



# Transitivity and Narrative Therapy in *The Woman Warrior*

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### ABSTRACT

Since its publication in 1976, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has aroused widespread concerns and discussions in both China and abroad. This book is regarded as the pioneering work of Contemporary Chinese American literature and a masterpiece of feminism, relevant research serves to figure out the dilemma from which the Chinese American females suffered, as well as their struggle to fight against the racial and sexual discrimination attached to them. The present study is concerned with the identity of the Chinese Americans represented by Kingston herself as well as the author's purport of adapting ancient Chinese tales, while ignoring the process of the protagonist's self-awakening and how she employed narration to reconstruct her identity and getting access to education and power. This paper will focus on the therapeutic properties of narration in *The Woman Warrior* with the assistance of transitivity analysis, which illustrates that transitivity can reveal a character's thinking pattern and that narration can help the narrator perceive the world in a more positive way and gain the necessary strength to fight for her own rights.

**Keywords:** *The Woman Warrior*; Maxine Hong Kingston; transitivity; narrative therapy

### 1 Introduction

Widely identified as the starting point of Contemporary Chinese American literature, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has elicited interest all across the world and is still intensively analyzed today. Belonging to the generation of Chinese Americans born after World War II, Maxine, since her birth, lived in the gap between the Chinese and American cultures and suffered from the othering (Said, 1999) of American society. The sharp contrast between these two cultures rendered Maxine lost in identity. Her parents' stories of Chinese society, the main source of ideologies Maxine absorbed, were obviously incompatible with the American culture they lived in. In addition, the unprivileged state prevented Maxine from forming and expressing her independent thoughts. However, as she grew older, she could gradually identify the lies from the truth and consciously employ narration to reconstruct her own identity as intelligent and strong. In this way, she interacted with society actively, instead of passively being influenced by others. The shift from inertness and obedience to self-awareness and rebellion is a common experience shared by most people during their growth. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analyze how Maxine achieved the transformation and got rid of self-doubt and inferiority complex.

Previous research mainly focuses on Maxine's attitude toward Chinese and American cultures, ignoring the dynamic transformation of Kingston's identity and how she succeeded in balancing the conflicting forces in the two cultures. For instance, the adaptation of Chinese tales such as *Mulan* and *Ts'ai Yen* in this novel is analyzed by Yang Chun (2004), and the function of ghosts is studied by He Xue (2005). Although some critics have illustrated the construction of Kingston's identity (see, for instance, Pu & Rao, 2006), they have not noticed the important role narration played in this process. Indeed, it is through narration that Kingston gradually accumulated enough strength and confidence to defy the ideologies both her parents and society forced her to accept and to strive for her proper rights to get an education and respect. It is also worth noticing that Maxine's conscious employment of narration is clearly revealed in the transitivity processes.

Narrative therapy originated from postmodern psychotherapy, which was initiated in the 1980s by Australian researcher Michael White and New Zealand researcher David Epston. In their book *Narrative Mean to Therapeutic Ends* (1990), they systematically describe the perspectives and methods of narrative psychotherapy. It helps the participants to improve their self-cognition and construct a more complete self through metaphors contained in narration. The significance of narrative therapy lies in the use of positive and appropriate language forms to help the narrator to re-establish a positive self, find a positive aspect of life, and stimulate the internal power so that the psychological and personality of the narrator can grow (Wang, 2018).

The last chapter *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Song* of *The Woman Warrior* is Maxine Hong Kingston's autobiography, in which she depicts the experience in her childhood and youth. Three excerpts are chosen from the chapter, the first paragraph is the description of her silent state in primary school, the second one is Maxine's bullying of another girl, which signifies the starting point of her rebellion against the stereotypes attached to her, and the last excerpt being her argument with her parents for rights of education and freedom. A statistical diagram demonstrating the numbers and types of the transitivity processes is given in Table 1 in the Findings.

## 2 Transitivity Features

### 2.1 Stage I: Silent and Obedient

The initial state of the protagonist is silence and obedience. Born in America after World War II, Maxine Hong Kingston suffered from double discrimination for her identity—as a Chinese, she was excluded from mainstream American society and can only live in Chinatown and receive an education there; as a female, she was unfairly treated inside the family, which resulted in her self-effacement and obedience. When she was a baby, her tongue was cut by her mother, which, to Maxine, signified her mother's deprivation of her right to speech. In this way, she became a silent Chinese girl with stories and opinions instilled in her by her parents :

During the first silent year, I spoke to no one at school, did not ask before going to the lavatory, and flunked kindergarten. My sister also said nothing for three years, silent in the playground and silent at lunch. There were other quiet Chinese girls not of our family, but most of them got over it sooner than we did. I enjoyed the silence. At first, it did not occur to me I was supposed to talk or to pass kindergarten. I talked at home and to one or two of the Chinese kids in class. I made motions and even made some jokes. I drank out of a toy saucer when the water spilled out of the cup, and everybody laughed, pointing at me, so I did it some more. I didn't know that Americans don't drink out of saucers. (Chapter 5, 146)

According to the transitivity system proposed by Halliday (1985), the altogether 20 verbs in the selected paragraph can be divided into five categories—Material (10), Behavioral (3), Mental (3), Verbal (3) and Existential (1). Over half of the Actors of the Material processes are the narrator (6 out of 10, 60%), the other three are other people, and the rest are “the water”. It seems that Maxine was an active Actor, acting upon the environment and influencing it, but, actually, she was not. In fact, in most of the cases, Maxine being the Actor witnesses her vain struggle to be accepted by the

environment, which pushed her to “made motions”, “made some jokes” and acted funny, but it turned out that all her attempt was viewed as disgraceful and ridiculous, which corresponded to their stereotypes about and prejudices against her. The other two Material processes illustrate the narrator’s disadvantage in the real world. She “flunked kindergarten” without even being aware that she was supposed to “pass” it, revealing the extremely low expectations from both her family and school because of her identity as a Chinese girl, and her flunking school, in turn, gives them a better reason to hold discriminations against her. As Lois Tyson directly points out, “Patriarchy continually exerts forces that undermine women’s self-confidence and assertiveness, then points to the absence of these qualities as proof that women are naturally, and therefore correctly, self-effacing and submissive.”

Moreover, importance should also be attached to the Behavioral, Mental and Verbal processes. Mostly, the Actor of the nine verbs is Maxine herself (7 out of 9), in the rest two cases the Actor being “my sister” and “everybody”. According to Maxine, her sister was, like herself, a representative of the silent Chinese girls, so the description of her sister, somehow, corresponds to the situation of herself. Besides, the other exception— “everybody laughed”—is people’s reaction to Maxine’s endeavour to please them by fooling herself. However, the “laugh” expressed by others shows not kindness or acceptance but sneer and rejection—they “laughed” because Maxine was innocent of the American conventions, which made her seem funny and even silly. The young Chinese girl tried to please others by repeating the action, but she was unaware that she was actually laughed at.

Furthermore, what is worth noticing is that whenever it comes to Verbal and Mental processes, they are always linked with negative expressions. For example, the Receiver of the Verbal process “spoke” is “no one”, the Target of “said” is “nothing”, and the other verb “ask” is modified by the negative finite “did not”. Besides, in the only process of emotion, the Phenomenon she “enjoyed” is “silence” instead of anything active. Apart from what is mentioned above, there are two Behavioral processes related to speech. However, the former one “talk” is restricted by “was supposed to”, which indicates that the reality is against the expectation, or to say, Maxine remained silent despite the external requirement, while the Location and Receiver of the latter Behavioral process “talked” are “at home” and “to one or two Chinese kids in class”, which illustrates the restriction of the protagonist’s power of speech—merely she only spoke to her family members and, what’s worse, inside the family it was her parents that owned the explanation of everything and inculcated their values and judgments in her. Therefore, Maxine was in a state of total silence and a lack of power. She didn’t speak, so she was unable to tell her own stories. On the other hand, Maxine didn’t speak, because she had nothing to say—she was too young to have a thorough understanding of the world and to form her own worldview. In the paragraph above, there are only two processes of cognition, yet both are negated by finite.

Last but not least, the Existential process— “There were other quiet Chinese girls”—indicates the social background of the memoir. Under the double discrimination of gender and ethnicity, these Chinese girls are deprived of various human rights. They are told to discipline themselves, to be silent and self-effacing. Finally, they all became silent girls in schools who only have space in their own families.

*2.2 Stage II: Rebellious yet Irrational*

When it comes to the second stage, Maxine became rebellious as she was increasingly aware of the misery of being silent, weak and feminine. She detested her state of being controlled, defined and arranged, and she wanted to fight against the world which kept cheating and utilizing her. Unlike her complete trust in the narration of her parents in the initial stage, she then grew suspicious of their stories and could gradually tell lies from the truth. In the meanwhile, however, she was still immature and irrational. She was unwilling to obey her parents, yet she had not enough strength to fight back, so she could only transfer her anger to a weaker little girl:

“You’re going to talk,” I said, my voice steady and normal, as it is when talking to the familiar, the weak, and the small. “I am going to make you talk, you sissy-girl.” She stopped backing away and stood fixed.

I looked into her face so I could hate it close up. She wore black bangs, and her cheeks were pink and white. She was baby soft. I thought that I could put my thumb on her nose and push it bonelessly in, indent her face. I could poke dimples into her cheeks. I could work her face around like dough. She stood still, and I did not want to look at her face anymore; I hated fragility. I walked around her, looked her up and down the way the Mexican and Negro girls did when they fought, so tough. I hated her weak neck, the way it did not support her head but let it droop; her head would fall backward. I stared at the curve of her nape. I wished I was able to see what my own neck looked like from the back and sides. I hoped it did not look like hers; I wanted a stout neck. I grew my hair long to hide it in case it was a flower-stem neck. I walked around to the front of her to hate her face some more.

I reached up and took the fatty part of her cheek, not dough, but meat, between my thumb and finger. This close, and I saw no pores. “Talk,” I said. “Are you going to talk?” Her skin was fleshy, like squid out of which the glassy blades of bones had been pulled. I wanted tough skin, hard brown skin. I had callused my hands; I had scratched dirt to blacken the nails, which I cut straight across to make stubby fingers. I gave her face a squeeze. “Talk.” When I let go, the pink rushed back into my white thumbprint on her skin. I walked around to her side. “Talk!” I shouted into the side of her head. Her straight hair hung, the same all these years, no ringlets or braids or permanents. I squeezed her other cheek. “Are you? Huh? Are you going to talk?” She tried to shake her head, but I had hold of her face. She had no muscles to jerk away. Her skin seemed to stretch. I let go in horror. What if it came away in my hand? “No, huh?” I said, rubbing the touch of her off my fingers. “Say ‘No,’ then,” I said. I gave her another pinch and a twist. “Say ‘No.’” She shook her head, her straight hair turning with her head, not swinging side to side like the pretty girls’. She was so neat. Her neatness bothered me. I hated the way she folded the wax paper from her lunch; she did not wad her brown paper bag and her school papers. I hated her clothes—the blue pastel cardigan, the white blouse with the collar that lay flat over the cardigan, the homemade flat, cotton skirt she wore when everybody else was wearing flared skirts. I hated pastels; I would wear black always. I squeezed again, harder, even though her cheek had a weak rubbery feeling I did not like. I squeezed one cheek, then the other, back and forth until the tears ran out of her eyes as if I had pulled them out.

“Stop crying,” I said, but although she habitually followed me around, she did not obey. Her eyes dripped; her nose dripped. She wiped her eyes with her papery fingers. The skin on her hands and arms seemed powdery-dry, like tracing paper, onion skin. I hated her fingers. I could snap them like breadsticks. I pushed her hands down. (Chapter 5, 155-156)

Unlike the abundant negations in the first stage, most of the verbs in the selected paragraph above are transitive, indicating Maxine’s interaction with the world. There are altogether 80 verbs, and in most cases (53 out of 80) the Actors are “I”, the protagonist, while in the rest clauses the Actors are the bullied girl or parts of her body (“her head”, “skin” and the like).

When the Actors are “I”, the processes are Material (29), Mental (15), Verbal (5) and Behavioral (4). As the excerpt depicts Maxine’s bullying of another girl, it is, undoubtedly, abundant in Material processes concerning physical violence (13 out of 29), and the Goals of these processes are mostly the girl’s body (“her nose”, “her cheek”, “her face”, “her hands”, “her fingers” and the like). And the more silent the girl remained, the more infuriated Maxine grew and the harder she hurt the girl. By defining the girl as “the weak, the small” and herself as the opposite, Maxine was actually trying to explain the world from her own perspective, and the way she behaved in front of the girl showed how she endeavoured to acquire strength by narrating. In contrast with the stereotypes of fragile to neat attached to her, Maxine, by narrating her own identity, struggled to remove the fetters from her mind and live her own life.

Besides, it is noticeable that the Mental process “hate” or “hated” is repeated eight times in the excerpt, while the Phenomenon concerned is always the girl’s body (“her face”, “her weak neck”, “her fingers”) or something closely connected with it (“her clothes”, “pastels” and so on). In contrast, the Desiderative Mental processes are employed four times to show Maxine’s preferences and willingness, the Phenomenon of which is “stout neck”, “tough skin, hard brown skin”. As Kate Millett brilliantly construes in her *Sexual Politics* (1969), gender is a result of social construction created by cultural ideas and norms, and sexual politics is “the arrangements whereby one group of persons is controlled by another”. Put the lists of Phenomenon under the perspective of feminism, and it is clear that what Maxine hated and despised were actually the social norms and stereotypes attached to females, and what she endeavoured to become was the opposite, the masculine features. That is to say, Maxine became aware that the feminine features she used to have made her inferior to other people, and she became irritated when she saw the exact same characteristics in another girl who was even younger and more innocent than herself. By bullying the girl, she wanted to free herself from the boundary of the female and struggled to find strength and power through the bullying. Nevertheless, it should also be noted that after the violence, Maxine herself became ill and it took her a whole year to recover, which means that the fight against social discrimination failed because she chose the wrong target to release her anger and to seek her strength.

Another significant difference from the first stage is the sharp change in both Verbal and Mental processes. Compared with the initial state in which most of the Verbal and Behavioral processes are accompanied by negations, in the second stage, Maxine became able to observe what was going on, form her own opinions, though not rational or systematic enough, and express her views. There are

five “said” repeated in the excerpt, through which Maxine gave commands to the little girl and showed her strength in an immature way.

To sum up, in the second stage, the rebellious spirit in Maxine began to awake, and instead of being satisfied with the stories told by other people, she tried to narrate her own story, during which she, to some extent, recovered from the injury caused by the social stereotypes and discriminations against her identity as a Chinese girl. The therapeutic effect of narration started to function, but only on a limited scale.

### *2.3 Stage III: Self-aware and Assertive*

In the final stage, Maxine, who “had grown inside me a list of over two hundred things that I had to tell my mother”, was eager to show her true self and to “stop the pain in my throat”. The pain in her throat symbolizes the anguish she suffered from the lack of right to speak, and she wanted to recover from the misery by speaking out her inner truth, which indicates her awareness of the therapeutic function of narration. Besides, in this period, she had formed a thorough understanding of the world as well as of herself, which helped her distinguish the truth from the lies and be independent of the inculcation of her parents. Moreover, when her parents wanted her to marry a rich yet revolting man, which was strongly against her own will, she became courageous enough to fight for her rights and point out the hypocrisy of her parents:

I stood up, talking and burbling. I looked directly at my mother and at my father and screamed, “I want you to tell that hulk, that gorilla-ape, to go away and never bother us again. I know what you’re up to. You’re thinking he’s rich, and we’re poor. You think we’re odd and not pretty and we’re not bright. You think you can give us away to freaks. You better not do that, Mother. I don’t want to see him or his dirty boxes here tomorrow. If I see him here one more time, I’m going away. I’m going away anyway. I am. Do you hear me? I may be ugly and clumsy, but one thing I’m not, I’m not retarded. There’s nothing wrong with my brain. Do you know what the Teacher Ghosts say about me? They tell me I’m smart, and I can win scholarships. I can get into colleges. I’ve already applied. I’m smart. I can do all kinds of things. I know how to get A’s, and they say I could be a scientist or a mathematician if I want. I can make a living and take care of myself. So you don’t have to find me a keeper who’s too dumb to know a bad bargain. I’m so smart, if they say write ten pages, I can write fifteen. I can do ghost things even better than ghosts can. Not everybody thinks I’m nothing. I am not going to be a slave or a wife. Even if I am stupid and talk funny and get sick, I won’t let you turn me into a slave or a wife. I’m getting out of here. I can’t stand living here anymore. It’s your fault I talk weird. The only reason I flunked kindergarten was because you couldn’t teach me English, and you gave me a zero IQ. I’ve brought my IQ up, though. They say I’m smart now. Things follow in lines at school. They take stories and teach us to turn them into essays. I don’t need anybody to pronounce English words for me. I can figure them out by myself. I’m going to get scholarships, and I’m going away. And at college I’ll have the people I like for friends. I don’t care if their great-great grandfather died of TB. I don’t care if they were our enemies in China four thousand years ago. So get that ape out of here. I’m going to college. And I’m not going to Chinese school anymore. I’m going to run for office at

American school, and I'm going to join clubs. I'm going to get enough offices and clubs on my record to get into college. And I can't stand Chinese school anyway; the kids are rowdy and mean, fighting all night. And I don't want to listen to any more of your stories; they have no logic. They scramble me up. You lie with stories. You won't tell me a story and then say, 'This is a true story,' or, 'This is just a story.' I can't tell the difference. I don't even know what your real names are. I can't tell what's real and what you make up. Ha! You can't stop me from talking. You tried to cut off my tongue, but it didn't work." (Chapter 5, 176-177)

The first striking finding concerning the excerpt is the stunningly high proportion of verbs. There are, surprisingly, 112 verbal processes out of 550 words, the percentage of which is slightly over 20%. Among them, there are 50 Material processes, 24 Mental processes, 23 Relational processes, 9 Verbal processes, 5 Behavioral processes and one Existential process.

Moreover, it is worth noticing that there is no Relational process in the former two stages, while this kind of process occupies 20% of the verbs in this paragraph, and most of them are attributive modes with Maxine herself being the Carrier, which indicates her strong self-awareness as well as high self-esteem. She repeated the declaration "I am smart" four times to prove her intelligence and ability in order to fight for the right to education. Furthermore, the semantic field concerning the Attributes is also worth analyzing. Maxine consciously linked herself with professions of high social status such as "scientist" and "mathematician" while refusing the identities like "a slave or a wife", which were considered to be the best, and maybe the only choice of girls.

Besides, the change in Mental processes is also informative. If in the second stage, Maxine began to form some systematic yet immature ideas about the world, in the final status she can not only express her own logical opinions but also speculate the thoughts of other people. The Cognitive processes occupy one-third of all Mental processes (8 out of 24). It should also be mentioned that these Cognitive processes are not restricted by finite, which demonstrates that the tone of Maxine is assertive and confident. She actively employed discourse to vindicate herself and reevaluate her own qualities. For instance, she stated, "Not everybody thinks I'm nothing." In this way, she informed her parents who were somehow ignorant of her capabilities of the approval of other people, especially school teachers. As Yuan Yuan illustrates, the key of narrative therapy is to regard the problem as external to the individual, thus emphasizing the problem as "problem" rather than "individual problem", and encouraging the individual to talk about his or her way of fighting the problem and continue this process. Maxine, by attributing her previous failure in school to the hindrance of her parents instead of blaming herself, positively accumulated information that proved her intelligence and tried to persuade her parents to send her to university. In this way, she no longer doubted herself or was disturbed by other people's scepticism. By narrating her own story, Maxine constructed a new identity and started to pursue a more promising future.

### **3 Findings of Transitivity Analysis**

The properties of the transitivity patterns employed in the excerpts can be summarized as follows:

- i. There is an obvious increase in Verbal processes in these three stages, indicating Maxine's growth from silence to assertiveness. It should be noticed that in the first excerpt, all of the Verbal processes



are modified by negotiations, in the second stage Maxine began talking and even giving commands, but only to a weak little girl, and it is in the final stage that Maxine became courageous enough to verbally fight against her parents, the greatest authority in her life.

ii. The percentage of Mental processes rises from 15% in the first stage to 19% in the second stage and then to 21% in the final stage, which demonstrates the awakening of Maxine’s self-consciousness and the improvement of her rational thinking. More importantly, the proportion of processes of cognition is also climbing, which illustrates her advancement from perception to cognition.

iii. The proportion of Relational processes surged from 0 in the initial stage to 23 in the final stage, which signifies the development of her cognition because the Relational processes in the third stage are Maxine’s judgments of herself and other people, through which she narrates her own story and express her independent opinions.

**Table 1**

	Material Process	Mental Process	Relational Process	Verbal Process	Behavioural Process	Existential Process	Total
Stage I	10	3	0	3	3	1	20
Stage II	50	15	6	5	4	0	80
Stage III	50	24	23	9	5	1	112
Total	110	42	29	17	12	2	212

**4 Conclusion**

Transitivity analysis of Maxine Hong Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior* demonstrates that Maxine’s thinking pattern and psychological state undergo a shift from silent to assertive, from obedient to rebellious, and from inert to self-aware, which is closely linked with her later employment of narration as a tool to gain strength and defend herself from the control of authorities. Besides, it is also worth noticing that the change in transitivity corresponds to mental growth of Maxine.

It should be admitted that the paragraphs analyzed in this paper are limited to Chapter 5 in which Maxine narrates the story of her past. Further study can expand excerpts to include contents from the whole book, which may lead to new discoveries.

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