

# Silence and language in "a song for a barbarian reed pipe"



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Maxine Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* wrestles with the importance of language for Chinese-American women, using Kingston's own life experiences as the novel's foundation. In the book's final chapter, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," she details her developing relationship with silence and language. Kingston voices her frustration and mistrust of Chinese tradition in that both its speaking and silence elude connection to her. She argues that she must find a voice of her own, as a Chinese-American woman, in order to bridge the gap between generations and communities and that this voice must be used to empower others, not tear them down. It is through the arts that this voice takes form, be it through song or literature, as in the case of the novel.

Throughout the chapter, it is clear that Kingston's struggle to find her own voice is entwined with her struggle to make sense of the Chinese voice tradition. Is silence or loudness the embodiment of being Chinese, particularly for a Chinese woman? As a young child, she mainly identifies with silence and initially views silence as integral to being a Chinese girl – "The other Chinese girls did not talk either, so I knew the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). Silence is something she originally takes comfort in. Kingston states that she enjoyed the silence and for her it was a natural state in that "it did not occur to [her] that [she] was supposed to talk" (166). For her silence was not a lack of things to say but a "stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose" (165). Her silence, this stage curtain "so black and full of possibilities" (165), was only hiding the "mighty operas" on stage inside her mind.

Kingston also picks up the theme of silence, or at least the absence of communication, from the Chinese adults, particularly in the communication of passing down traditions. In one sections she talks about the ambiguity of Chinese holidays and how “ even the good things are unspeakable” (185). No one tells her when holidays are and “ the adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask” (185) She rightly questions “ how can Chinese keep any traditions at all?” (185), pointing out that one of the downsides of the silence she grew up with is that it stifles continuity between generations. The lack of communication is largely responsible for the disconnect between Chinese and Chinese Americans, which Kingston notes leaves much uncertainty for the younger generation in dealing with challenges in life. “ If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death” (185) Her statement may allude to the Biblical Garden of Eden, where it was not until God told Adam and Eve about the Tree of Knowledge that they stumbled into the ups and downs of mortality. This construes silence as an almost infantile state, one in which there is shielding from both bad and good things in life. Here we see Kingston disdainful of the gaps in knowledge that this state leaves.

So then what about loudness and sound? Kingston does provide evidence that perhaps it is loudness that embodies the Chinese woman. The silence that pervades the Chinese girls in American school quickly evaporates once at Chinese school; “ The girls were not mute. They screamed and yelled during recess, when there were no rules; they had fist-fights” (167). Here she seems to argue that it is the American school environment that induces the quietness in her and other girls; once put in a Chinese environment they

adapt the Chinese expression form. Her father also comments on this later in the chapter, “ Why is it I can hear Chinese from blocks away? Is it that I understand the language? Or is it they talk loud?” (171) Kingston goes on to describe the irreverence of a Chinese audience at a piano recital, because “ Chinese can’t hear Americans at all” (172). And then she lays it out rather plainly by saying, “ Normal Chinese women’s voices are strong and bossy” (172). Strong and bossy, loud and irreverent, this is what is presented to Kingston as the manifestation of Chinese. Yet the Chinese loud voice does not resonate with her. Her own judgement is reflected when she says, “ You can see the disgust on American faces...it isn’t just the loudness. It is the way Chinese sounds, chingchong ugly...not beautiful” (171). She is embarrassed by the loud Chinese tradition of banging pot lids during the eclipse and distrusts the Chinese voice for “ they want to capture your voice for their own use” (169).

For Kingston this mistrust of Chinese voice plays a large part in the miscommunication between the Chinese and the Chinese Americans. Throughout the entire novel and especially in this chapter, Kingston struggles to understand which stories she hears from her mother are truthful and which are jokes. Speaking of her mother’s stories, she shouts, “ They scramble me up. You lie with stories...I can’t tell the difference” (202). This outburst comes from years of pent up angst about Kingston’s fears of being sold off into marriage and all of the many derogatory comments made about women, especially her and her Chinese American sisters. Her mother, countering Kingston’s accusations, shouts back “ You can’t even tell a joke from real life” and “ That’s what Chinese say. We like to say the opposite”

(202-3). There is clearly a gap of understanding between Kingston and her mother. This gap is symbolized in the ordeal with her mother cutting Kingston's frenum, an act that invokes both pride and terror in her heart. Her mother claims she "cut it so that you would not be tongue-tied. Your tongue would be able to move in any language" (164). Kingston has a distrust of her mother's reasoning and blames it for making her have a "terrible time talking," the cut "tampering with my speech" (165). So was her mother trying to silence her or free her tongue? Kingston brings up that "the Chinese say 'a ready tongue is an evil' yet her mother counters that "Things are different in this ghost country" (164). This paradox of the tongue symbolizes the ambiguities and miscommunications between the Chinese and Chinese Americans and also points out the importance of location for the guidelines of communication.

In order for her to bridge the gap between hers and her parents' generation, she must find her own voice; Kingston make clear what is at stake if she can't. On page 186 she explains, "I thought talking and not talking made the difference between sanity and insanity. Insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves." She goes on to tell about Crazy Mary and Pee-A-Nah, both women who grew into adulthood unable to communicate with the world. Kingston is fearful of becoming like these women; "I did not want to be our crazy one" (190). So how does Kingston figure she can avoid this fate? She has all of these fantasies and imaginary conversations in her mind, the opera that her period of black paint was hiding, and it is the need to communicate these inner truths that leads her to make her list, "a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother so that she would know

the true things about me and stop the pain in my throat" (197). Kingston and other Chinese-American women need their own voice. She needs her voice to bridge the gap between her mother, she needs her voice to bridge the gap between her and the outside world. " If only I could let my mother know the list, she – and the world – would become more like me, and I would never be alone again" (198). Here we see another negative of silence: isolation.

Kingston hopes that finding her own voice will empower her in connecting with her mother and with her community.

So then what voice does Kingston advocate for? In one sense we can answer this by looking for what she advocates against – voices which demean others. Throughout the novel and especially in this chapter the voices of her mother and relatives tear her down. We can see the emotional and mental trauma wrought about Kingston as a result of this verbal abuse, including a self-hatred of her own silence and failings. In a climactic and jarring confrontation, Kingston takes out her self-loathing on the little silent Chinese girl in the bathroom after school hours. Kingston channels all of her powers to bully the girl into speaking, berating her with phrases like " You're disgusting" and " You're such a nothing" (178). When Kingston herself starts to cry, we see that she is projecting her insecurities onto this little girl and interrogating them in a voice reminiscent of her mother's – " You think somebody's going to marry you...Nobody's going to notice you. You're so dumb. Why do I waste my time on you?" (180-1) Kingston reflects, " It seemed as if I had spent my life in that basement, doing the worst thing I had yet done to another person" (181). Here she is, having found a loud and outspoken voice like her mothers, using that voice to bring down and

traumatize a younger girl. This is clearly not the voice that Kingston advocates, and she uses this story to warn us of the dangers involved in misusing a powerful voice.

Instead, Kingston argues for a voice that empowers others and internalizes nuances. In the beginning of this chapter, she compares her brother's talk-story to hers – " His version of the story may be better than mine because of its bareness, not twisted into designs. The hearer can carry it tucked away without it taking up much room" (163). However Kingston wants the opposite; she wants her talk-story to resist easy digestion and to imbue the nuances and fantasies that reflect her thinking. Alluding to the Chinese knot-maker lore, she says, " If I had lived in China, I would have been an outlaw knot-maker" (163). She needs a voice that allows her to tie stories that are complex.

Kingston presents an example of the voice she seeks at the end of the novel, where she relays the tale of Ts'ai Yen. This master poetess was captured by barbarians whose haunting music " disturbed [her]; its sharpness and its cold made her ache" (208). This music prompts her to sing " a song so high and clear...about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger...Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along" (209). The voice of Ts'ai Yen transcends the language barrier and speaks to the emotions and aching of the barbarians. Additionally, the song was able to be passed down to her children and eventually becomes a Chinese household song. This is the voice Kingston desires, a voice of Chinese origins that can speak to the universal human experience, a voice that can bridge the gap between the Chinese and

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those born outside of China. She postulates a voice that is penetrating but not overbearing, a truthful voice that resonates between generations. In a manner arguing for the necessity of her novel, Kingston champions the arts as the avenue for this voice. It is through song and reed pipes that Ts'ai Yen and the barbarians connect; it is through literature that Kingston hopes to connect Chinese and American-born.