to be circulated (66). The bandits draw lots to decide who will be the first to rape her, and all the fifty men would have got their turns had not soldiers raided the camp, forcing the bandits to flee. Chen, the bandit chief, then decides to sell *Lalu* in Shanghai. On their way the bandits constantly insult her, as though she were mere freight.

“The whore will ride with me,” Chen said.

Ding [another bandit] jerked Lalu toward him. “Save yourself the discomfort,” he said obsequiously. “I’ll make sure our little bag of gold doesn’t get lost.”

“Or damaged!” Chen warned, laughing. (68)

Lalu is then taken to a Shanghai brothel, where Chen and the Madam of the brothel haggle endlessly over her price:

. . . the Madam said, “Twenty thousand.”

“Seventy thousand,” Chen countered.

“Twenty-five thousand.”

“Sixty thousand.”

“As you said yourself, there is a famine in the North. Soon girls like this one will be sold for three or four thousand cash, perhaps even a single bag of seed,” the Madam said.

“Fifty thousand.”

“Thirty thousand. That’s my last offer.”

Chen released Lalu. “All right, but I might as well be giving her away.” (84)

The literal meaning of *qianjin* turns out to be an outrageous lie as well as a devastating statement of fact: a lie because the father, when in distress, thinks that two bags of seed are as good as a daughter; a statement because *qianjin* betokens Lalu’s value as merchandise. Lalu’s worth is reckoned only commercially.

A similar passage appears in *The Woman Warrior*, where Brave Orchid, Maxine’s mother, bargains over a slave girl in China (95). Though Maxine herself is never put on sale, as a daughter she too suffers from insecurity, especially when she hears her mother describe how slave girls are sold in Chinese marketplaces along with fish and cattle. Brave Orchid boasts how she once bought a clever slave girl at a low price through her expertise in bargaining. The mother’s account of the happy purchase fills Maxine with both fear and envy. She fears that her parents will sell her in China (116), but she envies the clever slave girl. “My mother’s enthusiasm for me is duller than for the slave girl” (96), Maxine reflects, with withering irony. She keeps comparing herself with the slave, trying desperately to assess her own worth—in precise monetary terms. She asks her mother,

“How much money did you pay to buy her?”

“One hundred and eighty dollars.”

“How much money did you pay the doctor and the hospital when I was born?”

“Two hundred dollars.”

“Oh.”

“That’s two hundred dollars American money.”

“Was the one hundred and eighty dollars American money?”

“Fifty dollars. That’s because she was sixteen years old. . . . Babies were free. During the war, though, when you were born, many people gave older girls away for free. And here I was in the United States paying two hundred dollars for you.” (97–98)

The mother’s answer only increases the daughter’s anxiety. But such incessant reminders of worthlessness eventually provoke Maxine to remake herself in the image of the cherished warrior.

Seeking reassurance from childhood projections, the two protagonists begin to generate new selves. The projections, as it were, sharpen into distinct and separate identities; from being shadows cast by insecurity, under which the protagonists seek solace and protection, they come to reflect courage and ambition. Maxine develops into a powerful writer who fights with her pen; Lalu turns into an audacious pioneer who shines in the community. In each instance an imaginary self crystallizes into a solid self-image.

Maxine never becomes a warrior in the traditional sense. She excels not in martial arts but in the art of storytelling—the art of “talk-story” (as the Chinese and Hawaiians call it). Her power resides in words. Because English is her second language, however, her apprenticeship as a writer is no less taxing than that of the legendary warrior. As a child Maxine is regarded by her American school teachers as having zero IQ, for she has difficulty expressing herself in class, in speech or on paper. She recalls:

The teachers called my parents to school, and I saw they had been saving my pictures, curling and cracking, all alike and black. The teachers pointed to the pictures and looked serious, talked seriously too, but my parents did not understand. (“The parents and teachers of criminals were executed,” said my father.) (192)

In her young mind, the inability to express herself is tantamount to a crime. Maxine sees herself as a criminal and fears that her parents will be executed because of her silence, with the identical black pictures presented by her teachers as incriminating evidence. But while seeming “dumb” to her teachers in all senses of the word, Maxine is acutely aware of the discrepancy between her outward reserve and her exuberance within. Judged as a retarded pupil, she longs to vindicate herself.

Her description of the incident is itself the vindication. The first-

person narrator describes her speech impediment eloquently. Even as we are reading about her childhood ordeal we are witnessing her adult achievement. Yet how does an inarticulate child come to express herself so felicitously at the end? One senses that the vision of the legendary warrior spurs her on throughout the painful process of breaking silence. Her training is no less strenuous than that undergone by the military warrior, and her achievement no less heroic. For someone besieged by silence, self-expression is a heroic act, a breakthrough into verbal power.

Throughout *The Woman Warrior* Maxine stresses the power of words to subdue and to redress, to punish and to liberate. Words can subdue: "There is a Chinese word for the female *I*—which is 'slave.' Break the women with their own tongues!" (56). But words can also redress: the Chinese ideographs for revenge literally mean to "report a crime" (63). To report, to express in writing the injustices done to her as a woman is Maxine's way of fighting back, of being a warrior. Withholding words, on the other hand, is a form of punishment, as evident in the first chapter of the book, entitled "No Name Woman." The punishment the family imposes on the adulterous aunt is the taking away of her name; no one is allowed to mention it in the family.²

In venturing to "name the unspeakable"—to describe the experience of the wayward aunt—Maxine at once sanctions her aunt's defiance and announces her own ambition. The aunt is punished for giving birth to an illegitimate child. Maxine is engaging in another form of forbidden creativity. Her book begins with the mother's stern warning, "You must not tell anyone . . . what I am about to tell you" (3). In choosing to tell the story, Maxine not only reclaims her aunt but also asserts her own right to create and communicate. Banished from family records, the aunt is restored in the book of her niece. But in restituting her aunt, the writer also helps herself: recreating her aunt's story enables Maxine to free herself from her parents' countless taboos and give rein to her own creativity.

Names—notably *qianjin*, the *name* for daughter—also play a significant part in *Thousand Pieces of Gold*. *Qianjin*, as noted earlier, marks Lalu's ironical descent in status, from a precious daughter to an exchange commodity. Eventually the term will acquire a new, and positive, meaning. But first, like Maxine, Lalu must suffer protracted humiliation and self-deprecation. Tossed back and forth as an object of barter, she begins to see herself in mercenary terms. When the Madam in the Shanghai brothel tells Lalu that she will be sold again, this time in America, where gold is said to be everywhere, Lalu rejoices at the prospect:

Hugging herself inwardly, [Lalu] had pictured her parents' and brothers' faces when she gave her father the gold that would make him the richest man in the village. The pride they would have in her, their *qian-jin*. And she had held fast to this picture, as to a talisman. (92)

Irony runs deep in this passage. Abandoned by her parents, Lalu hugs herself, appreciating her own value. Then, the "Thousand Pieces of Gold" is sold to the "Gold Mountains"—the Chinese name for America. Finally, Lalu thinks she can vindicate her worth by bringing gold to her parents.

Beneath the irony is her desperate wish to prove that she is valuable to her parents, whom she never sees again. Nor does she acquire wealth in the Gold Mountains. The picture she entertains on her voyage to America is shattered as soon as she lands on its shore. Along with other Chinese girls, she must stand naked on an "auction block." Instead of picking pieces of gold, she herself is picked—by a customer. Her supervisor (or rather, procuress) orders:

"When the price is agreed on, the buyer will place the money in your hands. That will make the sale binding, but you will turn the money over to me."

The old woman pointed to some buckets against the wall. "There's soap and water. Wash thoroughly. You will be *stripped for auction*."

"Stripped?"

"Women in the Gold Mountains are scarcer than hen's teeth and even a plain or ugly girl has *value*. But when a man has to pay several thousand dollars for a woman, he likes to see exactly what he is *buying*." (101, my emphasis)

To be "stripped for auction" is just about the worst mortification that could befall a woman. Things get even worse when Lalu is sold to Hong King, a Chinese saloon keeper from the mining camps of Idaho. He strips Lalu of the last vestige of human dignity by taking away her name, renaming her Polly. When she protests, her new master snaps: "A slave does not choose her own name" (117). As in *The Woman Warrior*, the deprivation of one's name symbolizes an attempt to obliterate personal identity. Hong King certainly treats Polly as though she had none. He uses her occasionally to satisfy his lust but mostly to win clients. To him Polly is not a person but his capital, his property. Poetic justice is meted out when Hong King loses her (his collateral) in a wager at a poker game.

The winner is Charlie, a white suitor of Polly. But be it in bondage or in marriage she is frightened at the thought of being possessed again. She says defiantly to Charlie: "All my life I belong someone.

My father, the bandits, Hong King. And I promise myself when I free of Hong King, I belong no man, only myself.” (162)

Polly wants to be her own self, not a possession. *Qianjin*, her former title, does turn out to be a sort of talisman, guarding her integrity. From the beginning she is seen as strong and independent. She works side by side in the field with her father, ignoring her mother's enjoiner that she should be “growing sons, not vegetables” (35). At the bandit camp she repeatedly tries to escape, vowing “she would never accept the path . . . Heaven had assigned her” (73). At the Shanghai brothel she tries to ransom herself with jewelry (84). Despite repeated humiliation she clings to her self-worth and strives tenaciously for independence. In America she eventually succeeds in proving her worth—not monetary but personal. She cures sick children, restores Charlie to life after all the doctors have given up on him, and operates a farm single-handedly till her death. Her character confirms the glittering title of the book: her resilience, her will to be free, and her love for those around her attest to an inestimable worth.

Maxine and Polly sustain and refashion themselves by transforming self-indulgent fantasies into self-fulfilling visions. What remains to be noted is the remarkable distance mediated by the authors between the original inspirations from China and the actualizations in America. While the legend of the Woman Warrior and the expression *qianjin* have roots in Chinese culture, Kingston and McCunn have adapted the Chinese legend and the Chinese metaphor to life in America, evolving new models far removed from the original sources.

Kingston's protagonist differs markedly from Fa Mu Lan, though the two are construed as one in the fantasy. The traditional legend celebrates the woman warrior's filial piety. Maxine has to fight against her own parents, who keep reminding her that daughters are worthless. The legendary woman warrior conquers abroad but submits to her husband's family at home; after a triumphant battle, she returns only to kowtow to her parents-in-law. Maxine insists on being heard and respected at home as well. The author has re-dressed the Chinese heroine in American armor.

To be sure, this seeming unfiliality paradoxically expresses filial piety. The daughter's ability to talk-story has been handed down from the mother. In committing the disobedient act of telling the forbidden tale of the no name aunt, the daughter copies her mother, Brave Orchid, who has disobeyed her husband in telling her daughter about that aunt. In graphically retelling this story, Maxine pays a greater tribute to her mother than silent obedience or heroic self-sacrifice

could have. In fact, she attributes to Brave Orchid her own narrative power: "I . . . had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (24). Like the woman warrior, Maxine has brought honor to the family, not by taking her father's place in battle but by taking her mother's place in storytelling.

The narrator even adopts her mother's habit of giving narratives practical implications. Brave Orchid tells stories to shape her children's character. Maxine writes, "whenever she had to warn us about life, my mother told stories" (5). The problem Maxine and her siblings face as children is to figure out how their parents' "invisible world . . . fit in solid America" (6). The adult narrator solves the problem by rearranging and reinterpreting family history and Chinese lore to shape her present American life. Hence she does not simply retell the tale of the no name aunt; she turns the delinquent into a "forerunner" (9) of her own rebellious self. Nor does Kingston simply pass down the Chinese story of Fa Mu Lan; she conflates this legend with that of Yue Fei, a male warrior, whose mother carves words on his back before he leaves for battle. By thus taking liberties with Chinese myths, Kingston forges a close parallel between the woman warrior and Maxine: "The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. . . . What we have in common are the words at our backs. . . . The reporting is the vengeance—not the beheading, not the gutting, but the words." (62–63)

The author has turned the Chinese swordswoman into an American word-slinger. No matter how heroic a female in male armor may seem, she still defines herself by conforming to the masculine code of behavior and colluding in the use of physical violence. Maxine, despite her fantasy of military prowess, chooses to avenge herself by "reporting" instead. In projecting a self who prevails through words rather than through physical violence, Kingston not only redefines heroism but revises the American stereotype of the quiet and submissive Oriental woman.

Just as Kingston reconstructs the story of the Chinese Woman Warrior to allow for a different kind of heroism, so McCunn converts *qianjin* into another sort of value. The term in its conventional sense of a precious daughter can also insinuate a spoiled, oversheltered, and all-too-exquisite child. (In feudal China, a daughter in a rich family has bound feet, stays indoors perpetually, and is spared all manual labor.) This image of *qianjin* is perhaps what gives rise to the American stereotype of the dainty Chinese doll. But McCunn's protagonist unbinds her feet to work on the farm, traverses mountainous roads to

run away from bandits, and endures sweltering temperatures on her voyage to America. In the wild west she braves cold and heat, digging a ditch in heavy snow and rescuing her lover from a raging fire. Struggling for survival against the natural elements of the Western frontier, she is anything but a *qianjin* in the traditional sense of the word. Yet because she does what no sheltered Chinese daughter did or could, she is, McCunn implies, precisely worth her weight in gold.

To assume that Kingston and McCunn are merely transplanting their Chinese inheritance in the American context underestimates the subversive power of their narratives, which challenge—through both form and content—the traditional dismissal of Chinese women. Each author has chronicled the life of a woman who is devalued as a child but who is later able to forge her own destiny. The act of writing an autobiography or a biographical novel about such a person turns her into a noteworthy heroine and commits her to public memory. Departing sharply from both conventional Chinese models and prevailing American stereotypes, the adult Maxine and Lalu are self-made Chinese American women.

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NOTES

1. While my essay assumes that each protagonist's imagination reflects the author's, I will refer to the protagonist of *The Woman Warrior* as Maxine to distinguish her from Kingston, the author. Although her book is classified as autobiography, I treat it as literature rather than as nonfiction, on account of the "self-invention" mentioned earlier.
2. The aunt's verbal isolation and loss of name may be compared with what Orlando Patterson called "natal alienation"—the primary psychic burden of slaves (7). I would like to thank Professor Nancie Caraway for this suggestion.

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