IDENTITY AS A TEXTUAL EVENT: THE WOMAN WARRIOR BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

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A captivating quality of Maxine Hong Kingston's novel The Woman Warrior is the narrative energy that pervades the different episodes and binds them together. The source of this energy is neither to be found in the novel's content nor in its literary technique alone. The energy originates in the fluid conjunction and continuous displacement of form and content which allows the text to powerfully speak for itself.

While examining the traditional division of form and content in The Woman Warrior, it becomes apparent that each exhibits narrative dimensions which were traditionally reserved for the other. On the content level, Hong Kingston's Chinese background handicaps her success in American society, while her adjustments to this society alienate her from her familial and cultural ties to China. This cultural identity problem is, however, presented as an issue of form: The narrative technique itself produces the problem of identity in not reaffirming established concepts of managing reality and in diffusing and broadening the limits between structural units. In The Woman Warrior, the form of the text does not function as a vehicle for conciliation between the particular content of the text and the 'universal' order of narrative structure; instead, it is self-referential in that it produces the very theme of the narrative. Thus, the text's form provides what we normally expect from content: substance and particular information. The division of form and content and the idea of universal structures in general may, after all, be seen as a Western concept, so that the novel's theme—the problem of cultural conditioning—is as much an issue for the reader as it is for the author. Again the text's power manifests itself, here in the weakening of the division between the functional modes of author/reader.

Taking the narrative as a whole in an effort to arrive at some kind of genre categorization, The Woman Warrior may appear surprising, if not confusing, in its formal management of the subject matter. With the central issue being the author's identity, the text should be called an autobiography. In the process of reading, however, we soon notice that this choice of genre is not being sanctioned by any other features of the text. For one thing, the author does not engage in a consistent 1st person narrative but adjusts her point of view to the episode at hand, thus

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allowing the reader an unexpected breadth of perspective. Also, this autobiography does not gratify the reader’s desire for structural unity—there is no obvious temporal or causal pattern to organize the series of events into a manageable shape. Even the delineation of the main character’s individual traits seems secondary to a more or less disassociated presentation of influencing forces. And finally, there is no clear division between truth and fiction in many of the episodes—a feature unexpected in autobiography, which, after all, is expected to be telling the reader ‘what really happened.’

Collectively, the unexpected narrative features of the text lead to the conjecture that there is more at stake than “autobiography” with its limitation of subject matter. While expecting the defined shape of a ‘self’ to emerge, we witness that Hong Kingston’s ‘self’ is not being taken out of cultural context but remains interwoven with other life forces such as real or fictional people, dreams, stories and traditions. By eluding a straightforward genre categorization, The Woman Warrior again confronts us with the limitations of Western conditioning. In a sense, the author’s intercultural problems are transported to the reader who has to come to terms with a different way of managing experience.

The self-referential quality of the narrative is culturally ‘other’ for the author as well as for the reader. Again, one must be careful to avoid the notion that the narrative is a representation of this other culture—it is precisely the difference from the structuralist separation between form and content, sign and meaning, which is thematized in the text. The author’s cultural dilemma is therefore situated in the tension between the rhetorical modes of representation and of self-referentiality: the key conflict for author and reader is the formal problem of managing reality, which is revealed to be a cultural issue. In a confrontation with her mother, the author voices her confusion: “And I don’t want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won’t tell me a story and then say, ‘This is a true story,’ or, ‘This is just a story.’ I can’t tell the difference....”

Hong Kingston wants to determine whether her mother’s stories represent a truth, or whether they remain particular—stories that mean nothing beyond what they say. Here, we are reminded on Jacques Derrida’s differentiation between two kinds of interpretations:

> There are thus two interpretations of interpretations, of structure, of sign, of play. The one seeks to decipher, dreams of deciphering a truth or an origin which escapes play and the order of the sign, and which lives the necessity of interpretation as an exile. The other, which is no longer turned toward the origin,

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1. The notion of “truth” in this context refers to the traditional stance of autobiography as a genre, with the reservation that the concept of “truth” has been shown to be untenable in newer literary criticism. For a brief survey of the whole problem of “truth” in autobiography, see AUROM FLEISCHMAN, Figures of Autobiography: The Language of Self-Writing (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1983) 1-39.

affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the history of metaphysics or of ontotheology— in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.3

These two approaches toward interpretation are given a cultural dimension in *The Woman Warrior*: the search for origin seems to be symptomatic of Western thought, whereas the affirmation of play appears to be more congruent with Chinese or Eastern culture.4

Even though the author expresses her desire to connect her life to a transcendent meaning, her own narrative remains, as a whole, self-referential. She is not integrated into either culture to a degree which would enable her to represent it. At this point, the question is how to approach a narrative that eludes structural categories. In response to this question, we turn to Andrew H. Plaks' observations in his article "Towards a Critical theory of Chinese Narrative." Perhaps the most telling concept of Chinese narrative that keeps reappearing throughout Plaks' article is that of "overlapping":

Since in Chinese narrative, as in Chinese philosophy, existence is conceived of in terms of overlapping patterns of ceaseless alternation and cyclical recurrence, it follows that any attempt to mimetically reduce that experience to discrete models—mythic or geometric plots such as lend themselves to the aesthetic sense of unified narrative shape—would appear erroneous from the start.5

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4. See David Hall and Roger T. Adams, *Thinking Through Confucius* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987) 158-159: "It has been the argument of this work so far that Confucius' philosophy makes no resort to any concept of transcendence, that a systematic implication of employing an immanent vision is a commitment to explaining the world in terms of events rather than substances, and that a primary emphasis on particularity is necessarily entailed by process and immanence. Rational order prizes continuity and consistency, and eschews disjunction and novelty. By contrast, aesthetic order, with its concern for concrete particularity, is more fully realized in an event ontology in which the degree of disjunction and inconsistency that characterizes process permits a corresponding degree of creative possibilities." Also, A.C. Graham refers to this argument in *Disputers of the Tao*. *Philosophical argument in Ancient China* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Co., 1989) 30: "We conclude this section with David Hall the philosopher and Roger Ames the sinologist, who in 'Thinking Through Confucius' (1887) have proposed Confucius as a model for the post-modernist who has left behind the West's long dependence on transcendence."

In these areas of overlap lie the clues for an understanding of Chinese narrative, which is striving to present a broader picture of existence. This presents a strong contrast to Western thought, where we approach understanding through an analytic process of singling out and defining separate models of existence.

In the description of human character, Chinese narrative engages in a broadening of perspective as such: "That is, the individual takes on a sense of integrity as a unit only when set in the integral context of other individuals." This notion of personality leads back to The Woman Warrior, where the author derives her sense of self within a nexus of women who influenced her. The lives of these women organize the book into five chapters. The titles of the chapters reflect not the characters of these women—which would be a representation—but name that part of their lives which is also a part of the author.

Chinese womanhood serves as the thematic backdrop to which all the different characters, including the author, are tied. Within this broad background, there is one missing link: the author does not outline her own position within it. For one thing, she does not mention her name or describe her physical features. Also, she lacks a defined rank within her family, since she grows up believing that her oldest brother and sister died in China, a story later repudiated by her mother. As a result, she grows up with the responsibilities of the oldest living child but is denied the respect of the title "oldest sister." Altogether, the exterior delineations of her identity are missing, which in effect increases the reader's awareness of the fluidity and the interpersonal as well as situational dependence of her 'character.'

The story of "No Name Woman"—the aunt who drowned herself and her baby because she had broken the social laws of her village through adultery—holds a strong emotional grip on the author: the fear of developing a feminine individuality which may result in social rejection and "non-existence." Incidentally, the author remains a no-name woman within the novel, which indicates the identity between Hong Kingston and her aunt in their struggle with social integration within Chinese upbringing. The story's effect on the author exposes the cultural paradox of her situation: fear of feminine identity on the

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6. Id., "..., thus directing the readers' attention away from the linear sequentiality and mimetic specificity of the narrated details, and towards the sort of broader issues of human existence which are usually associated with historical writing." 328.

7. Id. at 344. The same argument is made by Stephen W. Durrant in his article on Ssu-Ma Ch'ien: "The selfhood of Ssu-Ma Ch'ien constantly eludes us as it slips into the patterns and precedents of the past. There is very little sense of individuality here, little assertion of uniqueness. ... Ssu-Ma defines his existence not in substance, some inner core of private and personal meaning, but in a series of relationships to a tradition." STEPHEN W. DURRANT, "Self as the Intersection of Traditions: The Autobiographical Writings of Ssu-Ma Ch'ien," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106.1 (1986): 39.

8. Hong Kingston, 5.
Chinese side, social pressure to become "American-pretty" on the other side. At the time of narration, however, Hong Kingston rejects the relevance of Chinese customs by 'telling the secret' and by writing her aunt back into existence.

Hong Kingston's mother tells the story in a matter-of-fact way, because "she tested our strength in establishing realities." Hong Kingston, on the other hand, goes beyond the 'realities' by creating a fictional description of her aunt and of the circumstances leading to her death, probably in an effort to understand why it happened. 

By creating a story literally to 'come to terms' with the facts, she breaks the self-referentiality of her mother's narrative and makes it representational: she shapes her aunt into a tragic heroine. However, the idea of a human model in general and the notion of a 'tragic character' in particular are typical Western narrative categories. What we have here is therefore not only the emotional struggle of dealing with conflicting social pressures, but a fundamental difference in approaching an understanding of the world in general which is reflected in the way mother versus daughter handle this particular narrative. This difference is addressed early in the text:

The emigrants confused the gods by diverting their curses, misleading them with crooked streets and false names. They must try to confuse their offspring as well, who, I suppose, threaten them in similar ways always trying to get things straight, always trying to name the unspeakable... Chinese-Americans, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to poverty, insanities, from what is Chinese?

It is precisely the author's wish to "separate" that throws her into this cultural dilemma.

Fa Mu Lan, the heroic swordswoman described in the chapter "White Tigers," cannot be shaped into a model that fits into American experience. She is characterised by her actions only, not by the play of possible expressions of a deeper character. Hence, the way Hong Kingston makes her a part of her life is not by seeing her as an 'example' but as an object of identification. (At the beginning of the story, the reader knows that it is played through in the author's imagi-
nation by the narrative use of the conditional "would:" "I would be a little girl of seven the day I followed the bird away into the mountains." Soon, however, the narrative position changes into indicative, showing how completely the author has internalized the story.)

Through identification with Fa Mu Lan, Hong Kingston creates a psychological reality that allows her to live a separate, contrasting existence to her normal life. The legendary swords woman's life contains all elements of happiness that are missing in her own life. As an imaginary swords woman, Hong Kingston feels loved and respected like a male hero. Even the swords woman has to 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." In her real life, Hong Kingston tries to be successful yet is unable to earn her parents' love:

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. That was for my brother, who returned alive from Vietnam.

As a consequence of this discrimination, Hong Kingston does not try to assimilate feminine qualities. She wants to remain a "bad girl," because a "bad girl is almost a boy." Again, this story's influence throws the author into a conflict of cultural expectations, causing her to strive for quasi-male attributes while wishing for a date: "And all the time I had to turn myself American-feminine, or no dates."

The author's life is very different from that of the swords woman, yet there is an important area of overlap between them:

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

The swords woman and Hong Kingston are both heroic in that they defy male domination and oppression, tyrannical barons in one case, familial and cultural oppression in the other case. The chapter about Fa Mu Lan is called "White Tigers" - on the mountain of the "White Tigers," Fa Mu Lan passes her survival test. Similarly, Hong Kingston's narrative is an expression of her survival as an individual. While Fa Mu

13. Ibid., 10.
14. Ibid., 46.
15. Ibid., 56.
16. Ibid., 56.
17. Ibid., 63.
Lan's words fit on her back, Hong Kingston has so many Chinese and American concepts to contend with that they burst the seams of a defined identity. *The Woman Warrior* is the release of this overflow, an acknowledgement of the dilemmas that characterize her life, resulting not in the representation of a separate identity, but in a manifestation of a self that is based on connections with other forms of existence.  

In the story about Brave Orchid, the author's mother, the two described levels of cultural conflict are merged into one prominent issue: the notion of reality. Brave Orchid juxtaposes her Chinese past, her 'real life,' with her American life, which in comparison appears as a kind of insignificant, mechanical existence. In China, Brave Orchid was a powerful woman, a "Shaman," an admired healer and midwife. She lived in complete harmony with Chinese traditions, knew the stories, chants, legends and superstitions of her culture. Her self was securely centered within these traditions, which constitutes a strong contrast to the author. In China, the centering of spirit was achieved by pulling the person's earlobes while chanting her descent line—names of relatives and friends. Being reassured of this place within the descent line resulted in a reassurance of identity. Hong Kingston recalls this experience: "When my mother led us out of nightmares and horror movies, I felt loved. I felt safe hearing my name sung with her's and my father's, my brothers' and sisters', her anger at children who hurt themselves surprisingly gone." This is the only occasion in the text where the author feels loved. It appears that she is loved for the space she occupies within her family and that her identity is defined by her belonging to others. In China, this place and this belonging constitute identity to a large extend. The author, on the other hand, grows up in America, where she is culturally conditioned to define her identity from within and to be loved for 'who she is.'

Brave Orchid did not change her name in America. Neither does she adapt to American culture. She persistently maintains her Chinese vision of the world and refuses to accept American reality. Americans are "ghosts," but she does not have the power over them that she had over Chinese ghosts. Even the physical world is not real to her: "Someday, very soon, we're going home, where there are Han people everywhere. We'll buy furniture then, real tables and chairs. You children will smell flowers for the first time." The author grows up with the notion of living in a ghost country, while this ghost country is the only reality she knows. Brave Orchid even calls her own daughter "ghost-like" because of her American traits. At the same time, the author

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18. Francis L. K. Hsu describes the contrast between Chinese and American culture as such: "We have hypothesized that the Chinese have a situation-centered way of life while that of Americans is individual-centered." FRANCIS L. K. HSU, *Americans & Chinese. Passage to Difference*, 3rd ed. (Honolulu: The U. Press of Hawaii, 1981) 17.
19. Hong Kingston, 89.
20. Ibid., 115.
21. Ibid., 213.
must develop her personality in America, so that her self-assertion in
the one world is cause for criticism from the other, and vice versa. ("My
American life has been such a disappointment. I got straight A's,
Mama.'—'Let me tell you a story about a girl who saved her village.'
"I felt sick already. She'd make me swing stinky censers around the
counter, at the druggist, at the customers. Throw dog blood on the
druggist. I couldn't stand her plans.")

With her narrative, Hong Kingston performs a kind of "Shamanism"
herself, in an effort to contend against the "ghosts" of her own
subjective reality. Through the rhetorical process of shaping her
disturbing experiences into narrateble episodes, she assumes an au-
thority over them. As narrative episodes, the experiences become rela-
tive to each other and lose their "capricious force," to use Leroy Searle's
term.

Moon Orchid, on the other hand, has no defense against the "ghosts." Brave Orchid's sister who comes to America as an old woman
experiences the destructive effect that cultural uprooting can have on
an individual. Moon Orchid is too old and too weak to adjust to the new
culture. Her world collapses when she learns that Chinese traditions
are no longer relevant for her life. The most painful experience for Moon
Orchid is to be rejected by her Chinese husband, who now is living a
life completely separated from her world. She cannot relate to Brave
Orchid's children, marvelling at their un-Chinese behaviour. Despite
Brave Orchid's efforts to strengthen her sister's spirit, Moon Orchid's
identity crumbles slowly until she feels continually haunted by ghosts.
The title of the episode again reveals what Hong Kingston has in com-
mon with this character: they are both "At the Western Palace," not 'in
the West.' The image of a "Western Palace" evokes the notion of an ex-
ocic building held up by Eastern soil—a place one visits, not a place to
live.

The final chapter "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe" presents the
author's maturation and, ultimately, her liberation from a cultural

22. Ibid., 54.
23. Ibid., 197.
24. "...we need literature and art in a very practical way, as a space in
which to think and reflect and feel, without immediate peril, not least of all
to determine and to judge what we desire and what we need to live to the fullness
of our powers and not merely to their limits. To be excluded from that space is
to be rendered powerless and made subject to a disabling anxiety, precisely
because one cannot not ask 'why,' cannot not resent the unfairness of
unexplained detail. It is the primitive clarity of our response to injustice that we
may postulate what is perhaps the most important element of our common
humanity: the desire not to be hurt, not to be subject to capricious force, to be
valued or cared for and acknowledged, simply for living." 863-864. LEROY
SEARLE, "Afterword: Criticism and the Claims of Reason," Critical Theory Since
1965, eds. Hazard Adams and Leroy Searle (Tallahassee: Florida State U. P.,
1986) 856-872. See also Paul John Eakin's article about The Woman Warrior
for a detailed analysis of Hong-Kingston's becoming of self through language.
PAUL JOHN EAKIN, Fictions in Autobiography. Studies in the Art of Self-Invention
dilemma so destructive to her happiness. It is a story of developing American self-assertion in spite of her Chinese self. "There is a Chinese word for the female I—which is 'slave.'" Hong Kingston refuses to become a slave but does not have a chance of becoming a swordsman. In her dilemma she is afraid to become crazy: "I thought every house had to have its crazy woman or crazy girl, every village its idiot. Who would it be at our house? Probably me." Again, she is saved by language, which gives her the power to unveil the confusion in her life and to explain herself: "Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves." Her quest for identity is therefore manifested in her quest for self-expression in language, which is also revealed in her voice:

At times shaking my head is more self-assertion than I can manage. Most of us eventually found some voice, however faltering. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality, except for that one girl who could not speak even in Chinese school.

During the first two schoolyears, the Hong Kingston does not talk; later, her interior insecurity is revealed in what she contemptedly calls her "pressed-duck" voice.

As a schoolgirl, Hong Kingston feels more comfortable in Chinese school. There she feels safe within the group, not having to perform as an individual: "There we chanted together, voices rising and falling, loud and soft, some boys shouting, everybody reading together, reciting together and not alone with one voice." This choral chant brings back the notion of overlapping: the merging of voices constitutes the chant, parallel to the merging of lives that constitutes human existence. Hong Kingston's typically Chinese lack of self-assertion results in embarrassment in her American life, causing her to be angry about Chinese shyness. Her struggle with self-assertion culminates in an outburst of anger, in which she torments a little girl who never talks. This little girl, as the target for self-projection, becomes the object of release for Hong Kingston's anger. By trying to force her into speaking, the author seeks to overcome her own shyness. Shortly after this scene, she falls into a long, probably psychosomatic illness which she enjoys as a way of withdrawing from the world.

In an effort to come to terms with herself, the author seeks her mother's help. She wants to reveal her list of 200 items, made up of fears, painful memories, and confusing experiences: "If I could only let my mother know the list, she—and the world—would become more like

25. Hong Kingston, 56.
26. Ibid., 220.
27. Ibid., 216.
28. Ibid., 200.
29. Ibid., 194.
me, and I would never be alone again." Her mother refuses to listen, leaving her isolated in loneliness. As a result, her interior struggle worsens into a physical pain: "I shut my mouth, but I felt something alive tearing at my throat, bite by bite, from the inside." At the same time of this rejection, Hong Kingston is confronted with her family's obvious disrespect for her feelings: they allow a retarded boy to follow her around while searching for a possible husband. Now, the author faces the most important choice of her life: if she remains within Chinese domination, she will be married off to an immigrant or worse, besides living with an interior struggle which is driving her crazy; if she breaks away from her family, she has to survive in American society on her own, without the security of familial protection. Her parents' disrespect finally makes her choice clear. She explodes in a dramatic act of self assertion, rejecting her mother's dominance, blaming her family for lack of love and consideration, and exposing her talents and successes. She demands to be granted human dignity:

I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I'm nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won't let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here.

The narrative ends on a positive note. Hong Kingston tells another story of a Chinese woman, the poet T'sai Yen. It is a story that her mother began and that she finishes in her own narrative. The story of T'sai Yen is an analogy to the author's story: T'sai Yen feels emotionally tormented by the sounds of barbarian flutes she hears in her captivity. When she can stand it no longer, she uses her Chinese voice to sing along in harmony. It is a song that Chinese and barbarians can understand equally well, even though it does not represent either culture. It is also Hong Kingston's quest to find a voice. Just as for T'sai Yen, Hong Kingston's voice is brought about by emotional torment in a search for harmony—her voice is The Woman Warrior, speaking only for herself, yet understandable for everyone through its expressive power.

The question remains whether Maxine Hong Kingston arrives at some kind of reconciliation between the two cultural influences inside of her, which, judging strictly from the basis of Plaks' article, are profoundly different, even opposite in their strategies for approaching truth. Crudely simplified, one could describe the difference as an opposition between Western 'identification' and Chinese 'con-fusion.' The Woman Warrior is a 'quest for self,' which is as such a typically Western undertaking. The narrative itself, however, defies Western structures

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30. Ibid., 230.
31. Ibid., 233.
32. Ibid., 234.
33. "The defense of the substantial self so prominent in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is to be contrasted with articulations of more diffuse senses
in that it is not based on a unifying principle. It is not by following a 'main theme,' but by recognizing the connections and the relevance of diverse episodes that we arrive at an understanding of the broad picture of Hong Kingston's existence. In short, the text is the result of a Western motivation, yet employs a Chinese approach to narrative. The two cultural influences cannot be fused into a unified perspective. The powerful reality of Chinese culture in Hong Kingston's life cannot be blended into American concepts, so that her own cultural struggle is translated into a text filled with ambivalence. Still, through language Hong Kingston comes to terms with her Chinese background, revealing its emotional power to herself and to the reader. Is the author's act of revelation a conquest, similar to her mother's conquests who "...could contend against the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost because she could eat them"? 34

The text starts with the words "You must not tell anyone" and ends with "It translated well." Hong Kingston tells her own "talk-story" in a narrative that translates well for both Chinese and Western readers. Her book is like "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe"—is she herself "The Woman Warrior"? The swords woman defeats the baron, "who took away my childhood." 35 Hong Kingston's text is a vengeance for the cultural struggle so painfully felt in her own childhood: Not only was she trapped between conflicting modes of behaviour, she was also caught in a formal vacuum of how to shape her identity. Neither the Chinese option of functional, familial integration as a wife offered an acceptable solution, nor the Western expectations of self-representation as a certain 'character.' Growing up in this vacuum, she does not see the possibility of finding cultural acceptance for being her particular self.

The words in her book are the words that do not fit on her skin. Her American name "sounded like 'Ink' in Chinese." 36 Maxine Hong Kingston reveals the paradoxes in her life to the reader through the expressive power of her language. She cannot annihilate the paradoxes as such, but with language she puts them in their place outside of herself, so that The Woman Warrior can be seen as Maxine Hong Kingston's act of self-purification and liberation from their haunting presence. Through language, she creates a release for the overflow of words, making room in her mind to hold paradoxes. 37 Ultimately, it is language and the text of The Woman Warrior through which she assumes an identity. Her text, therefore, is not only a rhetorical but also an existential event.


34. Hong Kingston, 108.
35. Ibid., 52.
36. Ibid., 152.
37. This is another connection to the swordswoman: "I learned to make myself large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes." 35.
One can conclude that the text ends with the notion of a non-dialectical coexistence of opposing principles. This is counterintuitive for Western minds who are looking for a resolution of conflicting ideas in the search for truth. Thanks to the self-referential quality of the text, however, the cultural paradoxes in The Woman Warrior do not appear as a threat to the concept of truth. The displacement of form and content does not allow the readers to use either one as a representational medium, thereby compelling us to deal with the particularity of the narrative. The narrative speaks for itself, liberating both the text and its reader from the task of representing or searching for a transcendent meaning. Precisely those features of the text that counteract a clear conceptualization by the reader—its lack of formal and thematic closure, the absence of 'meaning' beyond the "play" of variation in Hong Kingston's existence—are symptomatic for what Derrida calls the "ontological' non-value" of binary oppositions such as nature/culture, content/form, signifier/signified etc. Here, the absence of the transcendental signified is revealed in Hong Kingston's unmasking of cultural limitations in conceiving and understanding reality. Being rooted in a culture which is based on connections and conjunctions rather than on essential differences, Hong Kingston finds herself unable to mask the absence of archetypal character in her account of her self. The conceptual tools for the process of masking an absence may perhaps be easier available for someone who is rooted within the Western heritage. In a way, Hong Kingston has utilized her position as a cultural outsider to a rhetorical advantage: The Woman Warrior shows that it is possible to create a text which is an 'event,' a 'presence' which is unbesieged by the authority of truth. At least, The Woman Warrior has done what Michel Foucault claims to be necessary for all discourse: "...to question our will to truth; to restore to discourse its character as an event; to abolish the sovereignty of the signifier." 

39. DERRIDA, Writing and Difference, 285.