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Talk Story: Counter-Memory in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men*

King-Kok Cheung

SUMMARY

Here the author interprets Kingston's *China Men* as a special kind of historiographic metafiction--a "revisionist" novel which counters traditional historiography with an alternative mode of telling and reimagines the past to make room for a different future. Kingston's "talk story" technique allows her, by interweaving oral and literary traditions and a polyphonic multiplicity of narratives, to fracture and subvert both Chinese patriarchal and white American authority. Like Foucault's genealogy, talk-story thus "fragments what was thought unified" by decentering, disseminating and interrogating authority. But Kingston embellishes historical data and received myths with imagined details; she mixes fact and fantasy to herald a world grounded in reciprocity rather than domination.

KEY WORDS

historiographic

talk-story

metafiction

patriarchy

oral tradition reciprocity

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China Men, though often classified as nonfiction and considered by critics as family history or ethnography, insistently defies the traditional notion of history as an authoritative account of events. What Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction"—a term she applies to novels which are "both intensely self-reflexive and yet lay claim to historical events and personages"—best describes Kingston's book. According to Hutcheon, historiographical metafiction incorporates the concerns of fiction, history, and theory: "its theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs . . . is made the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (12).

China Men calls attention to its own fictionality even as it provides us with a graphic description of Chinese American experience based on actual people and events. Its self-conscious narratives answer to what I call "provocative silences." Just as Baba's (father's) taciturnity provokes the narrator to invent his life, so the exclusion of *China Men* from white American history goads her to reconstruct what has been lost by extrapolating from the meager resources available. Yet Kingston does not adopt the methods of conventional historians who assume the voice of truth. Her imaginative reconstruction is not a faithful record but "a prophetic vision of the past" (to borrow Edouard Glissant's phrase), a vision that is profoundly entwined with the concerns of the present. The very silence that hobbles the chronicler enables Kingston—the creative writer—to dispense with time-honored au-

thority and invent a braver world.

The work is revisionist in at least two ways: it counters traditional historiography with an alternative mode of telling and it reimagines the past to make room for a different future. The first form of revision may be compared to Foucault's concept of "counter-memory." According to Foucault, "memory" is in the service of "traditional history," of knowledge as transmitted, inscribed, sanctioned, and possessing the unmerited status of "truth." Conversely, "counter-memory" resists official versions of historical continuity, "opposes history as knowledge" and unmaskes "knowledge as perspective" (160, 156). The second form of revision reflects the author's feminism and pacifism. The absence of historical information is used by Kingston as a pretext for artistic licence, allowing her to subvert patriarchal and national authority.

The distinction between historical and revisionist impulses is crucial to the interpretation of *China Men*. Kingston, I believe, is concerned not only with reclaiming a Chinese American past but also with envisioning a better future. Had she been motivated merely by her historical impulse and her sympathy for China Men whose contributions have been erased from official American history, she would have tried to make her narrative as factual as possible. Yet she deliberately resists the opposition of fact and imagination in the face of received falsehood and historical silence, and composes instead a historiographic metafiction that expresses her own political vision. She achieves "polyphony" (Bakhtin) by integrating biography and poetics, by revising Chinese myths and mythologizing American history.²

The methods by which Kingston challenges traditional historiography and projects her own worldview may be described as "talk-story." As I will demonstrate later, these strategies include rewriting ancient tales, presenting competing versions of the past, and blending fantasy and reality.

Talk-story allows her to interweave oral and literary traditions and accommodate multiple narratives as it fractures Chinese and white American authority. Like Foucault's "genealogy," this discursive mode "disturbs what was previously considered immobile," "fragments what was thought unified," and "shows the heterogeneity of what was imagined consistent with itself" (147). But unlike "genealogy," which "depends on a vast accumulation of source material" and "demands relentless erudition" (140), talk-story embellishes historical data and other source material with imagined details.

China Men repeatedly divulges the distorted representation of China Men in mainstream discourse. A sample of the domineering voice of official history is reproduced in a section titled "The Laws" (152-59). This midway section enumerates the various U.S. statutes concerned with the Chinese, from the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 to the immigration law of 1978. Most of these laws openly discriminated against Asians: "1878: . . . No 'Chinese or Mongolian or Indian' could testify in court 'either for or against a white man'. . . 1924: Any American who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; any Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship" (153, 156). With their stamp of legality, these statutes branded the Chinese as a substandard people. Kingston's sketches of China Men may not be factual, but they are surely truer than the reductive images inscribed in these merciless canons.

If Chinese were badly represented in American laws, they were absent altogether in the American annals of achievement. Ah Goong (the narrator's paternal grandfather), along with countless other China Men, worked on the transcontinental railroad in the nineteenth century. Yet not a single Chinese laborer appeared in the historic photos taken at the completion of the project: "While the demons posed for photographs, the China Men dispersed. It was dangerous to

stay. . . Ah Goong does not appear in railroad photographs" (145). The last sentence captures in succinct understatement the erasure *in toto* of China Men. Wanting visual and verbal record, these "binding and building ancestors" (146) were expelled discursively as well as physically. Their absence from American chronicles attests to the power of those who control the production of history. Kingston's imaginative rendering of the lives of her male ancestors must be read in the context of such misrepresentation and underrepresentation.

The narrator of *China Men* offers her own re-vision of the past without assuming the voice of authority. She concedes early on that much of the story of her father and grandfathers is based on fallible recollection and unverifiable evidence. She announces from the very beginning of the book, in response to Baba's silence, that her writing is purely speculative: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong" (14-15). China itself, she tells us, is purely her own construction: "I'd like to go to China if I can get a visa . . . I want to talk to Cantonese, who have always been revolutionaries, non-conformists, people with fabulous imaginations, people who invented the Gold Mountain . . . I want to compare China, a country I made up, with what country is really out there" (87).

Kingston often "talks story" by recasting Chinese and Western fables. *China Men* begins with a story about Tang Ao, which is adapted from an eighteenth-century Chinese classic, *Flowers in the Mirror*, by Li Ju-chen (c. 1763-1830). In Kingston's version Tang Ao falls captive in the Land of Women where he is brutally transformed into an Oriental courtesan. The transformation extends to etiquette: when Tang Ao speaks for the first time, an old woman threatens to sew his lips together; instead she has his ears pierced. This details figuratively foreshadows two causes of silence drama-

tized in *China Men*: the inability to speak and the inability to hear. Throughout the book we encounter Chinese Men who cannot speak as well as those who are not heard. The torture suffered by Tang Ao in a foreign land symbolizes the suppression of the China Men in the United States, where the peculiar racial discrimination they suffer is often an affront to their manhood.

In reversing masculine and feminine roles, however, the legend also defamiliarizes patriarchal practices and foregrounds the asymmetrical construction of gender. Like the author of *Flowers in the Mirror*, Kingston questions the sexual objectification of Chinese women by subjecting a Chinese man to the tortures women have endured for centuries. Her divided sympathy--rooted in her ethnic and feminist allegiances--pervades the book. Her description of the white subjugation of her Chinese fathers is often interlaced with hints at patriarchal abuse within Chinese culture.

Kingston's retelling of the legend prefigures not only the themes but also the narrative strategies of *China Men*. Her story of Tang Ao concludes as follows: "Some scholars say that [the Land of Women] was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America" (5). In transplanting a Chinese story in North America, Kingston lays bare one of her favorite strategies.

Just as Kingston turns a Chinese story into a Chinese American parable, she rewrites Western classics as Chinese legends. The most obvious example of such rewriting occurs in "The Adventures of Lo Bun Sun," a story read to the narrator by her mother from "a book from China" (224). But the story is no other than *Robinson Crusoe*, repainted with the local color of a Chinese setting. Robinson (Crusoe) becomes the title character Lo Bun Sun, who "grew beans and made tofu and bean sauce" (227); he rescues a cannibal and names him Sing Kay Ng ("Friday" in Cantonese). By changing the racial

identity and the geographical location of Daniel Defoe's story, Kingston, as David Leiweil Li observes, prompts Western readers to see Crusoe as a "protocolonizer, imposer of Western norms" (489).

Less obvious is Kingston's retelling of Ovid and Chaucer in the chapter on Bak Goong--"The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains." Bak Goong works in the sugarcane plantations of Hawaii, where Chinese laborers must observe a "rule of silence" while hacking away at the jungle. Bak Goong, who has been "fined for talking" (100), complains bitterly: "If I knew I had to take a vow of silence . . . I would have shaved off my hair and become a monk. Apparently we've taken a vow of chastity too. Nothing but roosters in this flock" (100) His remark connects the enforced silence with virtual castration.

To relieve himself and his sickly countrymen of the paralysis of repressed speech, Bak Goong tells a story about a king who longs for a son, only to beget one with cat's ears. Although the king orders everyone to keep those anomalous ears a secret, he is unable to contain it himself and shouts it into a hole in the ground. Later, the grass that grows over the spot whispers the secret in the wind. Inspired by the story, the China Men dig a gaping hole through which they loudly convey their longings and frustratrions to China. Frightened by the racket, their white bosses leave them alone. The China Men fill up the hole as soon as the "shout party" is over: "Talked out, they buried their words, planted them" (118).

Although Bak Goong's tale of the prince with cat's ears is presented as a well known Chinese legend, both this story and the description of the China Men's insurgence are in fact drawn from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. In Book IX of *Metamorphoses*, King Midas disputes the decision of a music contest in which Apollo's music has been judged superior to Pan's. Not allowing "ears so dull to keep their human form" (133), Apollo punishes the king by turning his ears into those of an ass.

King Midas is so ashamed that he covers them with a turban. His shame is known only to his personal barber, who, unable to keep quiet, utters the secret into a hole. "But a thick growth of whispering reeds began to spring up there, and these, when at the year's end they came to their full size, betrayed the sower, for stirred by the gentle breeze, they repeated his buried words and exposed the story of his master's ears" (133). This story is retold by Chaucer's Wife of Bath in *Canterbury Tales* (ll. 952-82). According to the Wife of Bath it is King Midas's wife, rather than his barber, who betrays the secret. Chaucer's version suggests that women are inveterate blabbers.

Kingston transforms the story of King Midas into a Chinese folktale and an episode in Chinese American history to highlight her own themes. The king's longing for a son in the folktale parallels the yearning of the China Men, who are separated from their loved ones in China and prevented by American exclusion and antimiscegenation laws from creating new families. Bak Goong's connection between silence and sexual deprivation suggests that the hole into which these men pour their words may be read metaphorically as an outlet for their pent-up sexual desires.

More important, the hole is an aural receptacle: "They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets" (117). The description echoes the dual motifs of listening (ears) and talking (lips) introduced in the Tang Ao legend. Recalling that King Midas gets his ass's ears as a punishment for dull hearing, we may read the story on another symbolic level--as an indictment of historians who are deaf to the contributions of China Men. The ears of these historians are plugged the way the "ear into the world" is eventually filled with soil. No matter how loudly China Men speak through their labor, their exploits remain uncredited. Their words are buried deep underground, and their contributions consigned to oblivion. The narrator is determined to "make up"

for these glaring omissions. The chapter on Bak Goong ends on an incantatory note that closely echoes the conclusion of Ovid's tale: over the spot inseminated with words "the new green shoots would rise, and when in two years the cane grew gold tassels, what stories the wind would tell" (118). The narrator implies that the secrets about China Men, though hidden deep in American land, will some day be out.

Indeed, these stories have already been harvested by the narrator, the great-granddaughter: "I have gone . . . as far as Hawaii . . . and listened for the voices of the great grandfathers . . . I have heard the land sing" (88, 90). While this remark implicitly distinguishes the narrator from those deaf historians, it also reveals her vivid story of her great-grand-father as being not factual but ancestrally inspired.

The inspiration carries a feminist edge. Kingston's retelling, I believe, reflects not only upon Ovid's story but also upon Chaucer's, in which it is King Midas's wife who leaks the secret, thereby violating the rule of female silence. Through this tale Chaucer insinuates that women are notorious gossips who must not be trusted with secrets. Kingston, by contrast, makes us see that silence--considered a feminine virtue in many cultures--is in fact no easier for women to maintain than for men. Her feminist message is brought home indirectly in the two brief sections that immediately follow the chapter on Bak Goong--titled respectively "On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again."

Both of these sections impute the loss of human immortality to the inability to keep quiet. In "On Mortality," Tu Tzu-chun is asked by a Taoist monk to observe the rule of silence no matter what he sees in his hallucinatory state so that the monk can prepare an elixir. Tu succeeds in refraining from speech as he watches his wife and himself being tortured; after being reincarnated as a mute woman, however, Tu screams when her husband tries to wound their son. Because

Tu breaks the rule, humankind is forever subject to mortality.³ The same theme recurs in "On Mortality Again." Maui the Trickster has almost succeeded in stealing from Hina of the Night the heart that would bestow immortality on men and women "when a bird, at the sight of his legs wiggling out of [her] vagina, laughed" (122). The laughter awakes Hina, who kills Maui by "shutting" herself.

In these two folktales speech ushers in mortality; "a ready tongue is an evil," as suggested in a Chinese saying quoted in *The Woman Warrior*. Yet talk is shown to be therapeutic for the plantation workers in Hawaii, among whom the rule of silence causes a sickness unto death. By putting the three segments side by side, Kingston debunks the patriarchal fables that dictate oral abstinence—whether in men or in women. Bak Goong's story brings out the sexual asymmetry in Tu's story; like the myth of Tang Ao, it defamiliarizes patriarchal mores by causing a man to feel what many women have felt. The reincarnated (female) Tu is at first complimented by her prospective husband for being literally dumb: "Why does she need to talk . . . to be a good wife? Let her set an example for women" (121).⁴ Men such as Tang Ao, Tu, and Bak Goong, all of whom have been put in women's shoes, know that silence is no less painful and talk no less essential for women than it is for the great-grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains.

In fact, Kingston discloses in an interview that most of the stories in *China Men* are derived from women's talk-story: "Without the female storyteller, I couldn't have gotten into some of the stories Many of the men's stories were ones I originally heard from women" (cited in Kim 208). The work thus pays covert tribute to the talkative women who have been instrumental in Kingston's reconstruction of the past. The women's words, refashioned by the author, ensure the immortality of her Chinese American ancestors.

By interweaving and transposing Western and Chinese

tales, Kingston confounds readers who look for exotic Chinese legends and customs in works by Chinese Americans. She has indicated repeatedly that she wishes to "claim America" for Chinese Americans in *China Men*. By rewriting Ovid, Chaucer, and Defoe, Kingston at once claims the Western classics as part of her Chinese American heritage and defies classical authority. But her method has aroused considerable furor among some critics. Although the use of literary allusion and the remolding of ancient material is a well-established practice, Kingston has come under fire for tampering with her sources. The charges range from bastardization of Chinese folktales to downright plagiarism. Evidently, such writers as James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Christa Wolf are free to refashion ancient material because most readers are familiar with the classics and the Bible. Since many American readers are unfamiliar with Chinese legends, Kingston is allegedly guilty of misleading those readers who, in all innocence, will mistake the retelling for the original. This double standard privileges Euro-American writers and readers. A writer's imagination should not be circumscribed by the limited scope of potential readers' backgrounds. Scholars and critics must assume the responsibility for identifying the plethora of allusions in Kingston's texts as well as her more esoteric references.

Reverence for ancient authority, generic purity, and East-West dichotomy is especially alien to Kingston, who consciously violates conventional boundaries. Her strategy of Americanizing Chinese tales and Sinicizing Euro-American ones is innovative and uniquely Chinese American. But there are literary precedents for embroidering historical sources in both American and Chinese literary traditions, in William Carlos Williams's *in the American Grain*--to which *China Men* is an acknowledged sequel (Pfaff 25)--as well as in Lo Kuan-chung's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Such mixing of codes--which exemplifies cultural interplay at its friskiest--

requires considerable knowledge and ingenuity. If John Milton has been venerated for his erudite allusions and admired for his seamless adaptation of classical and biblical source material, an author who can manipulate two even more disparate literary traditions should not be discredited in the name of "cultural authenticity."

Recasting traditional stories is only one method of talk-story. Another way by which Kingston recreates the past is to present multiple, often mutually exclusive versions of ancestral adventures. Given her father's reserve and occluded minority history, invention is the narrator's obvious recourse. But the author also uses these silences as a pre-text for turning a family history into a collective Chinese American "epic" (Sledge). For instance, she offers two entirely different versions of her father's arrival in America. In the illegal version, her father smuggles himself into New York Harbor inside a wooden crate. The vivid account ends, however, with a refutation: "Of course, my father could not have come that way" (53). In the legal version, the father is detained indefinitely in the immigration station on Angel Island, where he inscribes a poem on the wall urging his compatriots to hold on to their "Gold Mountain dreams." (Many such poems were indeed inscribed on the walls in the Angel Island detention camp.) By imagining the various ways a man like her father sought entry into the United States, Kingston extends the parameters of family history to encompass the experiences of diverse China Men. Using honorific titles such as "father," "grandfather," and "great-grandfather" instead of individual names, the narrator transforms individual family members into archetypes. Together the two versions of the father's entry to America signify the inhuman treatment accorded to China Men to deter them from immigrating. The multiple versions allow for a fuller picture of the historical situation than any single factual account can provide.

Such multiple telling has the further advantage of

approximating the oral tradition. According to Kingston, "The oral stories change from telling to telling. It changes according to the needs of the listener, according to the needs of the day, the interest of the time, so that the story can be different from day to day. . . . Writing is static. . . . What would be wonderful would be for the words to change on the page every time, but they can't. The way I tried to solve this problem was to keep ambiguity in the writing all the time" (Islas 18). Yet I believe the author does more than replicate the oral tradition: even as she claims its methodology she subverts it through writing. No matter how malleable the oral tradition, at any given moment only one account can occur. In the narrator's retelling of the father's entry, however, contradictory versions exist side by side. Tapping both oral and literary traditions, Kingston's talk-story challenges the authority of both.

Finally, talk-story allows a shift into pure fantasy, as in Bak Goong's pipe dream. On the rough voyage from China to Hawaii, Bak Goong takes opium to relieve his boredom, nausea, and nostalgia. In his ensuing vision, he feels affiliated with everyone and everything: "Men build bridges and streets when there is already an amazing gold electric ring connecting every living being as surely as if we held hands, flippers and paws, feelers and wings. . . . Even the demons abovedeck let out a glow" (95). This dream is thrice removed from reality and triply illusory, being a drug-induced hallucination, a fantasy that contrasts sharply with the grim reality in America, and an imaginative reconstruction by the narrator. Yet it effectively presents a utopian vision that resonates with the author's own pacifist world view.

As this example suggests, Kingston's impulse to retrieve China Men from historical oblivion is offset by an equally strong desire to project an alternative world untrammelled by the oppressive rules of society. If her genealogical compulsion propels her toward accurate representation, her revisionist

impulse leads her to project her own dreams onto her forerunners. Kingston uses fantasy the way other women writers use science fiction, historical romance, or utopian novels, for a "visualization of the world as it could be" (DuPlessis 179).

Just as the stories of *China Women* and *China Men* must be "heard" by the acquisitive narrator before they are retold, talk-story--both as a strategy and as a tradition--is predicated upon the attention of listeners. *China Men* thus concludes appropriately with the section "On Listening," in which the narrator, obsessed with (feminist) self-expression in *The Woman Warrior*, stresses here the equal importance of listening to the voices of others/Others. At a party she is told sundry stories about her Chinese ancestors' quests for the Gold Mountain, set variously in the Philippines, Mexico, and Spain. When the narrator (who admits that she has not heard these stories before) raises questions about a particular legend, the storyteller promises to send the answers to her. "Good," she thinks to herself, and ends with a possibly hortative comment to her own audience: "Now I could watch the young men who listen" (308).

The idea of listening, like that of translating at the conclusion of *The Woman Warrior*, abounds in interpretive possibilities. Both translating and listening presuppose that there is more than one language, more than one story. The ending of *The China Men*, which presents multiple versions of the Gold Mountain story, recapitulates the subversive strategy of the author, who has been challenging official, authoritative historiography all along. It further dismantles the notion of a unified narrative and deconstructs itself as an authoritative, cohesive, or complete text. Against the tradition of the virtually omniscient historian, the author reveals the limits of her knowledge and memory. Against the tradition of "dictating" history, the author talks stories about her ancestors and offers competing versions of their experience without legitimiz-

ing any particular one. Against the tradition of occluding marginalized voices, the author encourages extensive listening to stories still being told and as yet unrecorded.

China Men reveals the Chinese American author's conscious self-fashioning. Though bilingual and bicultural, Kingston does not set out to replicate traditional sources and master-narratives. She reinvents the past—not by reappropriating but by decentering, disseminating, and interrogating authority. Resisting patriarchal forces at work in both Anglo-American and Chinese American cultures, she (de)claims an open-ended Chinese American tradition. She does so neither by choosing one heritage over the other, nor by simply mixing the two. She reinstates herself in both traditions by recasting both Asian and Western myths, thereby exorcising ancient authorities and freeing herself (and her readers) from their patriarchal or colonial grip. She mixes fact and fantasy to herald a world grounded in reciprocity rather than in domination. Her talk-story gives voice to those who are made invisible by patriarchy, by racism, and by history.

By a twist of history, Kingston is currently one of the most widely read living authors in American colleges and universities. It is as though the words planted by the *China Men* have finally taken root in America, and secrets buried long ago are now heard everywhere in the wind.

Notes

¹ See my chapter on Kingston in *Articulate Silences*, 100-125. This paper recapitulates and elaborates on some of the ideas presented in that chapter.

² In arguing that *China Men* interrogates historical authority, I do not mean to suggest that all history is fiction by virtue of being human constructs, as Hayden White asserts, or to downplay the contribution of scholars who have excavated Chinese American history through painstaking research. Rather, I believe that *China*

Men prompts us to rethink history, to see it as dependent upon multiple narratives rather than on a unified and continuous account.

³ This story is based on a Chinese fairy tale, "Tu Tzu-chun," in *T'ai P'ing Kuang Chi*, ed. Li Fang et al. (109-12). In the original it is not the wife's muteness but the son's silence that eventually infuriates the father. I am indebted to Shu-mei Shih for her insights concerning this story, which she describes as an "intertext" for the previous chapter on Bak Goong (seminar paper).

⁴ The husband's remark is based on the Chinese original. The literal translation reads: "What need does a virtuous wife have for speech? Let her [Tu] set an example for long-tongued [i.e., shrewish] women" (Li Fang 111; my translation).

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