

The Dynamic Relationship between Cultural and Institutional Narratives in Maxine Hong Kingston's Literary Narratives: an Imagined Community Perspective

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Abstract: This study explores the dynamic interplay between institutional identity and cultural identity in the literary works of Maxine Hong Kingston, a prominent figure in American Chinese literature, through the lens of Benedict Anderson's theory of Imagined Communities. It examines how Kingston's narratives negotiate the tension between state-produced institutional narratives such as legal citizenship and immigration policies, and the reconstruction of cultural identity through fragmented storytelling, mythic revisionism, and intertextual dialogues. The findings demonstrate that Kingston's narratives transcend the oppression-resistance binary, reconceptualizing identity formation as an iterative process of creative synthesis within "third spaces." By integrating literary theory, cultural studies, and legal perspectives, this interdisciplinary research not only expands Anderson's theory by incorporating immigrant experiential knowledge but also provides a critical paradigm for understanding identity politics in transnational contexts, where institutional power and cultural agency remain in constant flux.

Keywords: Imagined Communities; Maxine Hong Kingston; Cultural Identity; Institutional Identity; Diasporic Literature; Third Space

1. Introduction

In the era of globalization, nationalism has taken on new dimensions and complexities. It is no longer confined to the realm of politics and ideology; instead, it has deeply infiltrated the cultural sphere. As Ernest Gellner argues, "Nationalism is about entry to, participation in, identification with, a literate high culture which

is co-extensive with an entire political unit and its total population, and which must be of this kind if it is to be compatible with the kind of division of labour, the type or mode of production, on which this society is based." (Ernest Gellner, 1983)[8]. This new form of nationalism has spurred interdisciplinary research, as scholars strive to understand its multifaceted nature. For Chinese American writers, cultural nationalism serves as a crucial tool. It enables them to resist marginalization, assert their unique identities and national characteristics, and reconstruct a cultural and spiritual foundation. They advocate for the rights to national cultural features and self-determination, highlight the role of literature and art in fostering a sense of community, unearth suppressed histories, and rebuild cultural traditions within the framework of national political discourse.

Benedict Anderson's 1980s idea of imagined communities, as presented in his book *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, is a useful model used to explain people's sense of belonging to the same groups. An imagined community is a social construct of people who share common goals, objectives, and a sense of belonging together. They might not interact in the physical world but sense a commonality of ideas and thoughts in their imagination. Imagined communities can form due to different aspects such as nationality, culture, or gender, and can be molded by historical traditions and fictional myths as well as by literature. Imagined community theory is used extensively in various fields to explain how people construct a sense of belonging and collective identity. The idea of cultural nationalism is the major mechanism by which Chinese American authors create what Benedict Anderson refers to as "imagined communities"-social entities in which members

"will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion" (Anderson, 1983, p. 49)[1]. This theoretical model offers critical perspectives to look at the ways in which literary strategies of cultural nationalism enable the formation of identity and create collective belonging among the diasporic populations of the Chinese. Maxine Hong Kingston, as a representative of the canon of the literature of Chinese immigrants, occupies an important position in the literature of Chinese Americans. Maxine Hong Kingston, the key figure of the literature of the Chinese Americans, embodies this in her foundational texts *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Not only do these texts investigate the intricate interplay of institutional and cultural identity but also the function of the literary imagination in the consolidation of historical memory and of cultural tradition. By interlacing the personal with the collective memory, Kingston resists the exclusion of the Chinese Americans and rebuilds a cultural identity which breaks through institutional restrictions. This research is devoted to investigating two important issues in the context of Chinese American literature, specifically Maxine Hong Kingston's work and its meaning in the context of narrative and construction. First, the research seeks to examine the impact of the concept of the "imagined community" on institutional and literary discourse. Based on Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, we seek to discuss how is the idea of the "imagined community" manifested in the institutional and literary discourse of Maxine Hong Kingston's works? Second, the research seeks to deliver a more in-depth and holistic idea of the nature of identity as not fixed but as dynamic and constructed in the interplay between institutional power and expressions of the culture[13].

This research is of great theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, it extends Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" theory to immigrant literature, focusing on Chinese-American cultural identity. Also, through the analysis of literary narratives in Kingston's works, this study explores how literary techniques contribute to the construction of imagined communities. This not only provides a socio-cultural dimension for literary criticism but also highlights the agency of literary narratives in shaping collective identity,

thereby strengthening the dialogue between literary studies and cultural theory. Practically, in the context of globalization, it provides a narrative model for immigrants to handle institutional-cultural identity tensions during adaptation. Moreover, it offers a cultural perspective for government departments to refine immigration policies and enhance social integration by revealing the impact of literary narratives on immigrants' identity perceptions.

2. Literature Review

Anderson's "Imagine Community" theory has triggered wide-ranging debates among scholars. On the one hand, many scholars believe that Anderson's theory offers a new illuminating framework of analysis of nationalism, which can explain the mechanisms and styles of nationalism in different time periods. For instance, Wu Xiaodong (2007) demonstrated that Anderson's theory highlights the central importance of language in nationalist identity, particularly under the push of print capitalism, language has become a central instrument in the construction of national identity (Wu,2007)[27]. On the other hand, Anderson's theory has also been criticized for over-relying on subjective imagination and neglecting the objective material conditions of nationalism, e.g., the function of economic and political forces in the formation of the nation (Zou&Ouyang,2011)[29]. At the same time, some scholars have also warned that Anderson's theory has limitations in explaining contextualized specific nationalist phenomena. For instance, in multi-ethnic states, the styles of nationalism are more intricate, and the theory of the single imagined community cannot totally encompass them (Ma,2010)[25].

In recent years, with the acceleration of globalization, Anderson's theory has once again attracted significant attention. Against the backdrop of globalization, the boundaries of nation-states are becoming increasingly blurred, and transnational mobility and cultural exchanges are more frequent. This has led to changes in the connotations and manifestations of nationalism. Some scholars have attempted to integrate Anderson's theory with theories of globalization to explore the new characteristics and trends of nationalism in the era of globalization. They argue that although globalization has undermined some of the foundations of traditional nationalism, nationalism as an emotional identification still

possesses strong vitality and has taken on new forms under new historical conditions (Ma,2011)[26].

As a significant representative of Chinese American literature, Maxine Hong Kingston has garnered widespread attention since the 1970s. In early studies, scholars primarily focused on the issue of identity in Kingston's works. Her books, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, document the history and identity quests of Chinese immigrants, revealing the dilemmas and struggles they face in the cultural conflicts between China and the United States. Many studies have pointed out that through the portrayal of female characters, Kingston explores the gender and identity of Chinese American women in a dual cultural context (Hua,2013; Myer,2017)[15]. For example, some scholars argue that the female characters in Kingston's works challenge traditional gender concepts through memory and narration, thereby demonstrating female subjectivity and agency(Hua,2013)[10]. In addition, narrative strategies have also been the central interest of earlier studies. Kingston incorporates the classical modes of Chinese narrative, postmodernist strategies of pastiche and parody, and the working of family memories to establish a distinctive narrative manner (Wang,2001)[22]. Not only does this narrative style enrich the substance of her works but also offer a new point of view in comprehending the histories as well as the cultures of the Chinese immigrants. In recent years, academics have started to pay attention to the cultural imagery and the process of community-building in the works of Maxine Hong Kingston. Also, her works not only chronicle the individual experiences of the Chinese immigrants but also compose different communities through literary narration. In spite of the extensive discussion of Maxine Hong Kingston's works from various aspects in current research, there remain some shortfalls. First, most research has concentrated on narrative strategies and identity in works by Kingston, while research on community-building is comparatively scarce and disconnected. Second, previous research commonly applies a single cultural or gender approach,with no comprehensive exploration of the dynamic relationship between institutional identity and cultural identity in works by Kingston. In addition, most research is founded on textual analysis with a shortage of interdisciplinary

research approaches, which cannot adequately reflect the complexity and diversity of community-building in works by Kingston. This research will explore the construction of identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's works of literature from the new point of view of the dynamic relationship between institutional identity and cultural identity. According to the theory of imagined communities and incorporating theories from various disciplines like sociology and law, this research will engage in an inter-disciplinary examination of institutional and cultural identities in the works of Kingston. Though the analysis of the use of literature narrative strategies, cultural imagery, and historical conditions in the works of Kingston will demonstrate the dual-source tension between institutional and cultural identities and discuss how through the works of literature, Kingston constructs trans-cultural and trans-institutional communities, wherein this research will also interpret the works of Kingston from the point of view of gender-complementarity, demonstrating the relationship and impact of the male and female characters in the exploration of identity and community-building from a gender point of view[23].

3. Discussion

3.1 Institutional Narrative for Constructing the "Imagined Community"

Legal identity, as a centralized manifestation of the power and will of the State, is not only an important guarantee of social order, but also an "imaginative construction" built through institutional narratives. Through legal statutes, policy regulations, and historical narratives, it molds the identity formation of specific groups while profoundly influencing both individual and collective belonging.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's works *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, legal identity emerges as a central issue for Chinese immigrants' survival and development within American society. Through literary narrative, Kingston unveils how legal mechanisms-particularly through institutionalized oppression like the Chinese Exclusion Acts-marginalize Chinese Americans as "the Other," while simultaneously demonstrating how the Chinese diaspora resists and reconfigures legal identity through the construction of an "imagined community".

3.1.1 Legal Identity Shaping the "Imagined Community"

The *Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are situated in the context of the Chinese Exclusion Acts, exposing how statutory codes used institutional to create Chinese Americans as a dehumanized "Other," thus truncating their historical belonging and cultural identity. The 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act was a watershed piece of legislation in the US, being the first federal law to target a particular racial community explicitly. The act barred Chinese worker immigrants from entry to the country and denied naturalized rights to Chinese nationals already in the country. The exclusion was not a one-off but was codified and enhanced in the form of three significant pieces of legislation. The 1892 Geary Act extended the period of exclusion for ten more years and put strict registration requirements on Chinese residents, essentially making their alien status permanent. The 1924 Immigration Act worsened matters by closing the entry of Chinese women to join their family members, thus dispersing the Chinese people and isolating them in segregated Chinatowns. The 1902 Congressional Resolution extended the ban on labor in perpetuity, upholding de facto exclusion till its repeal in 1943 under the Magnuson Act. These laws, Galang(2003) argues, represented a "racial grammar" engraved in legal codes to delegitimize the presence of the Chinese in America as well as the building of a juridical model to erase their culture(p.164)[7].

In the book of *China Men*, Kingston employs documentary realism to dissect the ideological machinery of legal exclusion, revealing how U.S. immigration laws masked racial expulsion under the discourse of "civilization." The father's detention on Angel Island serves as a microcosm of this juridical: Chinese immigrants endured forced strip searches, linguistic humiliation, and indefinite incarceration under the pretext of "incomplete documentation". Kingston's meticulous portrayal of the barracks-where barred windows symbolized physical confinement and inscribed poems became "muffled history"-exemplifies what Foucault (1975) terms "disciplinary power": the state's use of spatial control and cultural erasure to enforce racial hierarchy[6]. The cultural negation inherent in legal identity is further manifested through the officers' paradoxical act of compelling detainees to recite the U.S. Constitution while arbitrarily denying their

citizenship. This ritual, symbolizes the law's performative contradiction: "by invoking the Constitution's universalist ideals, the state simultaneously exposed its exclusionary practices, creating a discursive space for Chinese Americans to reclaim their political subjectivity". This process of forced acculturation, rather than fostering integration, solidified cultural alienation-a dynamic that underscores the constructed nature of legal identity as both a disciplinary tool and a site of resistance.

In the book of *The Woman Warrior*, the oppression of legal identity upon Chinese Americans becomes doubly amplified through a gendered lens. The tragedy of the aunt-ostracized by the clan for bearing an "illegitimate child"-appears superficially as patriarchal discipline over female sexuality. However, Kingston intricately exposes its inextricable ties to the systemic destruction of Chinese family structures under U.S. legal regimes. The Exclusion Acts' prohibition on Chinese laborers bringing spouses to America created a "state-engineered diaspora" (Espiritu, 1997, p. 45), fragmenting families and subjecting women in China to a double bind: economic vulnerability due to absent husbands and moral condemnation for perceived chastity violations[5]. This juridical intervention, as analyzed by Zhang (2022), transformed gender norms into "disciplinary technologies" that policed women's bodies while absolving the state of responsibility for systemic harm[28]. The aunt's expulsion by the clan for "defiling the family's honor" through pregnancy allows Kingston to expose how legal identity's oppression of Chinese Americans operates not merely through direct institutional exclusion, but more insidiously via engineered familial separations that exacerbate patriarchal gender within the ethnic community. The aunt's tragedy underscores the gendered dimensions of legal exclusion: Chinese American women are not merely victims of patriarchal traditions but casualties of a transnational juridical system that weaponizes cultural norms to perpetuate racial and gendered subordination. This analysis aligns with postcolonial feminist theories (Mohanty, 1988) that emphasize the interconnectedness of race, gender, and state power in shaping marginalized identities[16].

Legal identity is far from a neutral institutional design, but rather an "imagined community", or in another word, an "identity cage" constructed

by State power through narrative. This cage has not only severed the links between ethnic Chinese and mainstream society, but also torn the bonds of community within the community.

3.1.2 "Imagined Community" Reshaping the Legal Identity

While legal status functions as a disciplinary instrument of state power that enacts institutional discrimination upon Chinese American communities, this coercive process paradoxically activates the resistance potential of ethnic solidarity. Kingston's text reveals that the Chinese community is not always passively subjected to the domination of legal identity. Instead, they strategically deploy Benedict Anderson's (1983) "imagined community" as a counter-hegemonic tool to deconstruct the state's monopoly on identity formation. As Espiritu (1997) notes, the "imagined community" serves as a third space (Bhabha, 1994) where Chinese Americans renegotiate citizenship beyond juridical definitions[3]. By reframing legal exclusion as a shared struggle, the community transforms trauma into transnational solidarity, creating opportunities for identity remodeling in an era of shifting global power dynamics.

In the book of *China Men*, the author profoundly unearths the erased contributions of Chinese Americans in the construction of the transcontinental railroad, thereby challenging the dominant historical narratives that have long marginalized these individuals. This counter-narrative is deeply rooted in post-colonial theory, which, as Homi Bhabha(1994) suggests, emphasizes the role of cultural production in reshaping power relations and disrupting Eurocentric and racially biased historical accounts. Kingston's work exemplifies this by highlighting the significant yet overlooked contributions of Chinese laborers, arguing that their material contributions to American nation-building should be the basis for legal and social recognition, rather than racial categorization. On one hand, utilizing the historical fact that Chinese males pioneered the territory and built the country in the United States, Kingston countered those rigid legal provisions and tried to fight for Chinese Americans to have a political voice in the United States. This illustrates that paternal figures and migrant communities reconstruct identity through "mnemonic practices" (Assmann, 1995), such as oral histories and inscribed poems[2]. On the other hand, confronting systemic

injustice, Chinese Americans formed organizations like the Equal Rights League and Native Sons of the Golden State. These groups leveraged legal avenues-such as the landmark cases *Wu Yik v. Hopkins (1886)* and *United States v. Wong Kim Ark (1898)*-to contest racial exclusion. As Hing (1994) notes, these litigations transformed juridical systems into sites of resistance, redefining citizenship through "subversive appropriation" of legal discourses[9].

In the book of *The Woman Warrior*, the protagonist, as a Chinese American woman, lacks a complete legal identity within the American legal system. However, the protagonist does not fully succumb to this marginalization. By narrating her family history and cultural legends, she constructs an "imagined community", thereby finding strength in resisting the imposed legal identity. The only way for Chinese-American women warriors to escape the pain of that 'loss of voice' is to speak what they believe to be true and tell their own stories. As Kim (2006) argues[11], this mythical reimagining constructs an "imagined community" that transcends juridical exclusion: "By appropriating cultural symbols, Chinese American women rewrite their marginalized status into a narrative of empowerment" (p. 207). Thus, "I" list all the grievances and questions accumulated over the years and confront my mother, questioning the stories about ghosts she once told and those unscientific explanations of natural phenomena. "I" no longer remain silent as before, nor do I accept everything my mother says without question; Instead, I truly find my own voice. The transition from "voicelessness" to "voicing" is a painful and difficult process for "me", but I firmly believe that I will become a "woman warrior" living in America. Such a "woman warrior" represents the reconstruction of an independent and empowered self by Chinese American immigrant women under the oppression of legal identity.

This systematic exclusion at the legal level forces Chinese immigrants to turn to political movements, oral traditions, family memories, and folk rituals in order to reconstruct an "imagined community" based on cultural resilience outside of the imagined boundaries of mainstream society. Kingston's literary testimony reveals that while state power weaves legal identities through institutional narratives, the disciplined can also reshape the possible

dimensions of identity politics through counter-narratives.

3.2 Literary Narrative for Constructing the "Imagined Community"

Literature, as an important carrier of cultural expression, builds a bridge to the imagined community for people through its unique narrative methods. Next, from the three perspectives of fragmented narratives, intertextuality, and imagery, and taking Maxine Hong Kingston's works *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* as the main cases, this paper deeply analyzes how literary narratives influence the construction of imagined communities.

3.2.1 Fragmented narratives

Literature, as an art form in time, especially narrative literature, naturally possesses temporality. This temporality not only distinguishes the novel from traditional narrative prose but also makes literature a powerful tool for constructing and deconstructing "imagined communities". Through fragmented narratives, Maxine Hong Kingston's works *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior* break free from the constraints of traditional linear storytelling, thereby reconstructing the cultural identity and discourse of power for Chinese American communities within a heterogeneous culture.

In her work *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston employs an experimental 18-chapter structure, interweaving six chapters marked by the "Heroes of Gold Mountain" seal with twelve others that incorporate Eastern and Western myths, legal codes, and news clips. The overlapping, displacement, and contradictions between these narratives disrupt the authority of Western social discourse and challenge the dominant historical and cultural narrative of white America. For instance, the author, writing from the perspective of a "daughter," provides three different versions of her father's birth month; the life experiences of ancestors are presented through various pronouns and perspectives across different chapters, creating a sense of ambiguity and confusion in the storyline. Through this seemingly ambiguous narrative approach, the author challenges the linguistic authority of Western hegemonic culture, achieving a decentralized and anti-authoritative mode of expression. She conveys effective information about ethnic history, revealing to readers the historical truth of countless Chinese ancestors who, under immense social oppression,

contributed to nation-building yet were erased from mainstream historical discourse. This serves to break the authority of Western social discourse and to speak for her ancestors, restoring historical justice. Another key function of fragmented narratives is the deconstruction of traditional notions of "masculinity." In the sugarcane fields of *China Men*, laborers are compelled to abandon their traditional identities as scholar-gentlemen and instead reshape their physical narratives through the labor of "cutting sugarcane." "The blade serves as both a tool for survival and a metaphor for rebellion against discipline. This reconstruction is not a complete break with Chinese culture but a selective activation of traditional resistant elements, such as the collective resilience exemplified in the story of "The Foolish Old Man Who Removed the Mountains." "This resilience shines with the light of resistance in a new context, becoming a vital resource for the reconstruction of cultural identity. Through this narrative practice, laborers transform the land from a site of economic exploitation into a battleground for the reconstruction of cultural sovereignty, thereby establishing a new identity within the imagined community.

In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston interweaves multiple narrative timelines to further demonstrate the dynamism of the imagined community. The book consists of five chapters that showcase multiple narrative timelines of reality, memory, and fantasy. In "No Name Woman", the first chapter, the narrator and her mother jointly tell the tragic story of a forgotten aunt in old China. "White Tigers" is the narrator's fantasy based on the legend of Hua Mulan. "Shaman" and "At West Gate" recall the mother's and aunt's experiences in China and America. The last chapter focuses on the narrator's struggles and expectations as a Chinese American woman growing up. Through the juxtaposition of these stories across different times and spaces, the protagonist's conflicts and struggles between cultural memory and reality are highlighted. Using this narrative approach, Kingston not only deconstructs the traditional linear concept of time in imagined communities but also, through the reorganization of cultural memory, opens up new survival spaces for Chinese American women.

The core of fragmented narratives lies in their dynamic deconstruction and reconstruction of the imagined community. By breaking free from

the constraints of linear time, Kingston's works reveal the fluidity and negotiable nature of communities. This narrative strategy challenges traditional cultural essentialism and offers new possibilities for identity formation among Chinese Americans in a heterogeneous culture. Through this approach, the imagined community is no longer static or closed but becomes an open space that is continuously reconstructed, serving as a process where cultural identity is collectively imagined and reimaged.

3.2.2 Intertextuality

Intertextuality, a key concept in poststructuralist literary theory, was first proposed by Julia Kristeva, who stated, "any text is constructed of a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another" (Kristeva, 1980, p.66)[14]. Roland Barthes further developed this idea, asserting that texts are open and multi-subjective, and "it is the fact of intertextuality that allows the text to come into being" (Barthes, 1970, p.73). Beyond existing between texts, intertextuality is also evident in the interaction between texts and their sociocultural contexts. Through quotation, rewriting, and collage, the meaning of a text is generated in dialogue with other texts.

In Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, intertextuality serves as a powerful tool for deconstructing cultural boundaries and reconstructing the imagined community. By incorporating social texts, rewriting cultural symbols, and activating readers' perspectives, the work liberates the imagined community from the geographical boundaries of the nation-state, transforming it into a dynamic field for cross-cultural negotiation. This intertextual strategy not only challenges cultural essentialism but also creates new possibilities for identity formation among Chinese Americans in a heterogeneous culture.

Firstly, intertextuality deconstructs the illusion of the community's eternity by interweaving individual growth narratives with social texts. In the chapter "White Tiger", Kingston presents the identity struggles of Chinese American women facing racial discrimination and gender oppression through the dialogue between the "experiential self" and the "narrating self". The child "I" dreams of being a hero who overthrows oppression, while the mature "I" feels powerless against racial discrimination and can only protest weakly. This dual-perspective intertextuality not only deconstructs the myth of linear progress

narratives but also, by interweaving individual trauma with America's racial segregation policies, reveals the historical constructiveness of the imagined community. As Roland Barthes said, "it is the fact of intertextuality that allows the text to come into being" (Barthes, 1970, p.73)[4]. By embedding social texts in this way, Kingston transforms the marginalized experiences of Chinese Americans into a part of collective memory, thus deconstructing the illusion of the community's eternity.

Secondly, intertextuality maintains a balance between traditional continuity and adaptability by rewriting traditional images and cultural symbols. Kingston's depiction of the "dragon" in *The Woman Warrior* serves as a cultural weapon against Western stereotypes. She redefines the "dragon" as "resin flowing from under the bark of a pine tree, like the winding of a dragon," an image that preserves the natural view of traditional Chinese culture while creating a new cultural symbol through its connection to the land of California. This strategy of rewriting symbols resonates with Homi Bhabha's theory of "cultural translation," which involves "partially accepting and partially resisting" to transform traditional images into resistant capital within the American context (Bhabha, 1994, p.118). Kingston does not simply replicate Chinese cultural symbols but instead reconstructs the cultural subjectivity of Chinese Americans through localized transcoding, offering new pathways for negotiating the imagined community.

Finally, intertextuality reconstructs the open boundaries of the community by activating diverse reader perspectives. Kingston's adaptation of the Mulan story lives cross-cultural negotiation. While Chinese readers view Mulan as a symbol of loyalty and filial piety, Kingston's version transforms her into an icon of the American feminist movement. This cultural symbol's "othering" not only challenges traditional Chinese gender norms but also reconstructs the boundaries of the imagined community by activating different reading perspectives. As Duan Min points out, Kingston's adaptation isn't simple cultural appropriation but creates a "new myth" that meets the needs of Chinese Americans through "selective acceptance and resistance" (Duan, 2023, p.27)[19]. This myth-building process best illustrates the dynamism of the imagined community: it's not a fixed national allegory but

an open network constantly generated through cultural negotiation.

3.2.3 Imagery

Literary imagery, as a key expressive device in texts, is not only a carrier of culture but also an essential tool for negotiating the construction of imagined communities. Through their symbolic function and activation of cultural memory, images can create new cultural spaces within texts, deconstruct traditional cultural boundaries, and provide possibilities for the dynamic construction of imagined communities.

A primary function of literary imagery is to serve as a medium for cultural negotiation. Maxine Hong Kingston uses the image of the "huqin" to blend the rhythms of Cai Wenji's Han poetry with the notes of a Hunan instrument. When Cai Wenji brings this fused huqin music back to the Central Plains, the image not only restructures cultural boundaries but also reveals the dynamism of imagined communities. As Homi Bhabha states, "Cultural translation is not simple replication but the creation of new meanings through partial acceptance and partial resistance within differences" (Bhabha, 1994, p.118).

Imagery also serves the function of identity construction in literary texts. In *The Warrior Woman*, the imagery of "ghost" becomes a metaphor for the cultural identity of the Chinese community. Maxine Hong Kingston employs the metaphor of "ghosts" to explore and illustrate the cultural identity issues faced by Chinese Americans during their growth. These "ghosts" are not only symbols within cultural memory but also manifestations of collective memory within the "Imagined Community", which restrict and discipline the formation of the protagonist's cultural identity. For instance, in the chapter "Shaman", "ghosts" are fictitious in the experiences and oral stories passed down by the protagonist's mother, such as the Wall Ghost and Frog Spirit (Kingston, 1976, p.65). However, in the American society where the protagonist grows up, these "ghosts" become real individuals encountered in the daily life of Chinese ethnicity. We were regularly visited by the Mail Ghost, Meter Reader Ghost, Garbage Ghost. Staying off the streets did no good. They came nosing at windows-Social Worker Ghosts; Public Health Nurse Ghosts; Factory Ghosts recruiting workers during the war (they promised free child care, which our mother turned down)" (Kingston, 1976, p.98). It seems to

the protagonist that everyone around them, except family, is a "ghost", leaving them feeling "unable to breathe, unable to take steps", and overwhelmed by the vastness of the world, feeling afraid. The concept of these "ghosts" represents an ethnic memory conveyed to the protagonist through cultural symbols by the "Imagined Community", shaping their understanding of their relationship to their group and making them aware of their unique identity as Chinese in American society. The mother defines "ghosts" as a metaphor for the hostility of non-Chinese towards Chinese, and this shared experience limits the protagonist's exploration of a free identity to a certain extent. It also suppresses the possibility for the protagonist to explore a free identity beyond ethnic boundaries.

3.3 The Bidirectional Tension Between Institutional and Literary Narratives: Rediscovering the Essence of Identity

In the preceding analysis, the thesis delved into the formation and manifestation of tension between institutional and literary narratives. On the one hand, institutional narratives, backed by the coercive power of the state, construct legal identities in a linear and highly logical manner, emphasizing authority and stability. On the other hand, literary narratives, relying on individual imagination and creativity, employ non-linear and polysemous narrative approaches to showcase emotions and diversity, thereby challenging the authority of institutional narratives. The opposition between power and imagination, along with the differences in narrative approaches, together form the tension between the two.

3.3.1 Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" Theory

Homi K. Bhabha, a postcolonial theorist of international reputation and one of the postcolonial theory's guiding triad of theorists, alongside Edward Said and Gayatri Spivak, is recognized for his far-reaching work in the area. It was in *The Location of Culture* that the "third space" idea was developed. Bhabha believes in the development of cultural hybridity in "the overlap and displacement of domains of difference" (Bhabha, 1994, p.2), subverting fixed concepts of identity. "Third space" destabilizes the colonizer/colonized binary divisions, thus opening up the prospects for agency in the lives of subaltern peoples. In Maxine Hong Kingston's literary works, "the third space" provides a new lens through which to understand the interactive

relationship between legal and cultural identities. "The third space" allows scholars to go beyond the confines of the normal kind of studies, enabling the more in-depth analysis of the essence of identity. Kingston's works make use of the "third space" to demonstrate how identities can become fluid and hybrid, defying rigid categorizations and capturing the intricate interplay between varied legal and cultural frameworks[21].

3.3.2 The practice of "the third Space" in Maxine Hong Kingston's works

In *China Men*, Maxine Hong Kingston uses hybrid myths to create a literary "third space" where she interweaves Chinese legends, history, myths, and images with American literature. Thus, a space is created where different aspects coexist in harmony. In the section "Adventures of Robinson," the central figure, renamed "Lo Bun Sun," grows from a British sailor to a Chinese adventurer with the addition of lifestyle details from China such as pickling of eggs in vinegar as well as rice farming[18]. These mythic hybridities reinforce cultural hybridities, referring to the age-old Chinese virtues of diligence and courage, modeled on the narrator's grandfather, who toiled in Hawaiian sugarcane fields. The scenario is congruent with Homi Bhabha's "third space" theory, which breaks up binary oppositions and highlights dynamic cultural hybridities in the form of novel new genera of culture[17]. Drawing from both Chinese and American aspects, Kingston not only recontextualizes Western classics but also creates a new and distinctive Chinese-American culture, a combination of the collective virtues of the Chinese and the democratic ideals of the Americans. In this way, hybridity is a form of translation of the culture, which breaks up the conventional binary, opening the way for new identifications and new cultural expressions. In this way, Kingston is successful in integrating her "Chinese complex" with her work and mixing it with Western classic tales[24].

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston employs strategies of cross-cultural negotiation and identity reconstruction to establish a crucial foundation for the "third space." By reinterpreting traditional stories such as that of Hua Mulan, the author intentionally crafts a female hero figure rooted in the Confucian values of "collectivism"-emphasizing filial piety to parents and in-laws, as well as devotion to husband and children. Within Mulan's martial

journey, Kingston interweaves scenes of intimacy: during truces, Mulan reconnects with her husband and secretly bears their child. This narrative choice reveals the author's intent to endow "Hua Mulan" with self-awareness, portraying her not only as a traditional figure but also as an independent woman pursuing personal agency. Kingston transplants the iconic Hua Mulan—a beloved figure in Chinese folklore—from ancient China to modern America, constructing a new image of Chinese American women that uniquely blends American ideals of female independence and individuality with traditional Chinese virtues of collectivism, domesticity, and filial devotion. Throughout the text, Kingston repeatedly emphasizes the term "paradoxes": "I don't want to erase all the Chinese in me to become American. But I don't want to give up the good American things either. I want to participate in the wonderful American reality, but I don't want to scrub off Chinese either. I want both. I call that the paradox" (Kingston, 1976, para. 12)[12]. This duality underscores the author's aim to reimagine Chinese American history by weaving together reality and fantasy, truth and myth. Through this synthesis, Kingston revitalizes Chinese American literature, reshapes diasporic imagination, and redefines the identity of Chinese American women—ultimately positioning them as the "Warrior Women" of America, poised to claim their rightful place within and beyond the nation.

The bidirectional tension between institutional and literary narratives over identity construction is, at its core, a power struggle between disciplinary normalization and cultural resistance. Institutional narratives forge static "otherness" labels under the guise of law and order, while literary narratives deconstruct essentialist identity paradigms through imaginative reconfiguration. Their dialectical interplay ultimately converges in Homi K. Bhabha's "third space" theory—a space where identity transcends rigid binaries, emerging instead as a living practice of cultural hybridity. Kingston's oeuvre offers dual validation of this framework. In *China Men*, mythic hybridity rewrites Chinese labor history into a narrative of diasporic agency, transforming "coolies" into narrators who reclaim discursive power. In *The Woman Warrior*, the subversive reinterpretation of Hua Mulan exposes identity as a palimpsest of contradictions: a warrior woman who embodies both Confucian filial piety and

American individualism. Kingston's work illuminates a path forward: true emancipation lies not in erasing difference but in forging creative synergies across cultural fault lines.

4. Conclusion

Maxine Hong Kingston's literary narratives, examined through Benedict Anderson's theory of imagined communities, reveal the dynamic interplay between institutional and cultural identities as a site of both oppression and resistance. In *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, Kingston dismantles the legal frameworks that systematically marginalized Chinese Americans-exemplified by the Chinese Exclusion Acts-while simultaneously reconstructing transnational solidarity through counter-narratives. By interweaving fragmented storytelling, mythic revisionism, and gendered perspectives, she transforms state-imposed "otherness" into a collective identity rooted in cultural resilience. The tension between institutional narratives (enforced through laws and policies) and literary reimagination manifests as a dialectical process. Legal identities, designed to erase Chinese contributions to nation-building, inadvertently catalyzed the formation of an imagined community anchored in shared trauma and resistance. Kingston's hybridization of Chinese legends with American contexts illustrates Homi Bhabha's "third space," where identity emerges not as a fixed category but as a fluid negotiation. Ultimately, Kingston's works transcend binary oppositions, offering a vision of identity as a creative synthesis. Her narratives demonstrate that cultural belonging thrives not in erasing differences but in embracing the contradictions between institutional erasure and diasporic memory. This study contributes to diaspora studies by redefining imagined communities as dynamic, contested spaces where marginalized groups reclaim agency through storytelling-a vital perspective for understanding identity politics in an era of global migration and cultural hybridity.

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