

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

From the findings of this study, it is apparent that misreading is prevalent in *The Woman Warrior*. In summarizing the causes of misreading, possible suggestions arise as to how the merits of literary pieces can be appreciated and how to promote better understanding amongst different cultures. Propaganda, prejudice, and misleading information regarding China has been proliferated in Western society for many centuries and is the root cause of cultural misreading. According to the 5Ws Communication Model, the first four: “Who”, “says What”, “in Which channel” and “to Whom”, contributed to the last “to What effect”, the misreading of China, its people and culture. The misreading of China is not an isolated responsibility; moreover it is a conspired effort of the author, content, publisher, and Western readers.

The first “W”, “Who” refers to the author. It requires two conditions to build an effective basis of communication. Firstly, “Who” must be skilled. Secondly, “Who” must be well-informed of the subject material. Kingston is a highly skilled writer and can influence readers into believing her writing. However, her ill-informed knowledge of China made her writing unbelievable and thus the communication was therefore ineffective. The majority of her sources came from the narratives of her parents,

including the personal experiences of her mother, a first generation Chinese American immigrant. However, her mother's experiences just covered a short period from her birth in China up until her arrival in America and to Kingston, China's history remained frozen in that special period which did not acknowledge China's rich five thousand year history. As a result, her writing was sure to provide an inadequate and incomprehensive representation of China. Additional writing materials came from the experiences of Kingston and her mother in Chinatown, America. Her mother seemed unaware of China's development since she immigrated to America in 1925. She may not have been fully aware of China's development and perpetuated outdated habits and customs from fifty years ago, some of which were exclusive to Guangdong Province. Guangdong's old sayings and customs appearing in *The Woman Warrior* are both outdated and unilateral. Evidently, making assumptions that are both outdated and partial as a means of representing the whole of China would certainly be an overgeneralization. When comparing Kingston's modern American experiences with her mother's outdated Guangdong customs, Western readers would clearly see blatant differences between the advanced American culture represented by second-generation Chinese American immigrants and the regressive Chinese culture represented by first generation Chinese American immigrants. Secondary sources of information about China came from English language material introducing China to Kingston who possessed a limited understanding of the Chinese language. In addition, Western society has long regarded China as ignorant and regressive. Chinese political history had remained relatively unknown to Western society for around thirty to forty years prior to the publication of *The Woman Warrior*. This was largely due to major political changes in the World (1939-1945 the Second War) and in China (1945-1949 civil war,

with the Mao government replacing the Jiang Government to control mainland China). Official relationships between America and China were inaugurated when the People's Republic of China was founded in 1979. Such misreading appeared in many works by Chinese American authors, from the earliest biography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* written by Wong J. S. in 1945, to *The Woman Warrior* written by Maxine Hong Kingston in 1976, and then to the novel *The Joy Luck Club* written by Amy Tan in 1989. Commonly, China was represented as a regressive country. It seems that the malicious slander and defamation of China was a price gladly paid by Chinese American authors in seeking mainstream approval in American society. The critical components contributing to Kingston's misreading of China, its people and culture is due to Kingston's ill-informed knowledge. A lack of personal experience contributed to her understanding coming from her parents' stories, secondary information in English, and her own imagination. As a result, the stories, experiences, and materials are unilateral and cannot perfectly reflect the development and change of China over its diverse five thousand-year history. Kingston showed her prejudice toward China by catering to stereotypical images of China in order to be accepted by western society and it is a form of Orientalism. The author, Kingston, who misrepresented China both naively and intentionally, became the primary factor contributing to the misreading of China, its people and culture and ultimately she holds the most responsibility for this misreading.

The second "W", "says What" refers to the content of *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston's depiction of China as a barbaric, cruel and miserable place filled with ghosts in her book was the result of her ill-informed knowledge of China and desire to

be accepted by western society. She misrepresented China, its people and culture on four different aspects: Chinese image, Chinese behavior, Chinese sex and gender, and Chinese food. A plethora of negative portrayals revealed her distorted understanding and misreading of China. The Chinese in her book were seen to mistreat animals and weaker people. They were poor, greedy and liars. In addition, they acted in an impolite manner and Kingston also complained about their loudness. Such misreading was caused by her possible lack of knowledge of the characteristics of the Chinese language. Chinese language pronunciation includes four tones which involve five pitches and pitches can alter throughout the expression of tone of any single word. Three out of the four tones are linked to the highest pitch (5). Culturally, Chinese associate speaking loudly with friendliness and power. The relationship between men and women was also misrepresented in *The Woman Warrior*. Kingston based much of her writing on her mother's stories from a short period in China that disregarded the subsequent history and development of women's position in society. With her misreading of the term generally used to refer to Chinese women “奴家” (a self-deprecating term for a woman in ancient times) as “slave”, China became a world where women were sold in the market as slaves. Chinese food, famous world wide as a delicacy, was misrepresented as odd and awful in Kingston's book. She generalized that all Chinese food is based on Guangdong food and in doing so misled Western readers into believing that all Chinese food was terrible. Kingston portrayed Chinese culture through a Western stereotypical lens which was a form of Orientalism. As a result, the unrealistic portrayal of Chineseness in *The Woman Warrior*, the content itself, became the second factor contributing to the misreading of China, its people and culture.

The third “W”, “in Which channel” refers to the publishers of the book who can determine the genre of a publication and change the content. They became the third factor contributing to the misreading and thusly share a large part of the responsibility. Initially, Kingston intended to publish *The Woman Warrior* as a work of fiction, a novel. For financial purpose and reasons of publicity, her publisher Elliott advised publication as a work of non-fiction, a biography (Elliott as quoted in 林 (Lin) 16). At the same time, many brilliant novels were published and in hypothetical comparison to *The Woman Warrior* as a novel and they posed strong competition (林 (Lin) 16). Published as a non-fiction, it elevated the competition with its specialized subject, historical background and descriptions of China that were aligned with the aesthetic standard of Orientalism in Western society. This created publicity and infamy, attracting curious Western readers seeking knowledge of the real China through a reliable, first hand source of non-fiction. The publisher could then reap the rewards culminating from a National Book Award. Clearly it was a financial decision to change the classification from a novel to a biography and in doing so a level of integrity was disregarded. The publisher’s irresponsible attitude ensured that Western readers would believe the descriptions of China as genuine and then contributed to the misreading. In addition, the author’s opportunistic mentality in craving quick success and approval is equally to blame. However, questions to be seriously considered include the following - Is she ignorant and victimized as well? Couldn’t she and her publisher do a better job reviewing her manuscript and the publication to make it

correct and more suitable as a memoir? How about the committee that awarded the book the prize?

The fourth “W”, “to Whom” refers to the readers of the book. They can be divided into two groups: Western readers and Chinese readers. Readers should make rational judgments when facing content. If they are well-informed of the content, the communication is effective, otherwise, it is ineffective. When reading *The Woman Warrior*, Chinese readers have more knowledge of China than Western readers and they are able to know the content is not real using rational judgment. However, western readers have limited knowledge of China and are more likely to believe the negative description of China in the book without using rational judgment. With a fixed stereotypical idea of China, the misreading of China by Western readers is nonetheless obvious. Their knowledge of China is limited due to a language barrier and for historical reasons. However, it would also be fair to say that they are also responsible for such a misconception. Since *The Woman Warrior* was published as a work of non-fiction, they naturally never challenged its content and totally accepted it without question. Western society has misread China for many years and they tend to have a fixed stereotype of it in their minds. China, to them, was mysterious, regressive, and ignorant. These false beliefs were confirmed when reading *The Woman Warrior* and the Western readers became the fourth factor contributing the misreading of China, its people and culture. Ultimately, the misreading of China found a niche

market.

The fifth “W”, “to What effect” refers to the communication result. It is how the book content affects the readers and their feedback. Both content authenticity and readers’ rational judgment can contribute to an effective communication result. However, in case of *The Woman Warrior*, both of facts that the book content is unreliable and the vast majority of Western readers approach it without rational judgment contribute to an ineffective communication result which is the misreading of China, its people and culture. Kingston’s distorted knowledge of China and her desire to be accepted by Western society resulted in the book content unreliable. However, her publisher’s decision to publish it as a biography for commercial purposes would mislead Western readers with limited knowledge of China into believing the misrepresentation of China in *The Woman Warrior* as real. Unfortunately, the decision to change *The Woman Warrior*’s classification to a work of non-fiction was done without adequate preparation and research of China by Kingston. Together, they contributed to the misreading of China, its people and culture.

As for recommendations, Orientalism should not be utilized in a bid for acceptance and success in Western society. If Kingston had visited different areas of China as opposed to listening to her parents’ narratives, it would have offered her first-hand experience of the great vitality, diversity and beauty of China. Developing

her knowledge of Chinese language and learning more about China from original, cultural sources as opposed to exclusively using unilateral secondary material published in the West, would add integrity and truth. In describing cultural events and identities, she would be able to draw from profound knowledge rather than merely skimming the surface. A responsible author should respect history and in doing so treat different cultures fairly and impartially. As a result, accuracy would embellish the work and help to ensure that any misreading would not occur. Authors should not give into unreasonable classification demands by publishers and should take more responsibility for accurately depicting a society and in doing so, preserving their own integrity.

With more integrity, publishers would be less inclined to publish ambiguous material as a work of non-fiction to suit the zeitgeist and therefore, any further escalation of misreading could be prevented. Coincidentally, the publisher should savor their integrity by not changing the classification of a piece of work for their own benefit, especially when the piece of work could potentially contribute to misreading. They should show more discretion in choosing the appropriate classification, which requires more knowledge and respect toward the author's original wishes. Social influence is ultimately the publisher's responsibility and as an integral factor it should be balanced with their business interests. In doing so, they can live up to the reader expectations.



With a better understanding and education of China, Western readers would be less likely to subscribe to any depictions of stereotyping. Without a stereotypical perception of China and with more knowledge of Chinese history and culture, Western readers can make a better judgment when faced with ambiguous material. Western readers should not only limit themselves to reading and learning about China through prejudicial works, they should learn more from different channels including sources published in China. Without evidence, it is unfair to stereotype China, its people and culture. Visiting China would offer answers and help to make reasonable judgments in addition to avoiding misreading.

Western readers should maintain a clear understanding of the information they read. The cultural conflict depicted in *The Woman Warrior* is not a true representation of the real relationship between Chinese and American culture in contemporary history. Every culture is in progression. Some of the traditional conservative ideologies no longer exist in modern China. Chinese children are now questioning and challenging the status quo. If the readers compare modern American culture with past Chinese culture, it would be an unfair and irrelevant judgment. Chinese American writers and American publishers should take responsibility for their presentation of information in order to avoid cultural misunderstandings. China's national image and history may exist only in the hazy memories of Chinese Americans. They are "pillow-stories" from a mother's telling; they are the footprint on the slate of

Chinatown; and they are English translations of Chinese folk mythology. These fragments of memory then become the main clue used to trace the origin of China's national image and history for Chinese American writers. Without adequate research and fair perception, confusion and inaccuracy will inevitably arise in their writing. Responsible readers should show empathy to Chinese American writers and view their works with a more inclusive vision that critically analyzes the text to ascertain the reason for any misreading. Reasonable conclusions can then be arrived at as to how misreading of China can be avoided in the future. Unfortunately, since *The Woman Warrior's* publication over thirty years ago, misreading is still evident in Western society.

As China continues to improve relations with other countries around the world, knowledge is becoming more available. However, misreading China still has a market in Western society. This is most prevalent in Western mainstream media, such as in biased and unreal news reports about China on CNN (Cable News Network) and VOA (The Voice of America). Rapid economical development has influenced China's growing importance in the international community. The grand opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in 2008 showed the world China's flair and strength. The Shenzhou VI, the first manned spaceship sent into space by China showed the world the technical advances of China. In 2010, China's GDP (gross domestic product) overtook Japan, becoming second in the world, showing the world its economic power.

Now, China is depicted as a powerful developing nation, contrary to the regressive depictions found in the books of many Chinese American writers. The rise of Internet popularity and availability of information has made it easier for Western readers to learn about China from domestic sources. Conclusively, any misreading of China will hopefully lose its niche market.