

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 introduces how the study was conducted. It includes the rationale, purpose of the study, application and educational advantages, as well as the synopsis.

1.1 Rationale

Chinese Americans account for a significant percentage of the American population. They consist of Chinese immigrants who migrated to America looking for a better future in the early nineteenth century and American Born Chinese people (ABC). Migration began to America in 1820. The California Gold Rush brought about the first influx of Chinese immigrants taking up menial labor jobs in the gold mines. Settling on the West Coast, the majority were low educated young males from the Guangdong Province (Chang 34-35). In order to control Chinese immigration after the peak of gold mining an Exclusion Act was introduced in 1885 and lasted until 1943. Essentially it restricted low-skilled immigrants from gaining entry and only allowed entry for highly skilled professionals. The second wave of immigrants, starting in the 1970's, consisted primarily of students from Hong Kong and Taiwan whilst the third wave, starting in the 1980's, consisted of mainland Chinese people. The income and social status of these immigrants was diverse, although many residents of Chinatown

worked as menial laborers in low paying jobs with other well-educated professionals residing in affluent suburbs. The first generations adhered to their cultural heritage, eating their own food, practicing their own religions, traditions and keeping to their own communities. Living in close-knit families, parents, blood relatives and neighbors influenced the family agenda. From the second generation and onwards, American-born Chinese found themselves in a paradox, raised in a Chinese family in which their relatives expected them to carry on the traditions of respecting their elders, religious practices and codes of conduct. But outside of their home, they were exposed to totally different practices both in educational and social environments. Balancing the two worlds was a frustrating daily course of life. American schooling emphasized independent thinking and self-reliance in a quest for knowledge with non-restricted behavior and social ethics that clashed with their home expectations. In school, boys and girls were treated as individuals, whilst family values imposed by mothers insisted that their daughters get married as if to become slave-wives regardless of their academic performance. They should learn how to cook, take care of their husbands, and behave as desirable brides should. Failing to be known as respected Chinese ladies would result in rejection.

Among the immigrants were Chinese writers such as Yutang Lin and Eileen Chang. Yutang Lin was one of the most influential writers of his generation. In 1933, he wrote *My Country and My People* in the English language and published it in America. It was the first novel written by a Chinese author to systematically introduce China and its culture to Westerners. Even though he wrote many well received books, he did not receive any awards during his career and it was not until the 1970's that he

was nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize in Literature. As the most popular new writer in China, Eileen Chang left for the United States in 1955. She translated her famous novels into English, such as *The Rouge of the North* and wrote works recalling old Shanghai. Her works were regarded as an attempt to offer a different writing style to mainstream America. Nonetheless they were not accepted by American society, remaining obscure until her novels were published in 2010.

The road to literary recognition for Chinese writers in America was difficult, with second generation American-born Chinese writers having fared better. Growing up in America gave them the distinct advantage of being more in tune and affluent with mainstream culture. However, their American home life often conflicted with the traditional Chinese values that perpetuated their writing. Natural inspiration and knowledge materialized from the books and stories of their relatives in addition to their individual experiences and perceptions of the American world. Some of their literature had been mentioned in American literary circles but none were awarded until the 1960's. Issues regarding women and minorities including the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, the second feminist movement, and the Vietnam War gained notoriety around the same time. Consequently as a minority group, Chinese American literature gained recognition, creating opportunities for the second generation American born Chinese writers. Among many of the well recognized writers were Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. In 1976 Maxine Hong Kingston's book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts* won the National Book Critics Circle Award for the best non-fiction book. In 1980, Maxine Hong Kingston was declared a Living Treasure of Hawaii and received acclaim as one of the most

important contemporary writers in America (Pfaff 14-15), the first Chinese American to be honored. An overnight success, her work became “the most frequently assigned twentieth-century literary text by a living author on American high school, college, and university campuses” (Huntley 75). Most comments from American critics regarded *The Woman Warrior* as a brilliant work which rejected patriarchal attitude and substantially reflected feminism. When *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan was first published, it also received rave reviews and remained on the New York Times Best Seller list for seventy-five weeks. Alice Walker wrote on the cover of *The Joy Luck Club* that “Amy Tan shows us China, Chinese American women and their families, and the mystery of the mother-daughter bond in ways that we have not experienced before” (Tan book cover).

However, amongst the praise harsh criticism of perpetuating racist stereotypes was expressed from some Chinese and Chinese American readers. Resultantly, a famous cultural debate emerged between Maxine Hong Kingston and another Chinese American author Frank Chin. Chin accused Kingston and Tan of using Orientalism in their books to mislead the American readers’ perception of China. Like many other non-American writers, theirs was diaspora writing created from secondary experience and marketed for general English reading audiences (Chin 109-30).

Orientalism is a term that was defined by Edward Said in his book *Orientalism*. It represents Westerners attitudes and beliefs towards the Middle East which is “A Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient”

(Said 1978 3). Western people are inclined to believe they are more powerful and advanced than the East. To them, all countries of the East are the same — ignorant and regressive (Lockman 205). However, their knowledge of the East is likely to be based on imaginary and stereotypical ideas which are often contrary to facts and reality. Said developed his idea of Orientalism and expanded the study of Western attitudes and beliefs towards the Middle East to cover the Far East including India, China, etc. Orientalism has since become a foundational text of postcolonial studies (Said 1993 5-6).

Diaspora is a term derived from ancient Greek; it means “a scattering of seeds.” It was later capitalized to refer to the dispersing of Jews after Jerusalem was conquered by the Babylonians in 586 BC. When used without a capital it refers to any people or racial group migrating from their homelands to other parts of the world. Immigration has been a worldwide phenomenon since the nineteenth century. When people come to a new country, they naturally bring their own cultures, ways of thinking and beliefs. These embedded elements more often than not create difficulties when adapting to a new and foreign life.

Chinese American literature was popularized by authors such as Sui Sin Far, Frank Chin, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Amy Tan. They often wrote about Chinese people, both in their present and past situations. Much of their writing included what was going on in China before their parents left for a new land, the poverty, superstitions, hardships, political struggles, gender discrimination, social practice and

inequality, as relayed to them by their parents. Authors including, Amy Tan and Maxine Hong Kingston wrote about modern society whilst revealing their mother's preaching imbued with frustration and contradiction to what had been forced on them since childhood. Tan, in "Two Kinds", tells of a mother's wish for her daughter to become a prodigy, the one who excels, and in her case, a great pianist. The protagonist realizes how dedicated her mother is in working extra hours as a house cleaner to earn enough money to hire a famous private piano instructor. But she feels that the pressure is too great and becomes rebellious. Primarily their stories were written in English describing China and thus charged them with the responsibility of explaining Chinese culture to the Western world. Before the rise in popularity of Chinese American literature, Westerners were the only people writing about issues relating to China. Compared with Western writers, Chinese American writers seemed to be more reliable sources. After all, these were the Chinese people writing their own stories. Books, fiction and non-fiction, written by Chinese American authors usually attracted a large number of Western buyers seeking knowledge of China, its people and culture. However, in the process of cultural transmission, it is possible for cultural misreading to occur.

In *Primitive Culture*, Edward Taylor redefined the term culture as "culture, or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, it is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (1). It is a comprehensive concept that consists of all the shared elements of people in society. Traditional ideas and their attached values are fundamental aspects of culture. Every culture is unique, what is

considered appropriate in one culture may be a taboo in another and can cause dispute. In cross cultural communication, conflicts arise from different interpretations due to message receivers being unfamiliar with another culture, the result of which is cultural misreading. Cultural misreading literally refers to the misconception or inaccurate interpretation, both on the part of the sender and receiver, of the text or literary piece concerning its culture and social phenomena and people. It can even occur within the same linguistic communication. However, it is more likely to occur in cross cultural literature, since nations with their own unique cultures must be considered. Due to the influence of national patriotism and historical conflicts, cultural misreading is very common in cross cultural communications. Cultural misreading occurs when people consciously and unconsciously interpret foreign cultures and then make inaccurate judgments based on materials they are familiar with. Likewise, in *The Woman Warrior* misreading, misconception, misunderstanding, or misinterpretation is the result of differences in the cultural backgrounds, education, local conditions and customs of Westerners and Chinese. In order to prevent cultural misreading it is important to critically understand the text as it really is. That is to accept its existence, explore authentic reasons and motivations, treat it as a way of understanding the other culture, and use it as a tool to promote cultural communication.

Cultural misreading can be, therefore, summed up as the misconception of culture and civilization including knowledge, belief, art, morals, law and customs when reading a text. In short, what the reader understands may not be exactly what the author intends. Moreover, misreading can stem from the writers inadequate

knowledge of the matter itself. It can also stem from other factors, for example, the reader's lack of or inadequate cultural background on what is being read. In this particular case, the target and potential readers of English works written by Chinese American writers are both English-reading Chinese people and Americans who tend to comprehend things differently due to different geographical and historical backgrounds. For example, there are many descriptions in Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* which portray Chinese as regressive, such as their superstitions and valuation of females as being inferior to males. According to Ferraro, the Chinese American writer's depiction of Chinese culture has hurt Chinese audiences who have accused them of selling the dirty things of their own family to foreigners (as quoted in 林(Lin) 11). Western audiences may interpret these as real and believe the Chinese to be backwards. In contrast, modern Chinese readers may think the writer possesses superficial and inadequate experience that disregards the fact of China's development. When Western audiences welcome the book regarding it as a teenage girl's bitter memoirs about China, the writer considers herself to be culturally misread (Kingston 1982 55-65). Cultural misreading can also result from other factors; among them are language difficulties, cultural diversity and psychological differences. Misreading begins with the creators of the literary pieces and then the publishers who decide on classification of publication. In Kingston's case, *The Woman Warrior* was classified as a non-fiction memoir instead of a fictional work as originally intended by Kingston herself (as quoted in 林(Lin) 16). An equally important factor that may cause cultural misreading is that readers of different backgrounds perceive information through the lens of their knowledge, experiences and stereotyped ideas of a culture that is different from their own.

In order to analyze whether or not cultural misreading occurs, who and what have contributed to such misreading, and what the effects of such a misreading are, the research will apply Harold Lasswell's 5Ws Communication Model. The model fits the analytical framework of the study as it comprises five elements, "Who", "says What", "in Which channel", "to Whom", and "to What effect". These elements will be used to analyze Kingston as a "Who", the content of the story as the "says What", the publisher as the "in Which channel", the readers as the "to Whom", and the resulting cultural misreading as the "to What effect".

1.2 Purposes of the Study

1. To analyze if there is misreading of China in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*.

2. To analyze what cultural aspects have been misread in *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*.

3. To analyze the extent to what and how the misreading occurs based on Lasswell's 5Ws Communication Model.

1.3 Application and Educational Advantages

It is hoped that the findings of how and to what extent the misreading occurs will create an awareness among readers of diaspora writing of the possible

misinterpretations and their causes.

1.4 Synopsis

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts was published by Vintage Books in 1975. It was classified as an autobiography of the author, Maxine Hong Kingston. The book consisted of five stories as summarized below.

The first story, “No Name Woman”, was a series of narrations based on a story the narrator’s mother told her. The story begins with the narrator’s aunty learning of her pregnancy a year after her husband had immigrated to the US during the gold rush. After discovering this fact and assuming that she had an affair with another man, the villagers believed that she would bring them bad luck and decided to punish her. The day that she was to give birth, they rampaged her house, killing animals, and smearing blood around. She was forced to give birth in a pigsty and subsequently, out of shame, killed her baby and herself by jumping into a well. Eventually, in the final narration, the narrator concludes that the “real well” her aunt drowned herself in was symbolic of her abandonment by her own family.

The second story is titled “White Tigers” and is based on the narrator’s imaginations about an ancient heroine named Fa Mu Lan, who she learned about from her mother and an ancient poem. The heroine took her father’s place in the army to fight with the enemy. In the narrator’s dreams, she imagined herself as Fa Mu Lan performing heroic acts. She followed a bird to the mountain where she studied Kung Fu with two masters for eight years. After that she disguised herself as a man in the

army and defeated a giant in a battle. During the battle she met her husband, conceived a child and ordered her husband to take care of the baby whilst she continued to fight. Finally, she went back to her village and killed an evil baron who had kidnapped the villagers' sons.

The third story is called "Shaman" and it is the personal experience of the narrator's mother, Brave Orchid, when she was in China. After studying medicine at To Keung School of Midwifery she became a doctor in her village. In the story her mother was a very brave and independent woman. When she studied in the school, she slept in a room with ghosts to prove that they should not be feared and to help her roommates fight the Sitting Ghosts by burning them with hot oil. When she returned to her village to practice medicine, she was highly regarded for her medical expertise. She knew which sick men would die within one year from reading their daughter in law's faces and dealt with sensitive issues regarding illness and death. Although she was strong and independent, she was apprehensive about her new environment in America fearing that white people were ghosts. The narrator is more afraid of the 'unknown' ghosts she imagines she might face if returning to China such as the imagined people she might be sold to and the communists who had confiscated family property.

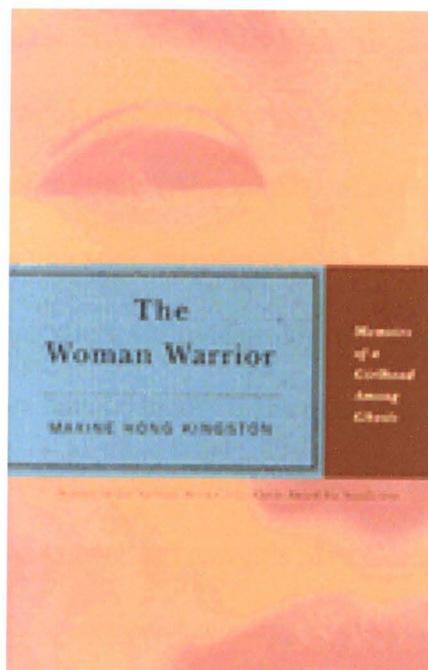
The fourth story, "At the Western Palace", describes the experience of Moon Orchid, Brave Orchid's younger sister. Moon Orchid went to America after being encouraged by her older sister to search for her husband who had left China thirty years ago. When first arriving in America, Moon Orchid temporarily lived in her elder sister's house because she dreaded meeting up with her husband who was already

remarried. The book described her as ignorant, incompetent, and weak. She acted oddly, talking to herself, spying on family members and could not even manage menial jobs such as ironing cloths or washing dishes. Many funny and ridiculous things happened to her and children disliked her. In the summer, she was finally forced by Brave Orchid to go to Los Angeles to look for her husband, but hesitated to see him without any invitation. Brave Orchid dreamed of a thousand ways for Moon Orchid to meet with her husband and raise her confidence. The two old women scheme how to replace the new wife, to regard her as a concubine, and to treat her like a slave. Arriving in Los Angeles, they found the husband, a rich brain surgeon working in a high-rise building and his new wife, a modern and beautiful young girl. They changed their plan and staged a traffic accident to attract Moon Orchid's husband over to their car. The awkward meeting reminded her of the distance between them. The husband told her to keep away from his life and to go and live with their daughter. After several months Moon Orchid went out of her mind, hearing ghosts talking and feeling that they had been tracking her. Although Brave Orchid took her back to her own home and managed to salvage her soul, Moon Orchid's situation worsened day by day. She pleaded with the family not to go out of fear that they might be taken away by ghosts. She even asked to have all the doors and windows closed and all the lights turned on. Eventually she was sent to a mental hospital where she died alone.

“A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe” is the fifth story and is the narrator's childhood recollections. The story begins with her mother cutting her tongue in order to disable her speech. Like many Chinese immigrant children, she dares not to speak



childhood recollections. The story begins with her mother cutting her tongue in order to disable her speech. Like many Chinese immigrant children, she dares not to speak in the American school but converses and plays freely during the after-hours Chinese ‘tuition’ school. She tries to help another Chinese girl who could not speak by threatening and abusing her. Consequently, she falls ill and is bedridden for eighteen months until she suddenly recovers when her mother says “You are ready to get up today.” She is afraid of the crazy Chinese people in Chinatown and acts abnormally to prevent being matched by her mom to an unknown new Chinese immigrant. For the same reason she also avoids associating with a retarded boy. She is determined to confess one thing every day until she has made two hundred confessions to her mother who may then be able to understand her thoughts. However, her mother says she is Ho Che Gui who talks nonsense. She angrily shouts that she will not marry or return to China and will go to college. A daughter asserting independence from her mother is a regular occurrence.



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