

Feminism and Ethnic Identity in the Paratexts of Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*

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In 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston published her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*. Born in the US to Chinese immigrants and influenced by feminism, she mixes memories from her childhood with Chinese stories and legends her mother told her. Blending fiction with non-fiction, Hong Kingston cites Walt Whitman and Virginia Woolf as influences on her work, appreciating their inclusive language, which deals with “all kinds of people,” regardless of gender or heritage (Fishkin 784). *The Woman Warrior* became an immediate success, winning the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award. Journalist and college professor Jess Row says: “When I query my first-year college students about books most of them have read, *The Woman Warrior* falls somewhere between *Beloved*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*” (Row). What puts *The Woman Warrior* in a group with these other famous works? The continuing re-publications and abundance of freshly written reviews show the momentum surrounding Hong Kingston’s work from 1976 to today.

The author saw *The Woman Warrior* as a book of several different categories, listing “the women’s lib angle and the Third World angle, the Roots angle” (Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings” 55). She recognized her book’s feminist meaning and while she also noticed the importance her ethnic background had to her writing, what she “did not foresee was the critics measuring the book and me against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental” (Kingston, “Cultural Mis-readings” 55). Early critics did indeed concentrate on the author’s ethnic background and the book’s foreign content. However, the reception through the reviewers has changed over the decades. What has not changed is the framing through the publishers, as the following analysis will show. There have been several different cover designs, and although they contrast, they all underline the author’s identity as an Asian woman.

To understand Hong Kingston’s own interpretation of her work as feminist, I will introduce second-wave feminism and feminist print culture before

applying Gérard Genette’s theory of paratexts to comprehend how the framing and perception of *The Woman Warrior* changed. In his 1982 publication on intertextuality, Genette argues that every text is accompanied by “a certain number of verbal or other productions, such as an author’s name, a title, a preface, illustrations,” (1) which he calls the paratext. According to Genette, the paratext “enables a text to become a book” (1) and is an important tool to research production and reception, as it reflects the circumstances under which the book was published. In this paper, I will perform a paratextual analysis, looking at book covers and reviews from 1976 until today, to understand how the book was framed by the publishers and how the audience interpreted it. I argue that the book’s framing remains the same; but that the reception has changed over time and contemporary readers have a different point of view, shaped by an ongoing fight for equality regardless of race, gender, or ethnic identity, which enables them to see the multiple facets of *The Woman Warrior*.

Hong Kingston published *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, when the second-wave feminist movement in the US was at its height. The 1970s were an “integral decade for the American feminist movement” (McBean 352), which spanned from around 1965 to the 1980s. The addressed issues were broad, ranging from a demand for equal income and equal job opportunities to a woman’s “duty” to take her husband’s name, to abuse and rape in marriage. The movement blurred the boundaries between personal and political issues, bringing personal issues previously not openly discussed, such as sexuality and domestic violence, into the public sphere. The movement was characterised by its structure of small local meeting groups that enabled the phenomenon of consciousness raising: women shared their personal stories and problems, and only talking about it in a group made them realize they were not alone. They learned that many other women felt the same and that their issues were indeed not personal, but political (Evans 3; McBean 356).

The Women’s Liberation Movement is a western feminist movement, since it was not inclusive to issues outside of the traditional western world. The movement initially provided a large variety of members, as many women joined from other activist’s groups, feeling “sidelined” by male group members. However, there was also criticism for its focus on the white middle class (Walters 104). According to Margaret Walters, “Betty Friedan’s 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique* exploded the myth of the happy housewife in the affluent, white, American suburbs” (102). Although Friedan’s book provided consciousness-raising moments for many readers, it was also criticised because there were many women outside of the white middle class who were struggling with chores and jobs, not making ends meet. Another critique was that the movement’s leading figures were often quite privileged, and that women who were actually severely oppressed never had the chance to speak up (Walters 102–105).

Struggles were also arising within the movement, because even though the women were united by the cause of fighting against female oppression, sub-divisions with different agendas complicated the matter, and the movement “seemed to be at war as much within itself as with patriarchy” (Evans 1). For example, there was a rift between lesbians and straight women as well as between white women and women of colour, since mostly white women represented the movement.

After the foundation of the Women’s Liberation Movement in the 1960s, the activists gained more attention in the 1970s, which provided “the conditions for the emergence of feminist fiction as a mainstream publishing phenomenon” (McBean 352). Feminist fiction spoke about marginalised issues such as abortion and menstruation and criticised the limits women experienced through marriage and family. Books served as consciousness raising objects, letting readers experience consciousness raising moments. The consciousness-raising novel was an important part of feminist print culture. The act of writing meant claiming subjectivity by having textual authority, which is why many female writers wrote books whose main characters were authors. Literature was seen as “upholding dominant culture (and its limited view of women)” (McBean 359), which is why feminists saw literature as having great potential for the feminist cause. However, books were often disregarded as feminist when they did not “connect women’s suffering to the patriarchal oppression of women” or failed “to register some possibility of transforming this situation” (Elliott 144). Most novels were from and about white women, because the movement saw being female as the key characteristic of being oppressed, which marginalised other issues. Sam McBean claims “there was an insistence that black women’s writing needed its own body of criticism” (360), similar to the way white activists worked. Since the dominant culture did not pay much attention to minority writing, minority feminists saw the development of a critical lens as central to its survival.

Influenced by the movement and its issues, Hong Kingston saw her work from a feminist angle, however, the publishers’ design choices do not reflect that. The book’s original 1976 Knopf edition (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 1976) features the author’s name, the book’s title and subtitle as well as a collage that includes a building, a warrior figure, a bird, and an Asian woman’s face. The depicted bird is a *fenghuang*, an important figure in Chinese mythology, symbolising harmony. Different mythological traditions see the *fenghuang* either as in possession of both male and female qualities, or as the female counterpart to the male dragon, representing marital bliss together (“*fenghuang*”). While the cover focuses strongly on the text’s connection to Chinese mythology, it also includes feminist aspects, of which some are more obvious (like the female warrior) and some more subtle (the meaning assigned to the mythological figures).

When Vintage published *The Woman Warrior* in 1977 (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 1977), it had already received praise, which is reflected in the cover design. The cover bears a sticker marking it as winner selected by the National Book Critics Circle as well as a quote from a review by Jane Kramer, published on the front page of *The New York Times Book Review*. Kramer is quoted as saying “Brilliant ... its sources are dream and memory, myth and desire.” By incorporating the sticker and the quote, the publisher is using the book’s previous success as advertisement. The cover is dominated by textual elements, but also features the drawing of an Asian girl, dressed in western clothes, a dragon wrapped around her. The depiction seems to represent Hong Kingston herself: an Asian girl, living a western lifestyle, entangled in Chinese myths. Overall, the message focuses on the mythical content, considering the dragon combined with the quote, which, using the terms “dream and memory, myth and desire,” is very vague.

The edition of 1989 (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 1989) (again by Vintage) does not feature any praise in form of quotes or mentions awards. The cover's illustration serves as the background and is kept in red and black. It shows the face of a woman (who might be Hong Kingston herself) and several cranes. The cover moves away from the warrior aspect of the title, focusing instead on the woman and her memories of mythology.

A few years ago, Vintage reissued the 1989 version with a new cover (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 1989 [Reissue]). Like its predecessor, the cover mentions the award, and the book is now elevated to a "National Bestseller." Also featured is a quote from *The Washington Post*, saying: "Intense, fierce, and disturbing ... a strange, sometimes savagely terrifying and, in the literal sense, wonderful story." In comparison to older covers, the cover design is cleaner and more abstract. The background photograph is of the lower half of a woman's face, her dark hair and light skin colour suggesting she might be Asian. This edition omits both the warrior aspect as well as the mythical part. The chosen quote is as vague as the one on the previous cover, but it does not allow any conclusions on the book's content.

Vintage published the book again as a paperback in 2000 (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 2000), now displaying a very minimalist design. It shows the upper half of an Asian woman's face, and the only other text apart from title and author's name is a small line about the book's win of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

The most recent edition was published as part of the Picador Classics series in 2015 (Kingston, *The Woman Warrior* 2015). It mentions a foreword by Xiaolu Guo, who is a Chinese author and director. The cover shows a crane, which is an important part of Chinese culture as a symbol of longevity. More specifically, the depicted crane is a red-crowned crane, which symbolises happiness, good luck, a long life, and marital bliss. With this cover choice,

the publisher has returned to framing the book in the context of its author's ethnicity. The feminist aspect does not appear; instead, the foreword by a Chinese author (and its mention on the cover) highlights Hong Kingston's Chinese heritage even more.

There is no discernible change in the covers over time. They look different because they all adhere to the design forms that were popular in their respective time, but they send similar messages. None of them clearly show the "women's lib angle" that Hong Kingston wished for. While some of them feature a female warrior figure, other positive female connotations are mostly hidden in the symbolism of mythological figures. Overall, the publishers' design choices mirror the author's ethnicity and the book's mythological content.

Reviews of *The Woman Warrior* do not mirror the framing of the publishers – at least not all of them. Jane Kramer's review of *The Woman Warrior* was first published in *The New York Times* on November 7, 1976. Kramer starts her review with her thoughts about how Americans see Chinese and American Chinese. She thinks that Americans do not really engage with the Chinese, instead they are fascinated and mystify them. She moves on to Hong Kingston, who she introduces as a "young Chinese American writer" (Kramer) of the name Maxine Ting Ting Hong Kingston. Her review is a very positive one, calling the book "a brilliant memoir" (Kramer). Kramer's review does focus strongly on the book's ethnic components, she likens it to André Malraux's novel *La Tentation de l'Occident* and says that "The Woman Warrior' is about being Chinese, in the way the 'Portrait of the Artist' is about being Irish" (Kramer). She further summarises stories of the book and talks about Hong Kingston's family and upbringing, always keeping the focus on her ethnicity. Kramer also mentions the story of the warrior woman Fa Mu Lan (which is one of the stories in the book), possibly because it makes a nice connection to the book's title.

Earlier the same year, *The New York Times* had already published another review with the title "In Defiance of 2 Worlds," written by a male author, John Leonard. Leonard starts by listing several male authors (Vonnegut, Updike, Cheever, and Mailer) who "will be making loud noises" (Leonard), insinuating that men are loud and women are quiet. *The Woman Warrior*, he says, is however anything but quiet. Could Leonard's review be read as feminist? Not really. Although he praises Hong Kingston and her writing, the reasons he gives why he likes her writing – being "loud," not being sentimental – makes it seem like he admires her because she reminds him of a male author, not because of any feminist qualities. He further focuses on her ethnic background, seeing her struggle as caused by her disruption between the western and the eastern world.

Margaret Manning, book editor of *The Globe*, published a short take on the text under the heading "Mysterious, burning with oriental defiance" on January 30, 1977. Next to the headline, there is the picture of a female Asian warrior. The drawing and the title dominate the page, which features several short book reviews. In her short review, Manning mentions the myths, among them Fa Mu Lan, but also focuses on the women in the book. She starts her final paragraph with "But most of the book is about her family – the women of her family" (Manning) and mentions Hong Kingston's connection between being female and being a slave in Chinese culture. She calls the author by her maiden name Maxine Ting Ting Hong and calls her a "woman among women who has written a brilliant, mysterious book" (Manning).

In "The Woman Warrior at 30 – Maxine Hong Kingston's secrets and lies," Jess Row revisits the text 30 years after its publication for *Slate's* memoir week. His review focuses mostly on the book's genre and narrative quality. While he mentions the stories of Hong Kingston's aunt and Hua Mulan, a distinctive feminist angle or focus on the

author's ethnicity is not discernible. The review gives insight into the book's status today, as Row explains: "When I query my first-year college students about books most of them have read, *The Woman Warrior* falls somewhere between *Beloved*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants*" (Row). *The Woman Warrior* has turned into a contemporary classic. Why is that? The review does not provide an answer. It seems curious; the books that Row mentions seem to be grouped together randomly. Is it the author's ethnic background and the books "exotic" content that attracted such a large readership? Or is it the liberal angle that still resonates with readers in the twenty-first century?

John Powers wrote a review of a new collection of Hong Kingston's novels that includes *The Woman Warrior*. He does not focus on her ethnic background, but describes her as "an Asian American writer, a feminist storyteller, a chronicler of immigrant experience and a literary innovator" (Powers). With this description, he acknowledges both her background as well as her intentions and shows that a writer – and her work – do not always belong in just one category. Fittingly enough, Powers credits Hong Kingston with "tell[ing] stories about creating your own identity, not settling for the one the world tries to give you" (Powers). This is exactly what happened to her when she wrote *The Woman Warrior* – she tried to convey a message, but her audience interpreted it differently. Powers includes the stories of the author's aunt and Fa Mu Lan (and credits her for introducing this now well-known story to the West). He also says that "in telling this story she's not supposed to tell us, Kingston underscores a cruel truth about traditional Chinese culture – its oppression of women" (Powers), referring to the opening of the book and drawing attention to the book's feminist issues.

Marisa Jue's review was published online in *April Magazine* on August 26, 2016. The magazine bears the subtitle "Actual Voice of Asian Women," which is a clear indication of its content. The review

includes a picture, which depicts a female warrior and a tiger in front of a city. The warrior's shield shows the cover of the 2000 paperback edition of *The Woman Warrior*. Jue sees Hong Kingston as "a giant within the Asian American literary community" and calls her "one of the leading literary voices of Asian American women" (Jue). With the magazine's orientation in mind, Jue summarises the book and its message without losing the connection to the Asian background, but still focuses on the feminist aspect, saying that "the entire book is full of female relationships, the weak protected by the strong, as Hong Kingston explores what exactly it means to be a Chinese American woman, torn between tradition and modernity" (Jue). She concludes by saying that

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"Kingston has created a striking portrait of what it means to be Chinese American woman and the dualities of that identity: the damsel and the warrior, old world values and Western social expectations" (Jue). In her review, Marisa Jue applies a modern understanding of Hong Kingston's work: She recognises the feminist aspect while still realising the importance of the author's ethnicity, fulfilling the demands of earlier feminists who claimed not all feminists had the same issues and that ethnicity does play a role in the oppression of women.

It took several decades, but *The Woman Warrior* is now being read the way Hong Kingston intended it to: from a liberal,

feminist angle, the book is now less mystified and exoticised. *The Woman Warrior* has always been popular and has been praised by many critics, but not for the aspects the author wanted to be seen.

A book's framing and reception influence each other. When a reader picks up a book, they will be influenced by the design choices on the cover, by information they gain from it. Their reading will be influenced. In turn, reviews may encourage the publisher to make changes for a new cover design. Interestingly enough, the overall message of *The Woman Warrior's* covers did not change, while the tone of the reviews did. It seems like none of the publishers ever reviewed their reading of the book. The message is simple: All the covers allude to the book's title, including a woman and/or mythical designs that point to the "exotic" content. While the most recent edition is one of the most minimalist, it mentions the foreword by a Chinese author, putting the American novel that Hong Kingston wrote even more into a foreign corner.

Although she wrote the book for an American audience, her readers did not grasp its full meaning in the 1970s. Written by mostly white women, the reviews praised the book, but saw it as a foreign tale and a stranger's experience. That has changed. Modern reviewers include Asian men and women, and they understand what their predecessors could not: feminism is layered and complex, and not every woman is experiencing and fighting the same issues. They experience the book as a consciousness raising text. Hong Kingston's work is a perfect example of a sub-group of feminism, as it connects feminist issues with the struggles caused by her ancestry. The feminist activism that followed in the time after the book's publication allows readers to understand all the facets of the book.

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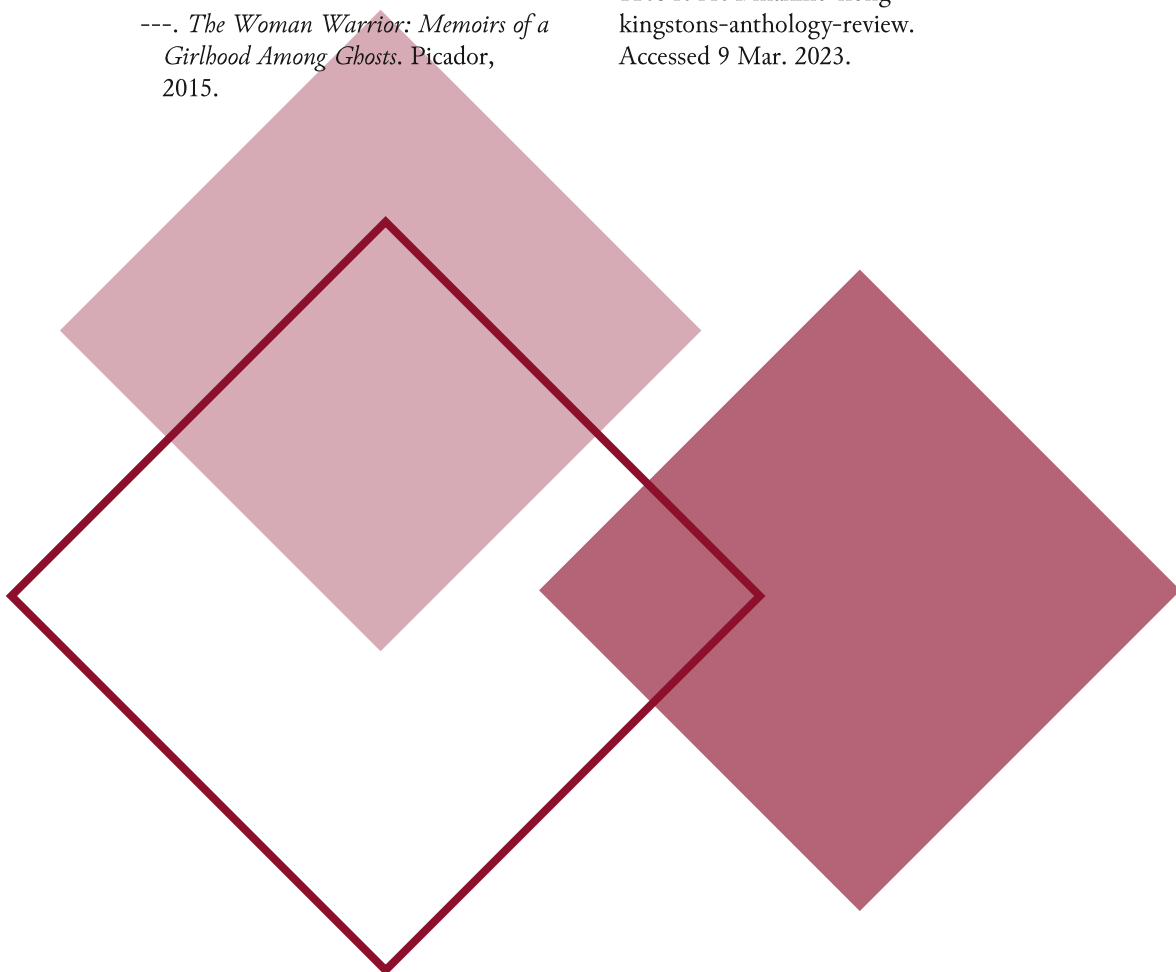
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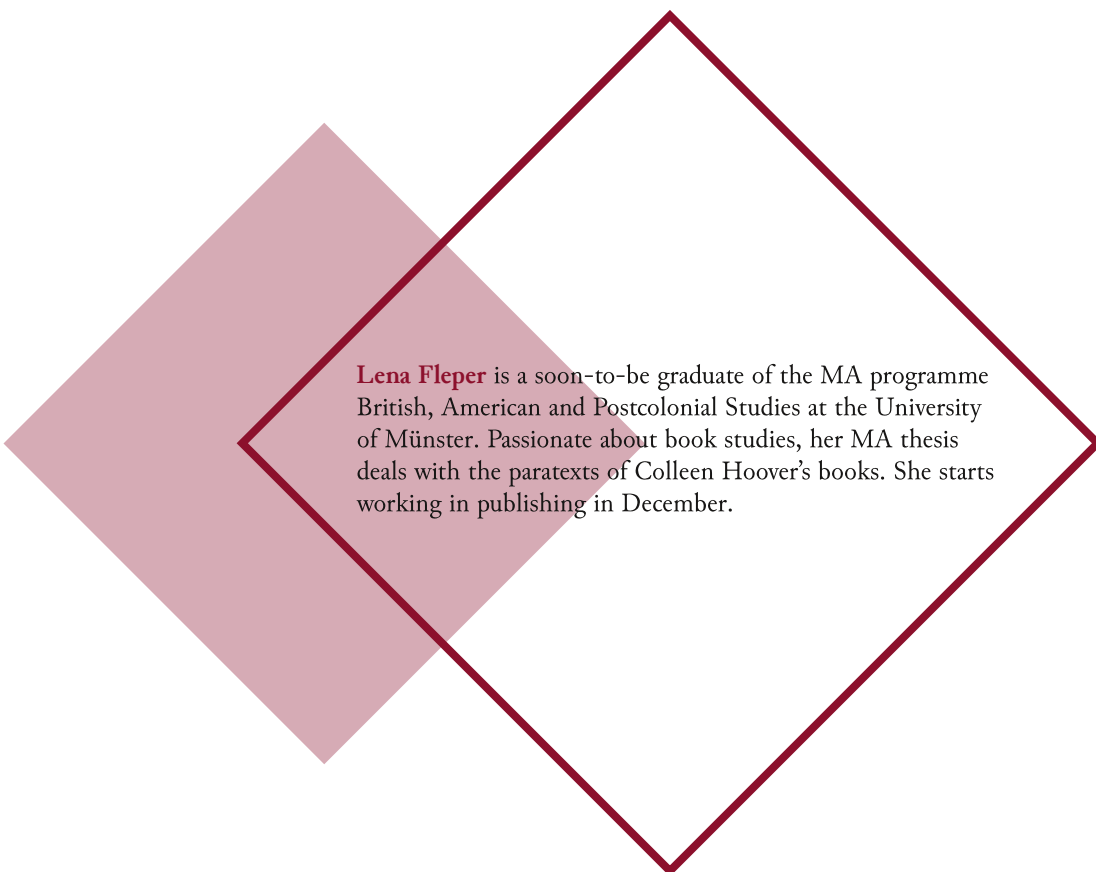
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