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Imagined Locality of a Girlhood Home: A Performative Reading of Maxine Hong Kingston's "White Tigers"

by Jing Tan

“When *we* Chinese girls listened to the adults talking-story...” “Night after night my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep”

The opening of Maxine Hong Kingston (born in 1940, Stockton CA)’s “White Tigers,” the second story in her groundbreaking collection *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, immediately transfers me back to my own girlhood, in a small town called Kaiping in South China, which shares its borders with Xinhui—where Kingston’s parents were from—to the west, and with Taishan—the best known of all three towns—to the south. All three towns, tucked tightly together and situated just north of South China Sea, have also long shared an extraordinarily intimate history—so intimate that, since the 17th century, they had been collectively called “Sze Yup,” until 1983, when the country decided to change this name. However, the old term Sze Yup was still remembered among overseas Chinese, including Kingston herself (Huntley 4), and among locals in South China, for I recall my own grandparents, and even my parents, evoking this antiquated name quite often.

Both the locality and the language of Sze Yup are of immense significance to Kingston, as well as to her narrator-protagonist: it is the locus of her mother’s storytelling, the land whence her mother absorbed the incredible power of “talking-story” that has been inherited by Kingston and has permeated her text, the soil whose spirit has been transplanted to her birthplace in America

and whose mystery has never ceased to inspire her imagination. Likewise, the Sze Yup dialect is the language that both the writer and her narrator first learned to speak (Jaggi): she “entered school speaking no English” (Talbot 12) and knowing only her parents’ native tongue, which must have been the language in which her mother “talked-story” to her.

Today, I cannot quite pinpoint exactly how, but when I first started reading Kingston some ten years ago, perhaps from the imagery she roused up, perhaps from the tone and undertone of her language, or perhaps just from the general aura of her writing, I immediately felt an uncanny affinity with the narrative voice. Tremendous indeed was my excitement when, after all these years, I finally found out that her parents hailed from Xinhui. So, she and I are practically from the same hometown, Sze Yup; we could actually understand each other in our native dialect, if we ever met. And look at her very birth name: Maxine Ting Ting Hong (湯婷婷). While “Ting Ting,” her given name, could be the pronunciation either in Cantonese or in Sze Yup, “Hong,” the surname she got from her father, is unmistakably the utterance in the latter, precisely as how I would say it in my own dialect (by contrast, its pronunciation in Cantonese would be “Tong,” and in Mandarin, “Tang”).

Kingston and I are bound together not only by the same originary homeland and the same mother tongue; but indeed, the “adults talking-story” little Maxine listened to was intricately intertwined with what I heard as a girl, though she heard it as a “Chinese girl” “among ghosts” in the Chinatown in Stockton, California, while I heard it as a different Chinese girl, with the distance of about half a century and the divide of the Pacific Ocean, in the native Sze Yup village.

Of course, albeit told in the same mother tongue, the “talk-story” she heard was not the exact same as that I heard: rather, in what I would like to think of as a moment of performativity in my reading, these two instances of “talk-story” *converse*, in an *imagined* sort of dialogue, with

each other. Kingston's narrator's mother in the Stockton Chinatown talks-story about people—and ghosts—left behind in her hometown, about tales and legends she herself brought from her own past, from the land called “home” that she “never gave up” and would eventually “create in her imagination” (Huntley 91); the little girl that I was, in Kingston's parents' hometown (and mine), hears story about “*Gum San Haak*”—a term which in Sze Yup dialect means “Gold Mountain folks” (Kristof) or “travellers to the ‘Gold Mountain,’ or America” (Wu and Li 21)—people just like Kingston's (and her narrator's) parents.

In this imagined dialogue where I undertake to connect Kingston's world of textuality, constructed through her mother's talking-story and her own imagination, to my world of lived experience, I am faced with the clichéd yet inevitable difficulty of trying to distinguish the author from the narrator, the autobiographical dimensions from the fictional elements. In fact, Kingston may have intentionally created this challenge, as she admits: “I made up a new way of story-telling, so that you can't tell whether I'm writing fiction or nonfiction.” So, perhaps we could accept the difficulty by simply acknowledging the deeply intimate bond between Kingston and her narrator-protagonist: after all, the author admits to having “felt the same emotions” in life “as the main character” (Kubota 2); and, “as a child” she already “had the feelings” of the protagonist she would later carve out, and was in a sense already “writing” the book, her “memories of a girlhood,” where the word “memoirs” betrays its personal and autobiographical nature. Interestingly, however, the current title was not Kingston's own choice: the “original title,” “*Gold Mountain Stories*,” was replaced due to editorial and marketing concerns (Hoy 48), though the more explicit reference to “Gold Mountains” would have made the link to Kingston's own family history more transparent.

Kingston's father, one of those countless Gold Mountains folks, had left his family and his native Xinhui, first for Cuba, then for New York, where he was “caught” and “jailed” twice before

eluding the “immigration demons,” settling down in the States, and eventually sending for his wife after a “15-year separation.” Both toiled long and hard—and their children, too, “put in long, grueling hours”—in laundry rooms to support the family. They must have missed home, however terrible the life they had left behind: the first family laundry they owned in Stockton was named “New Port Laundry” (Simmons 6)—“New Port,” that is how Xinhui would be rendered in English. Probably nothing articulates more clearly their feelings about “home” than Kingston’s own words: “My father left his valuable things in China. I’ve wondered whether he meant to return” (Jaggi).

Their stories, then, became the *Gum San Haak* tales I grew up listening to. My grandma and her neighbors would sit by the river, in the leafy shade cast by old trees, swinging palm fans while breathing in sultry summer air as they chatted about relatives who lived or died in the Gold Mountain. My grandpa would come home red and happy from feasts thrown by *Gum San Haak* who returned from America to treat good old fellow villagers to extravagant dinners, gloating with joy as he shared with me American candies and displayed to me American cigarettes or sometimes even American dollars, all of which were gifts from the generous Gold Mountain folks. My relatives would gossip about happy or unhappy stories about young girls or older women married off to America, and unfathomable or incredible dramas or misadventures that followed. Once, a girlhood friend recounted, with a hint of mysteriously wistful dreaminess, the good fortune of her big sister who would soon be going to America for she had been arranged to marry a guy there...

All those stories, just like those told by the mother of Kingston’s narrator, were charmed with an irresistibly fantastic spirit. The America must be an enchanted land. Gold Mountain folks were those who “journey to” their home village “to find wives,” (Wu and Li 21) with riches and with the promise of a wonderful life (even though in reality the vast majority of them belonged to the “blue collar American society” and worked in nothing more exalted than Chinese restaurants

and sewing factories). They were those who came home to “share the wealth they had amassed” in America not only by hosting dinner parties for “300 villagers” at the “fanciest restaurants” but also by donating money to build roads, clan temples, hospitals and schools—most buildings in my old schools bore names of prosperous and charitable folks who sent money from abroad for the construction; they were nothing short of beloved and celebrated local heroes.

The sense of locality of the place that is Kingston’s ancestral home, bestowed on me by the lived experience of my own girlhood, together with the imagined world of the Gold Mountain, which sprouted up from that land and runs deep in my sensibilities, can shed light on Kingston’s text, not only because her narrator alludes often to news and rumors that reach her Chinatown from her parents’ native village, but also because of the striking resemblance in spirit between her girlhood home in Stockton and mine in South China.

Both are “small,” “tight,” and extremely intimate communities. In Kingston’s words, “People really knew each other. Anything anybody did could have significance for everybody else and could even be a great explosion in town.” Her townsfolks, just like mine, were gossipy and “nosey.” (Kingston 47) In “White Tigers,” when the narrator returns after fifteen years of training as a warrior to her village, a little cousin told her “some of the people are saying the Eight Sages took you,” while another little one giggled, “some say you went to the city and became a prostitute.” (Kingston 33) I was rather taken aback, instantly reminded of how, as a teenager, when for years I consistently ranked number one in all the academic tests in town, everyone seemed to know me, at least by name and, years later, when I was off to study in Beijing, rumor from home somehow reached me by some circuitous manner that I studied too much and had gone crazy.

Not without reason was Kingston’s childhood community so incredibly similar to mine: folks in her Stockton, from the same village in Sze Yup, routinely “congregated” at her family’s

laundry, which moonlighted as a sort of “informal community center,” to catch up on news, “disseminate stories and neighborhood gossip,” and “reminisce about the life they left behind in China”: they were indeed striving to forge the “same connection” remembered “from life before they emigrated.” (Huntley 3) The hometown was transplanted, recreated in a foreign land, for better or for worse. It provided a uniquely rich source for Kingston’s imagination of her ancestral village; meanwhile, the hyper-gossipy and vigilant nature of the Sze Yup village seemed to not only have emigrated, but perhaps even intensified overseas. The collective judgement could be a source of enormous pressure; I cannot sympathize more with Kingston’s narrator when she confesses to having “minded” that “emigrant villagers,” who shared the time-honored tradition of categorically favoring boys over girls, passed judgement about her in front of her parents by calling her a “very mean” girl and “shook their heads at my sister and me: ‘one girl—and another girl’, making my parents ashamed to take us out together” (Kingston 46).

The greatest of all pressures comes from the insistence that one return home with “glory.” If folks were so dedicated to reconstructing in new soil a sense of the home village they had left behind, it would only be natural that they dreamed of returning home. And they did. Hence the *Gum San Haak* that returned to seek wives; hence Kingston’s suspicion that her father perhaps has never ceased to wish to return. Yet returning was never easy. My mother’s grandfather and great-grandfather, both “sojourners” from Sze Yup, were said to have worked and died somewhere in the “Gold Mountain,” leaving behind women and children and what must have once been a very fine, though eventually abandoned and dilapidated, house. The houses, and the wealth shared with families in the ancestral village, were the emigrants’ glory. It is a glory that redeems an otherwise lackluster life, making a mere “grocery store checker in America” seem “wealthy, cosmopolitan and urbane” to local villagers (Kristof). It is a glory that makes the life of an distant aunt of mine

who worked a strenuous menial job and lived in a dark basement in Chicago somehow appear envious to her siblings, who lived comfortable lives back in Sze Yup. It is a glory that could weigh more heavily than decades of loneliness, separated from family in life and in death.

Such was the burden upon the shoulder of those who left for the Gold Mountain: they must, in Kingston's words, "make that homecoming honorable" (Simmons 164)—returning empty-handed was not an option. In "White Tigers," the woman warrior Fa Mu Lan only "returned" to "settle in the village" after having "fought gloriously" (20). The narrator, the little girl who undergoes extraordinary training to be a great warrior, is told that if she quits to go home before gaining unparalleled power, "you will deprive your people of a champion" (32). She learns that, in the end she surmounts all obstacles and becomes an unconquerable warrior to serve her people, "I would be told of in fairy tales myself," (38) "the villagers would make a legend about my perfect filiality, (45) and I would forever be remembered by the Han people for my dutifulness" (23).

Thus, what's at stake for Kingston's narrator-protagonist is not only glory, but duty, filial piety. In her girlhood community, as in mine, parental sacrifice was sacred. Kingston shares that she "didn't work much during school" because her parents, who spent their lives sweating in the laundries, "saved a lot" for their children (Horton 7). Just the same as what parents in my hometown would do—they worked day and night, lived very frugally, to save up for their children's education, for throwing them sometimes outrageously expensive weddings, for helping them buy cars and apartments. My father would tell me that he didn't care how much he suffered; he just wanted me to have a good life—it was a rather common thing for parents to tell their kids, and they meant it. I suspect the rabbit that jumps into the fire to offer itself up as meat for the starving protagonist in "White Tigers" might in some way symbolize this kind of sacrifice, for it not only provides the girl with company in a most difficult moment, but has also taught her a lesson

“about self-immolation,” (28) which echoes her own mother’s words: “wherever you go, whatever happens to you, people will know our sacrifice” (34).

Such “sacrifice,” such “self-immolation” made by parents meant that we children must repay with utmost “dutifulness,” (23) with “perfect filiality” (45). We are to achieve “success” and go home. Thus Kingston first chose engineering as her major in college “to be practical”—which would make her parents happy, and felt as if she was being “frivolous” (Skenazy 125) and was “abdicating” all her “responsibilities” when she decided to switch to English, eaten up by “the burden of guilt” for “just living life for the fun of it” (Chin 98)—something that her parents would never approve of. The exact same kind of guilt had haunted me for years, when I quit Economics—a major I picked not at all out of passion but mostly because it might help me land a job that would make my family proud—and was slowly fumbling about towards the path of literature. We were supposed to go out, find success, and go home: “it was important that I do something big and fine,” Kingston’s narrator confesses, but “I could not figure out what was my village” (Kingston 45). Indeed, where is home? Can we ever return? Kingston (or her narrator) never really goes back home with the kind of glory her parents wanted of her, but instead wraps her “American successes” around herself whenever she visits them; I, too, have deviated very far from the life my parents pictured for me and can never return to settle down in my hometown. Ironically, however, in Kingston’s writing, and in my reading of her text, we *are* performing a metaphoric kind of homecoming, by (re)creating a locality that points toward a girlhood home.

One of the most compelling impulses behind this paper is the urge to engage in a “*parallel* reading of literary and non-literary texts” in an effort to explore—in the new historicist sense—“the textuality of history” and “the historicity of texts” (Barry 166), and to read—in a deeply personal way—“*all* of the textual traces” of a “lived experience” of the past, in the hope of

“defamiliarising” Kingston’s now “canonical literary text,” freeing it from the “accumulated weight” of previous critiques and “seeing it as if *new*” (Barry 173).

Perhaps what’s special about the method employed in this research is a paralleled, mutually resonating virtual “dialogue” between Kingston’s imagined ancestral village and my lived hometown. There is a profound performativity in her writing of *The Woman Warrior*, in that it embodies a highly conscious, unapologetically subjective, vehemently determined act of imagination, an imaginative “talking-story” to (re)construct a past that she has never lived but that was nonetheless “once mine,” “given me by my mother, who may not have known its power to remind.” Her mother might have been unaware, yet the daughter *is* intensely vigilant about having been “in the presence of great power” (Kingston 19-20)—her mother’s storytelling, which has been passed on to her even as a little girl: “as far back as I can remember I was a storyteller” (Huntley 32). Yet the story one hears can never equal the life one has lived, and that is when she boldly takes to exercising the storyteller’s ancient craft—to modify and transform stories. In her own words, “when you don’t know the story or they don’t tell you what else happens,” that is when “the fiction writer in you” kicks in: she “made up a new way of story-telling” to blur the line between “fiction” and “nonfiction” (Interview by Jeffrey Brown). It must be noted, however, that the imaginative nature in her writing is not an alternative picked merely out of necessity, or due to the lack of access, but is indeed an active artistic choice: she could have gone to her ancestral village to see it before writing about it, but she chose not to: “I didn’t want to go until I finished [writing] because if I did, I might have had a very different idea.” After all, “it is about my imaginary China that I write” (Horton 7).

If, in this sense, what Kingston has done can be seen as a performative writing, perhaps what I am carrying out here, rather than criticism in the usual sense, is also akin to a sort of

performative act, a “*performative reading*.” This method is inspired not only by the new historicist view that no discourse can express either “objective” truth or “inalterable human nature” (Veeser xi), but also by the theory of creative criticism, which insists on the “creative force” in the critical writer (Poovey 118). Therefore, the rejection of “critical objectivism” opens the door for the “theoretical repudiation” of the “defensive partition of the critical and the creative spirit” (Hartman 253). Indeed, there *is* a “continuum” connecting criticism to literature. “Criticism is not extraliterary”; it is “not outside of literature looking in” but can instead constitute an “influential part” of the literary text. This new way of thinking allows me to cherish the hope that, since reading—just like understanding—is “always highly personal” and “even idiosyncratic,” the “creative force” in a performative reading can permit my criticism the “freedom” of meaning-making and can give me, as the critic, the liberty to not “absent” myself from the critique and instead to insert “self-reference” and my own “narrative” into the commentaries. It is an act of critical reading that is at once a “version of performance,” which comes “after” the literary text, “restoring, supplying, making texts and promulgating meanings.” (Poovey 110, 118 and 123) To borrow a delightful analogy made by a new historicist, this exercise is like what the “jazz musician” does, who “doesn’t transmit a received text, but *transforms* what he *performs*” (Barry 182).

Thus, while Kingston has wielded her magic of imagination and her power of “talking-story” to conjure up her own unique version of a locality, endowing it with infinitely rich meanings, I—as a performative reader—have merely tried to explore the possibility of unearthing yet another layer of its meanings by entering—or rather, being immersed—in this locality, reading and interpreting it from a fresh angle, breathing into it my own lived experience of a different girlhood, from a place that is different and yet intricately linked with hers, for it is the same place that her

parents left behind, the same place where her mother first gained the “great power” of “talking-story” (Kingston 19-20), which the daughter has inherited and channeled into this singularly exceptional text that so amazingly stirs up my own past.

In the end, not only do Kingston’s “memoirs of a girlhood” derive from a place she has never lived in, but my own lived girlhood does not belong to any place anymore, for the Sze Yup I experienced is not the same as the one of today. Therefore, while in her performative writing she is imagining “a wider set of possible lives” than the “lived life,” in my performative reading I am imagining “what the lack of access to the past” “will not permit” (Appadurai 53); while she is tracing out the “inventions born of unknown memories,” I am tracing out memories “that no longer have a place.” In our respective reconstruction of our somehow overlapped girlhoods, we are both striving at “the possibility of imagining the place, dreaming it, and thus living it.” (De Certeau, “Ghosts in the City” 134 and 141) We are hoping this “acting-out of the place” (De Certeau, “Walking in the City” 97) can end up “founding spaces” (De Certeau, “Spatial Stories” 123). Or, in Shakespeare’s timeless words that Kingston has so beautifully cited (Skenazy 112), we are endeavoring to “give to airy nothing” a meaningful, homeward, nostalgic “local habitation.”

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