

Food and power: a female struggle in the woman warrior



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In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, conflicts involving hunger are clearly of significance, appearing throughout every chapter of her memoir from "No Name Woman" to "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe." Paul Outka's "Publish or Perish: Food, Hunger and Self-Construction in *The Woman Warrior*" argues that Kingston uses food to symbolize body and mind; while food fulfills physical need, it also represents desire and aspirations. More specifically, Outka believes the narrator Maxine struggles with adhering to the traditional Chinese expectations of women (her physical need) while being unrestrained in her expression of identity through writing *The Woman Warrior* (her non-physical desires). While not explicitly disagreeing with Outka's interpretation, I would like to take Kingston's use of food in a different direction: toward defining one's identity through their power over food. Kingston uses female struggles with food to thread a common issue through the novel, an issue faced by No Name Woman, Fa Mulan, Brave Orchid and eventually Maxine. By understanding each woman's individual struggles with food, we come to learn more about each woman's unique identity. Therefore, triumphs over food within Chinese culture reflect each woman's power, or lack thereof: Kingston proves that female power is a culmination of physical and mental strength.

No Name Woman's lack of control over food, through her struggle with Chinese societal norms, results in her existence being erased and her soul left eternally hungry, the ultimate debasement of power. When explaining No Name Woman's adultery through the perspective of the villagers, Kingston says, "Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during the good times, became a crime when the village needed food." Therefore, No Name Woman's fatal

violation of societal norms is creating another female mouth to feed during famine, rather than the sexual immorality of her actions; the severity of adultery – wavering between “mistake” and “crime” – depends solely on food availability. No Name Woman, living with her own family, is perhaps cast away from her husband’s household for the same reason her child brings along her demise. Women are a waste of resources, especially when food is scarce. This ideology crushes No Name Woman under its immense weight, like the Sitting Ghost pressed upon Brave Orchid’s chest, “absorbing her energy and getting heavier” (69). Bringing upon a figurative curse of death upon her family – she “killed us” – and being shunned and rejected by her community, No Name Woman is left unimaginably ashamed and nearly powerless, a “dead ghost” who had “never been born” (14). Unable to cope with the hatred of her reality, No Name Woman uses her last token of power, her physical body, to enact revenge on the villagers through her “spite suicide, drowning herself in the drinking water” (16). No Name Woman’s defeat by the village’s expectations surrounding food and women cost her life and honor, but her true punishment, her true loss of power, comes after death and continues through generations of silence.

No Name Woman’s village deliberately denies her existence and kinship to reflect her “crime” upon her forgotten soul, sentencing the aunt to a desolate eternity of hunger. Imagining No Name Woman’s afterlife, Kingston explains, “Her betrayal so maddened them, they saw to it that she would suffer forever, even after death. Always hungry, always needing, she would have to beg food from other ghosts” (16). By reintroducing the conflict of hunger in her afterlife, Kingston reveals that No Name Woman never escapes

the repercussions of her defeat by the Chinese ideology of food. To the villagers, No Name Woman's daughter, a blasphemous waste of food, threatens to worsen the hunger of everyone in the community; "could people who hatch their own chicks and eat the embryos...could such people engender a prodigal aunt?" (6). They choose to punish the aunt by enforcing and magnifying that same threat upon her afterlife, leaving her ghost as hungry as they imagine the village would become. The tragic and chilling truth, however, is that being subjected to starvation in the equivalent of a Chinese hell is not the full extent of No Name Woman's punishment, nor is it the most heart wrenching. What else can you take from a woman who loses her honor, her life, her child, and her family? No Name Woman's kin refuse to say her name. The aunt's last bastion of power, the memory and story of her existence, is repressed and forgotten as though she had "never been born"; Kingston admits, "there is more to this silence: they want me to participate in her punishment. And I have" (16). No Name Woman is an entity completely removed of all power (although the vast majority of women in China had little to begin with). She is left physically weakened before death, but mentally – her thoughts, beliefs, and memory of her life – made nonexistent, until Kingston breaks the cycle of punishment by writing "No Name Woman." If No Name Woman displays the loss of power that follows the constraints of food in Chinese society, then Fa Mu Lan depicts the opposite, a story of liberation and discovery that follows domination over food.

Fa Mu Lan's survival training grants triumph over food by allowing her to repress hunger, granting the mental and physical strength to become an

unworldly woman warrior. Unlike the erased memory of No Name Woman, Fa Mu Lan's successes are proudly passed down for generations. After her enlightening encounter with a vision of two golden, multiethnic dancers, Fa Mu Lan attributes the experience to hunger: "It would seem that this small crack in the mystery was opened, not so much by the old people's magic, as by hunger" (27). By surviving in barren wilderness, Fa Mu Lan conquers food by overcoming her body's starvation; the completion of her "survival test" proves she is no longer dependent on the male-driven Chinese society to feed her (28). This defeat of hunger, prompting the "crack in the mystery" to widen, opens Fa Mu Lan's mind, granting her the mental strength and capacity that contributes to her immense power. She now comprehends the complexity of time, "spinning and fixed like the North Star," perceives the precious equality of all humanity, "how peasant's clothes are golden," and foresees a strange "machine-future" (27). As Fa Mulan realizes that her mental strength, and therefore power, comes from defeating food, the hunger segment of her training ends. Fa Mu Lan's triumph over hunger, opening her mind to grand insights, serves as the gateway to attaining her physical strength, the other component of female power. Only after completing her "survival test" can she begin her dragon training, in which she "worked every day" to strain and empower her body - even "exercising in the downpour" during the rain (29). After completing her training, Fa Mu Lan's relationship with food persists through her journey and battles, allowing her to slay corrupt barons and overthrow an evil emperor; "when I get hungry enough, then killing and falling are dancing too" (27). By triumphing over the social norms of food and women, Fa Mu Lan is able to attain great power through her immense physical and mental prowess, using <https://assignbuster.com/food-and-power-a-female-struggle-in-the-woman-warrior/>

her power to become the avenging, sword-wielding, woman warrior of legend.

Brave Orchid, like Fa Mu Lan, exerts a commanding control over food, but rather than embrace starvation, Brave Orchid balks at it; a woman who can eat anything will never go hungry. During Brave Orchid's struggle with the Sitting Ghost, she boldly proclaims, " you are a puny little boulder indeed. Yes, when I get my oil, I will fry you for breakfast" (71). Unfazed, Brave Orchid vows to " fry you for breakfast," a proclamation of authority over food; Brave Orchid can and will eat anything, even the powerful, hairy, grotesque beast that threatens to consume her. In a battle between two eaters, who becomes the food? Brave Orchid's viscous verbal assault on the Sitting Ghost, an onslaught of insults and threats, demonstrates that even when physically overpowered, the mental tenacity gained by her control of food allows her to overwhelm and " eat" her opponent. The Sitting Ghost itself is ironically a strong eater too, emphasizing Brave Orchid's victory; she explains that " it's a good thing I stopped it feeding on me, blood and meat would have given it strength to feed on you" (73). Therefore, it is Brave Orchid's lack of pickiness, her eagerness to eat anything she needs to, that grants her the power to defeat the Sitting Ghost.

Decades later as a mother, Brave Orchid remains just as fearless an eater, carrying her control over food from ghost-fighting talk story into daily, family life. When retelling the story of eating monkeys' brains, Brave Orchid is not disgusted in the slightest, exclaiming, " you should have seen the faces the monkey made. The people laughed at the monkey screaming" (92). Although seemingly cruel, Brave Orchid's unabashed storytelling reflects her

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perspective that anything is food; live monkeys or Sitting Ghosts, nothing is too obscure for her palate. As a response to the belief that women are a waste of food, burdensome “ maggots in the rice,” Brave Orchid’s adaptation is one made for survival in China (43). In order to claim victory over hunger, she must purge her sympathies and readily consume anything if needed. Eating live monkeys is finding food, not torturing souls. This mindset contrasts strongly with Fa Mu Lan’s – to not kill animals, only eating roots and nuts – exemplifying their differences in triumphs over food. While different paths to this common goal exist, Brave Orchid attempts to enforce her perspective upon her Chinese-American children, “ ‘ Eat! Eat!’ my mother would shout at our heads bent over bowls, the blood pudding awobble in the middle of the table” (92). Brave Orchid wants to share her dominance over food with her children, urging them to expand their range of food with the hope that, like her, the children could “ contend against the hairy beasts whether flesh or ghost” (92). To Brave Orchid, her children must be accustomed to eating anything, from raccoons to turtles, because the power that accompanies control over food is vital to surviving in the ghost-filled, foreign land of America. Brave Orchid is a champion, a bold, fearless eater who disregards Chinese norms of food by consuming anything in her path; the power Brave Orchid gains through triumphs over food allows her to defeat all enemies – “ big eaters win” (90).

In contrast to Brave Orchid’s dominance over food, Maxine’s relationship with food is unstable, representing her shifting identity and expression of power. When Maxine reflects upon the legend of Fa Mu Lan, she thinks, “ If I could not-eat, perhaps I could make myself a warrior like the swordswoman

who drives me. I will – I must – rise and plow the fields as soon as the baby comes out” (48). Maxine imagines herself in control of food, able to “ not eat,” acknowledging that Fa Mu Lan’s power is sourced from her ability to embrace hunger. However, this scenario is unreachable for Maxine. She will never have mystical survival training amongst the white tigers, regardless of how strongly she searches for it; “ My brain momentarily lost its depth perception. I was that eager to find an unusual bird (49). Maxine forfeits this aspiration, conceding to “ rise and plow the fields as soon as the baby comes out,” exposing her fears that being unable to “ not eat” will make Chinese female subservience her fate.

Like Maxine’s inability to attain Fa Mu Lan’s control of hunger, her attempts to replicate Brave Orchard’s management of food also ends in failure. When responding to Brave Orchid’s dishes of squid eyes, blood pudding, and strange brown masses, Maxine expresses her revulsion, clearly stating, “ I would live on plastic” (92). Maxine’s preference of inedible plastic to her mother’s cooking, although stated semi-jokingly, strongly emphasizes the contrast between Brave Orchid and Maxine’s view of food. Maxine is a picky eater, incapable of Brave Orchid’s indiscriminate appetite toward anything and everything. Maxine’s American tastes diminish her desire for traditional Chinese staples; she would deny bowls of rice from the old couple in White Tigers, thinking to herself, “ do you have any cookies? I like chocolate chip cookies” (21). The American portion of her identity prohibits her from inheriting Brave Orchard’s power; Maxine’s taste buds have assimilated. Therefore, Maxine, who cannot escape her reliance on society for food by

overcoming starvation like Fa Mu Lan, also fails to embrace her mother's lack of pickiness when eating.

Although Maxine does not dominate or control her food like Fa Mu Lan or Brave Orchid, she still possesses power like a woman warrior. To prove that she has overcome the ideology that women are a waste of food, distancing herself from No Name Woman, Kingston says “ When I visit my family now, I wrap my American successes around me like a private shawl; I am worthy of eating the food” (52). Maxine's “ American successes,” her academic and literary triumphs, allow her to defeat the stigma that women in Chinese culture are “ maggots in the rice” – declaring she indeed is “ worthy of eating the food” (43). Since she cannot be Fa Mu Lan or Brave Orchid, she attains power by just being Maxine: using her written words to tell her life's narrative in an attempt to grasp identity. While control over food allows Fa Mu Lan to behead corrupt barons and Brave Orchid to vanquish dangerous Sitting Ghosts, Maxine's control over words empowers her to share her story, exposing the issues of gender, ethnicity, and the dubious nature of an American-Chinese identity.

By drawing parallels between control over food and possessing female power (mental and physical strength), we come to understand how conceptions of food and hunger are far more important than simply the need to nourish our bodies. Food is materialistic and elementary, but also profound, self-expressive, and vital to culture; separating groups of people from food does more than keep them hungry, it impacts their identity. This demonstrates why triumphs over the idea that women are a waste of food are so important, granting power to help fill the void created within one's identity.

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Therefore, by highlighting the few women warriors who can defeat their society's resentful attitude toward feeding them, perhaps Kingston aims to reveal a chilling dystopic tragedy: the inescapable strife of the rest of China's women, more like No Name Woman than Fa Mu Lan, suppressed by the notion of being a burden, an unfortunate waste of food.