

Male or Female: An Analysis of the Two Couples in “White Tigers” in *The Woman Warrior*

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Abstract: *The Woman Warrior*, written by Maxine Hong Kingston, depicts some either real or imaginary stories focusing on five women, with several male images connected with those mainly portrayed females. However, the two couples in “White Tigers” maintain a kind of harmonious relationship and bear some subversive character features, compared with others in the novel, even in other literary works. This paper makes an analysis of the two couples’ major characteristics through close reading, explores the probable causes by seeking the cultural origins and from the perspective of historical criticism, and then draws the conclusion that the two couples are testaments to androgyny, which, indeed, cannot go without Eastern philosophy, Western mythology and the experiences of Maxine Hong Kingston.

Keywords: *The Woman Warrior*, “White Tigers”, *The Two Couples*, Cultural Origins, Historical Criticism, Androgyny

1. Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston may be the “the most widely taught living American author”^[1]. Her best-known masterpiece, *The Woman Warrior* with a subtitle—“Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts”, demonstrates the living state of Chinese American women and her own dilemma among a variety of “ghosts.” As a storyteller and parodist, she also blends Chinese and Western culture through recreating legends or stories, in which case she manages to express her thoughts and intentions. On the grounds of her creativity and popularity, Maxine Hong Kingston is a big winner of National Book Awards, with her works as required readings at many American universities.

The Woman Warrior is, therefore, a favorite of many critics and has been studied from numerous perspectives. King-Kok Cheung, for example, studies the “imposed silence” while Shirley Nelson the “breaking silence.” Yuan Shu, however, pays more attention to the cultural politics and female subjectivity, compared with Malini Schueller who centers on race and gender issues. Besides, there are mythological critics like Ziqing Zhang, deconstruction ones like Ruoqian Pu, or feminism ones like Simon Shepherd. Instead of these perspectives, this paper has its eyes on the specific characters—the two couples—in “White Tigers.”

The two couples, as indicated by some commentators, are representative of androgyny but few of them continue in-depth studies. Also, most scholars focus more on text analysis or critical theories than on its author or historical background. Hence, this paper tends to analyze the two couples between the lines as well as beyond the lines, so as to explore the relationship between the work and other literature, between the work and its author.

2. The Two Couples: Being Whole and Seeking the Other Half

“White Tigers” tells a girl’s journey to martial arts and revenge. With a leading bird, she climbs onto a mountain, where an old couple trains her to become a warrior for the sake of her whole village. Invincible and far-famed, she guides her army to do away with the merciless emperor, as well as the corpulent baron, then sticking at her filial piety. Though representing a serious of combats and revenge, this short story also sheds light on the other side—harmony, reflected in the two couples.

The old couple, appearing as two martial arts masters and maintaining a harmonious relationship, is an indivisible whole. Arguably, they are designated by the narrator as “the old man and old woman,” “the old couple” or “the two old people,” never present alone; while they also claim themselves as “we” or

“us”. It seems that they are part of an integral whole, interwoven and interdependent. They are dancers dancing the future, so harmonious so that the girl begins to understand “how one of the dancers is always a man and the other a woman”^[2]. Then, they turn into tall angels in two rows, with “high white wings on their backs”^[2]. Love of purity pervades the dance of holiness. In the following years, what the girl discerns is that the old man may be a handsome young man, strapping with long black hair while the old woman a fair young woman. She then ponders that “the old woman was to the old man a sister or a friend rather than a wife”^[2], which is in sharp contrast with the feudal ethical codes in the male-dominated society. As for the discourse, for instance, when talking about revenge, the old man persuades her: “Or you can stay with us and learn how to fight barbarians and bandits”^[2]. Then comes the old woman’s words: “You can avenge your village”^[2]. Also, when the distraught girl wants to save the two boys, the old man warns: “You’re only fourteen years old. You’d get hurt for nothing”^[2]. So does the old woman: “Wait until you are twenty-two. You’ll be big then and more skillful”^[2]. Therefore, in a manner of speaking, the unity of thinking embodies in their actions or words. They are not so much as two separated individuals as an indivisible whole of androgyny and gender equality.

As regards the young couple, both of them display androgynous features and pursuit of harmony as the old couple does. The woman warrior, courageous and heroic, gains honor and glory in the battlefields; while her husband, affectionate and exquisite, looks for her everywhere. By seeking the other half, they reach a balance of gender—a long-sought harmony.

The journey on the mountains can be interpreted as the seeking of manliness, where the woman warrior learns martial arts and becomes more valiant. In her eyes, armors are no more designed specially for men but for women. She puts on her men’s clothes and ties her hair in a man’s fashion, winning many admirers. When she is pregnant, her “masculinity” gets even stronger: “I wore my armor altered so that I looked like a powerful, big man. As a fat man, I walked with the foot soldiers so as to jounce the gestation”^[2]. However, on the contrary, her husband bears some feminine features. For instance, when seeing the scar-words on her back, he cannot help weeping; when she gives birth to their baby, he talks to her and not go; and when the battles renew, it is the husband who takes the baby to his family. Both of them, so to speak, are androgynous. Their relationship is subversive but well-established. As childhood playmates, they love each other so much and ride “side by side into battle”^[2]. Like the old couple, they also achieve the consummate unity and succeed to be whole.

Actually, androgyny is one of the similarities between the two couples though expressed in different ways. Just as Yueshi Zhou puts in his essay: “In fact, the concept of ‘androgyny’ has gone through the cutting process from the ‘androgyny’ of the same body to the ‘bisexual’ of the split”^[3]. The old couple shows the “androgyny” of the same body while the young one displays that of the separated bodies, but still with a desire for being whole.

3. Cultural Origins: Eastern Philosophy and Western Mythology

The old couple’s being whole and the young couple’s seeking the other half match some cultural origins well, from Eastern philosophy to Western mythology. Androgyny, therefore, can be attributed to those sources to some degree.

On a par with Confucianism, Taoism also occupies an important position in ancient Chinese society and is handed down generation by generation. Nevertheless, instead of advocating the “masculine, managing, hard, dominating, aggressive, rational and donative attitudes of the rival Confucian”^[4], Taoists put more emphasis on the balance of yin and yang. As is illustrated in the eight diagrams of Tai Chi, yin and yang blend mutually—one has something of the other. Two halves with the same area constitute a whole. So do male and female. Their relationship should be as harmonious as the eight diagrams. In other words, androgyny can be deemed as a token of harmony, as is shown in the case of the two couples. In effect, this kind of pursuit of balance epitomizes “the natural tao”:

The natural tao pursues balance, and where his balance is upset, it acts to restore equilibrium. Similarly, as a compensatory measure to respond to and redress a predominance of “masculine” attitudes, the Lao Tzu is advocating the extension from “masculine” to embrace “feminine” qualities as an appropriate antidote for the imbalance.^[4]

So the androgynous features of the two couples can be regarded as “antidote for the imbalance.” As a result, there is not “predominance” any longer. Besides, in the text, the old couple tucks the girl into a bed just her width, saying: “Breathe evenly, or you’ll lose your balance and fall out”^[2]. An admiration of the natural tao gleams in their mind.

Apart from the natural tao, the constant tao also counts for much. “It is changing in the sense that it is the locus of all phenomenal change, yet it is unchanging in the sense that it suffers neither increase nor diminution”^[4]. The old couple’s case conforms with the constant tao appropriately in that they are both changing and unchanging. They now become two golden people “dancing the earth’s dances”^[2], Chinese, African, Javanese, Hindu Indian or American Indian dances included, and now turn into machine-future dancers, with centuries passing in moments. They even metamorphose into white-winged angels. However, they always convert back into their original look, ultimately remaining “unchanging.” In spite of ever-changing appearances or surroundings, their indivisibility keeps everything constant.

Roger T. Ames contends that “The consummate person is an analogue to the natural tao, and the consummate person is an analogue to the constant tao”^[4]. The two couples can go under the title of “consummate persons” on account of their balance and constancy. Their androgyny is similar to Taoism in this sense.

Moreover, a reference to Western mythology is more often than not a must when it comes to cultural sources. As expected, there are many myths making the case for androgyny. K. J. Dover states in “Aristophanes’ Speech in Plato’s Symposium” like this:

Once upon a time, all human beings were double creatures, each with two heads, two bodies, and eight limbs. Then, by the command of Zeus, each double creature was cut in half, and so humans as we know them came into being. Every one of us “seeks his other half”, and this search is Eros.^[5]

This demonstrates that the original ideal form of human beings is just androgyny, like the indivisible old couple in “White Tigers.” As for the young couple, they are on a journey of seeking the missing half. When meeting in the tent, the husband says affectionately: “I’ve looked for you everywhere”^[2], and the woman warrior responds: “I’ve looked for you too”^[2]. This search is their Eros—their sincere love. Hence after her husband comes back to his family, the woman warrior gets “so lonely with the tent so empty”^[2]. It is the separation that makes her empty-minded once more.

From another perspective, as is mentioned above, the two couples show the androgyny of the same body and the separated bodies respectively, according to which there are also some Greek mythology archetypes. For instance, Gaea, the personification of Earth, brings forth three children though without a mate. She may be androgynous to accomplish it by herself. Hermaphroditus, the son of Aphrodite and Hermes, acquires female physical characteristics for love, while Athena, the goddess of war, wears solid armors and shows great prowess. They can be counterparts of the feminine husband and the valiant woman warrior, both representing androgyny.

As a Chinese-American writer, Maxine Hong Kingston is fully exposed to Eastern as well as Western culture, so her work can be seen as a hybrid of both. Therefore, the odds are that the characters in “White Tigers” are influenced by Eastern philosophy and Western mythology to a certain extent.

4. Historical Criticism: Living Environment and Personal Insights of Maxine Hong Kingston

A question may be posed that why only Maxine Hong Kingston, rather than others with the same cultural settings, pays close attention to androgyny. Arguably, this may have something to with her growth environment and her own genius.

To understand her perspective, it is essential to probe into her family environment in the first place. “American in the early twentieth century had little use for an educated immigrant whose years of extensive training in the ancient Chinese classics had honed his expertise in and passion for traditional Chinese philosophy, poetry, and calligraphy”^[6]. Her father, therefore, is “forced to work as a window washer and invest a laundry in New York’s Chinatown”^[6], keeping the Chinese tradition in his bosom. He has to be engaged in considerably less respectable employment and fails to get a superior status in American society. On the contrary, Maxine’s mother, Chew Ying Lan “first trains in medicine and midwifery at To Keung school and then travels alone to meet her husband”^[6]. Courageous and independent, she puts her medical skills to good use, as is mentioned in “Shaman.” Her proficiency in storytelling “provides her daughter with additional information about the family history”^[6]. From this point, her father’s infusion of Chinese philosophy and her mother’s storytelling can provide inspirations for Maxine’s works. Also, the androgyny of the young couple can be regarded as a recreation of reality in view of her “frail” father and her “brave” mother. Besides, her Chinese name “Ting Ting” is derived from a poem and refuses to choose the character component of “female,” in that her parents expect her to be independent. She herself also repeatedly stresses this matter in public. Woman as she is, she goes for independence and equality decidedly, like a woman warrior.

Furthermore, Maxine's depiction of androgyny is disclosure as well as anti-stereotype to the historical and cultural phenomenon. Michelle M. Tokarczyk writes in her book:

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century, 90 percent of Chinese immigrants were male. This strikingly high percentage combined with anti-miscegenation laws and laws preventing laborers' wives from entering the United States forced many Chinese immigrants to live in bachelor communities. Chinese and Chinese-American men were tolerated because they were emasculated, often cast in film roles as "sissies". Women, in contrast, were granted excessive femininity, often stereotyped as dainty and submissive. Certainly, these gender stereotypes create tension between Asian-American men and women.^[7]

The Woman Warrior is a book focusing on women, so Maxine needs to concentrate on the anti-stereotype to women. Just as she states: "Quite often I feel forced to write against the stereotype"^[1]. Adding masculinity to them can be her powerful weapon against those stereotypes. As for the femininity of men, she is likely to reveal the living actuality of some emasculated "sissies." Both of these purposes can be realized by means of androgyny.

Last but not least, however, Maxine's experiences and insights must have also contributed to her wonderful whim. For example, she reads the works of Walt Whitman and Virginia Woolf, who are advocates of the harmony between men and women. She declares in an interview: "I love that throughout Leaves of Grass Walt Whitman always says 'men and women,' 'male and female.' He's so different from other writers of his time, and even this time"^[1]. She is also impressed by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, in which "Orlando can be a man, Orlando can be a woman"^[1]. And it is Virginia Woolf who puts forward the conception of androgyny, as "the founder of western feminist literary criticism"^[8]. In *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf even describes the harmony of sexes like this: "If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her"^[9]. The two couples fit this description very well. And Maxine's imagination is the icing on the cake for her brilliant work, just as she points out in the interview:

What we need to do is to be able to imagine the possibility of a playful, peaceful, nurturing, mothering man, and we need to imagine the possibilities of a powerful, nonviolent woman and the possibilities of harmonious communities—and if we can just imagine them, that would be the first step toward building them and becoming them.^[1]

When a meeting of inspiration and imagination occurs, it is not so surprising that Maxine can create such two harmonious couples in her work.

5. Conclusion

The Woman Warrior, mostly interpreted as a feminist masterpiece, is in witness of Maxine's gender view of androgyny. This view can be forcefully reflected in the two couples' characteristics in "White Tigers." However, reading beyond the lines may urge the readers to think further. As it were, not only do Chinese philosophy, especially Taoism, and Greek mythology take root in this Chinese-American author's mind, but she is also adept in drawing her inspirations from the historical environment as well as the experienced predecessors, from her story-telling parents to those inspirational writers. An analysis of these causes is supposed to make the expression of androgyny in this work better understood.

To be sure, this paper is still in need of improvement. Besides the perspective of cultural origins seeking or historical criticism, there are still other points of view to be studied. More multi-perspective analyses are expected in the future, which hopefully would be conducive to the promotion of research for this literary work.

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