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## **ANALYSIS OF CHINESE FEMALE DISCOURSE POWER CHANGES IN THE WOMAN WARRIOR**

*In The Woman Warrior, traditional Chinese feudal women are often constructed in a state of silence, and unable to express their individual demands and values. However, along with the progress of the times and the influence of the American immigrant community, some females gradually gain the opportunity to have equal conversation with males by receiving education or enhancing their own strength, and the discourse power of females gradually expands. From Foucault's theory of discourse power, this paper will explore the change of female's discourse power from silence to resistance in The Woman Warrior, and finally it can be concluded that Chinese female's discourse power has witnessed a process from silence to expansion, although there are still some unavoidable limitations in this progress, but it represents the reconstruction and progress of Chinese female's discourse in the male dominated society.*

**Keywords:** *Foucault, discourse power, Chinese female, changes.*

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Background**

Maxine Hong Kingston is a famous Chinese American novelist. As one of her representative works, *The Woman Warrior*, tells a little girl's American childhood life in the Chinese circle with five stories of *No Name Woman*, *White Tigers*, *Shaman*, *At the Western Palace*, and *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe*.

## **1.2 Foucault's Theory of Discourse Power**

As a prominent philosopher, social thinker and historian, Foucault's main sociological conception is from the dimension of historical development, concerns with the relationship between knowledge and power, which means how power manifests itself through discourse and cooperates with a variety of means of regulation to infiltrate power into every detail of the society (Sheridan, 1997). The theory of discursive power will be elaborated next in terms of three parts: power, discourse and subject.

### ***1.2.1 The Concept of Power***

In Foucault's idea of power, power is the action of one behaviour on another, the influence of one subject on another. Wherever there is power, people exercise it. The operation of asymmetrical power dynamics manifests through hierarchical social configurations wherein dominant actors institutionalize normative frameworks, manufacture epistemic authority, and monopolize symbolic systems to perpetuate specific ideological agendas. Historical and sociological analyses demonstrate that such hegemonic control operates through multivalent mechanisms, notably exemplified by patriarchal domination in gender relations, adult-centric governance in familial structures, and epistemic violence in educational institutions. These stratified interactions systematically reproduce social hierarchies through three primary modalities: first, the codification of exclusionary behavioral codes, second, the discursive construction of legitimized truth regimes, and the strategic erasure of subaltern knowledge paradigms. Particularly in cross-generational and gender-based contexts, the naturalization of these power asymmetries facilitates the intergenerational transmission of sociocultural capital while suppressing counter-hegemonic narratives. Therefore, when the subject confronts this kind of power, it is necessary to resist not only the subject, but also the influence of power related to knowledge, competence, and qualification, and to oppose the privilege of knowledge (Foucault, 2010).

Power is forged by the authority of intellectual discourse and exists when some behaviour exerts its influence on others, thus the regular functioning of power requires the Other who is invincible upon encountering hierarchical authority structures, individuals often exhibit involuntary acquiescence due to systemic constraints. The exertion of institutional dominance manifests particularly when confronting resistance, whereby governing entities employ systematic mechanisms aimed at the eradication of dissent and the subjugation of opposing forces through coordinated disciplinary practices. Therefore, the exertion of institutional dominance manifests particularly when confronting resistance, whereby governing entities employ systematic mechanisms aimed at the eradication of dissent and the subjugation of opposing forces through coordinated disciplinary practices.

### ***1.2.2 The Concept of Discourse***

In most circumstances, Foucault's definition of discourse is meant to suggest a valid form of language. Discourse does not only refer to words, language, but encompasses all behaviors that have the intention of regulating (Foucault, 2001). Within Foucault's paradigms of discursive power, subject formation operates through enforced compliance with normalizing apparatuses. The disciplinary mechanism manifests its bio-political efficacy precisely when encountering resistance, wherein regimes of truth activate panoptic strategies to effectuate the systematic dismantling of non-conforming subjectivities through iterative techniques of categorization, surveillance, and corporeal regimentation (Foucault, 1977/1995: 201–203). This perpetual power exercise reconstitutes dissenters as docile bodies via threefold operations: epistemic disqualification of alternative discourses, institutionalized exclusion from discursive spaces, and biopolitical neutralization through anatomopolitical interventions.

### ***1.2.3 The Concept of Subject***

Drawing upon Foucault's analytical framework, human agency emerges as an

effect of discursive formations rather than an autonomous essence. The Foucault's paradigm demonstrates how power-knowledge systems constitute subjectivity through normative frameworks that predetermine cognitive boundaries. Within this theoretical configuration, linguistic structures operate as regulatory mechanisms that select permissible articulation modes, effectively positioning speaking subjects within predetermined epistemic parameters. Foucault's inversion of traditional agency models reveals discursive power structures as primary architects of consciousness, wherein truth regimes systematically fabricate subject positions through institutionalized verbal protocols. This epistemic conditioning process transforms individuals into discursive artifacts shaped by historically contingent power relations embedded within language systems.

Therefore, this chapter examines Foucault's discourse-power nexus as an analytical framework, delineating how institutionalized authority intersects with linguistic systems to construct subject positions. The analysis foregrounds power's generative capacity in shaping truth regimes through discursive formations rather than mere prohibitive functions. Within sociohistorical contexts, power operates through normalized linguistic practices that simultaneously regulate human cognition and behavioral parameters. As Foucault's theoretical apparatus reveals, such mechanisms establish cognitive boundaries by transforming contingent value systems into seemingly objective epistemic frameworks. This process of discursive normalization enables power structures to govern social realities by strategically producing truth claims through historically contingent discursive practices, thereby generating self-perpetuating systems of inclusion or exclusion. People can only consciously or unconsciously live in accordance with certain implicit norms in reality, which has certain similarities with the image of women portrayed in *The Woman Warrior*.

## **2. The Silent Woman in Patriarchy**

The traditional Chinese ideology of the feudal patriarchy is a typical product of

a patriarchal society. Men as the dominant social actors strategically operationalize institutionalized power asymmetries to shape knowledge production systems. This process manifests through the codification of discursive practices that systematically reinforce existing hierarchies, controlling female discourse through the “truth”, and at the same time, constantly suppressing women’s discourse in all sorts of ways, preventing them from voicing their opinions, resulting in silence among females (Ding, 2022). In *The Woman Warrior*, the aunt in *No Name Woman* and the madwoman in *Shaman* are two typical characters of silent women.

## **2.1 The Silent Aunt in *No Name Woman***

As the aunt committed adultery with someone else, the family erased the aunt’s existence as if she had never been born. “Don’t let your father know that I told you. He denies her” (Kingston, 1989). The description of the aunt in the novel is also through mother’s words or author’s imagination, and the character of aunt has remained silent throughout the adultery incident, thus the aunt was in a state of silence in the social background of that time. The reason for the family and villagers’ attitude towards aunt is not only the act of adultery itself, but also the fact that adultery violates traditional Chinese feudal moral norms, such as the Three Bonds and Five Moral Rules, keeping faithful to husband until death, and not giving publicity to family scandals and so on.

In accordance with Foucault’s principle of prohibition in discourse regulation, people can only express what is in accordance with the norms in a certain context, and what is not consistent with the discursive structure will be prohibited and obscured. For the aunt’s family, her adulterous behaviour challenges the authority of her father and elder brothers as the feudal head of the family and disgraces the male members of the family, so the family wants to erase her existence (Wang, 2019). For the aunt’s village, her adulterous behaviour violates the feudal moral norms, so the villagers want to eliminate the negative consequences of the aunt’s behaviour through violence. Therefore, the aunt becomes silent owing to the prohibition of her

discourse by the male power.

## 2.2 The Madwoman in *Shaman*

In the view of Foucault, the second principle in discourse regulation is the “principle of exclusion”, which is primarily the exclusion of irrational discourses of madness. There is no equality between madness and rationality, and the mad can only be silenced, so the epistemological authority to delineate mental aberrations resides exclusively within institutionalized regimes of rationality. This disciplinary logic operates through spatialized governance mechanisms that materialize in panoptic modalities, enforcing a categorical demarcation between reason and unreason. Such carceral architectures serve dual functions of ontological purification and acoustic insulation, effectively enacting epistemic silencing through architectural regimentation.

The historical background of the *Shaman* is in the period of the Anti-Japanese War, in which the Japanese army frequently bombed villages, with the villagers being extremely sensitive to their surroundings due to the threat to their survival. The madwoman’s attempt to drink water from the river is misinterpreted by the villagers as an act of espionage:

*See? She’s a spy. Get out of the way, Doctor. You saw the way she flashed the signals. She comes to the river every day before the planes come.*

*“She’s only getting drinking water,” said my mother. “Crazy people drink water too” (Kingston,1989).*

As the madwoman is incapable of defending herself with rational language, the villagers convict the madwoman through their own speculations about her behaviour and collectively condemn her to death. Since the villagers’ act of stoning the madwoman to death is consistent with the collective will of the community at the time, the villagers’ collective murder was rationalized as an act of justice, and the madwoman’s own special mental condition was ignored by the community, making the madwoman a silent character.

### **3. The Construction of Female Identity by Male Discourse**

Within Foucault's conceptualization of discursive power dynamics, the enunciating agent emerges not as an autonomous originator but as an effect of the discursive matrix that simultaneously facilitates and constrains articulable positions. This constitutive paradox manifests through institutionalized knowledge systems that recursively mold subjective frameworks via normalized linguistic conventions, rendering the speaking subject both product and participant in its own ontological determination. In the context of feudal patriarchal society, men are the centre of discursive power and have absolute dominant authority. When female discourse is manipulated, female loses the power of discourse, and then loses the mastery of identity, and can only passively accept the construction of the female subject by male discursive power. In *The Woman Warrior*, male domination of the female subject is accomplished through the maintenance of discourse and discursive relations, which is mainly reflected in the discipline of female behaviours and the solidification of female minds.

#### **3.1 The Discipline of Female Behaviours – Aunt in *No Name Woman***

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault explains that when the body is confined to a certain range for a long period of time, while also receiving a series of physical training, a muscle memory is developed, which evolves into a habitual action that makes the body react in a subconscious way in any situation. "The purpose of this physical discipline is to make the human body more functional and more submissive, or more functional simply by becoming more submissive" (Foucault, 2003).

In the social background of traditional feudal rites in *The Woman Warrior*, a female's pursuit of beauty would be regarded as dissolute and would lead to gossip among the people around her: "on a farm near the sea, a woman who tended her appearance reaped a reputation for eccentricity" (Kingston, 1989).

In other words, human nature's pursuit of beauty was not recognized by the

social norms of the time, and the construction of female identity was based on the demands of the male-dominated society on the role of females, and only those female traits that conformed to the needs of the male society would be recognized by the society.

For the men of the family at the time, women were different from other male family members since women did not have the right to inherit property; instead, women were the property that the male elders had to deal with:

“After my grandparents gave their daughter away to her husband’s family, they had dispensed all the adventure and all the property” (Kingston,1989). The role of female in the family is only to constitute a family with men, to raise children and provide care for their husbands, and to labour day and night for the family. Even if the stooped posture of a woman carrying a baby on her back and washing clothes “like great sea snails” (Kingston,1989), does not correspond to the aesthetic male norms of “standing straight like a pine and sitting like a bell”, the female is praised in the male discourse as a virtuous wife and mother. Therefore, females’ demands and contributions are not evaluated from the female point of view, but from the male point of view, namely, whether or not their objective demands have been met, and the female identity is therefore constructed by the male discourse.

### **3.2 The Solidification of the Female Minds – Moon Orchid in *At the Western Palace***

Foucault mentions in *The History of Sexuality* that patriarchal power structures operate through discursive mechanisms that naturalize male-dominated ideologies within women’s processes of self-formation. This subtle indoctrination occurs via institutionalized knowledge systems that position gendered norms as inherent truths, effectively shaping feminine subjectivity through internalized regulatory practices aligned with hegemonic masculine frameworks, thus achieving the goal of dominating females (Foucault,1989). In *At the Western Palace*, Moon Orchid is a character who has been completely domesticated by the moral norms of



the feudal society. Moon Orchid regards her husband as the only pillar of support in her life. When Moon Orchid's husband remarries in the United States, Moon Orchid also maintains that her husband represents authority, and that she cannot go to the United States to find her husband and trouble his life, and that the authority and interests signified by her husband's status override Moon Orchid's personal interests at all times.

*"I'm scared. Oh, let's turn back. I don't want to see him. .... And he'll have a right to throw me out"* (Kingston, 1989). Even in Moon Orchid's view, her destiny and future are entirely determined by her husband. Moon Orchid has relied on the money sent by her husband all her life; she has no ability to live independently, and even when she manages to learn how to work, all she can think about is delighting her husband and earning his approval through her ability to work:

*Sometimes Moon Orchid got into the mood. "Maybe I could be folding towels when he comes in. He'll think I'm so clever. I'll get to them before his wife does"* (Kingston, 1989).

It can be concluded from this that Moon Orchid has been completely tamed by the norms of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues established by the patriarchal society and has completely oblivious to the significance and value of her independent identity as Moon Orchid. Therefore, after Moon Orchid meets her husband, he indicates that he is unwilling to recognize Moon Orchid as his wife in the future, which is a complete violation of the norms of the Three Obediences and Four Virtues, and as a result, Moon Orchid goes mad.

#### **4. Women's Resistance to Male Discursive Power**

The female subject is constructed under the patriarchal system, so if women want to reconstruct or change their original subjective identity, they should look into the history of the operation of the patriarchal power system and analyse the mechanism of power. Within the dispersed structures of patriarchal power, women's

resistance strategies cannot achieve full systemic transformation to create new structures of authority and redefine social identities. Following Foucault's analysis of power dynamics, such opposition must instead engage in localized contestations that incrementally reshape conceptions of femininity through ongoing negotiations with existing power relations.

#### **4.1 Discourse of Strength--Martial Arts in *White Tigers***

In the human world, males, due to their physical superiority over females in terms of strength, have emerged as the main group of people defending the country and in foreign wars, and therefore occupy the status of the centre of power. In *White Tigers*, the heroine imagines that if she grew up in the mountains with two mysterious old men and mastered martial arts, she would have great martial arts skills and lead an army to build up a successful career without having to be arranged by her parents to have to marry someone when she reaches adulthood, as other girls do, and the people of her hometown would extol her virtues for generations:

*My mother and father and the entire clan would be living happily on the money I had sent them. .... They would sacrifice a pig to the gods that I had returned* (Kingston, 1989).

That is to say, females have obtained the voice through their own strength, and even if the dominance of male discourse under the patriarchal society remains undiminished, females have gained the status of equal discourse with males through their strength.

#### **4.2 Discourses of Knowledge – Medical Education in *Shaman***

According to Foucault, "any educational system is a political approach to the maintenance or modification of discursive appropriation and the knowledge and power it transmits" (Foucault, 2001). Only a portion of society has real access to this knowledge and the ability to use knowledge education to maintain the power of a particular group or class. To those who are not educated, they are convinced of the

knowledge that those in power claim to have, whether or not it is actually the truth. In this way, power is maintained and stabilized with the help of knowledge. In *Shaman*, the character of the mother gains the respect and support of the group in society by virtue of her medical education:

*After two years of study – the graduates of three-week and six-week courses were more admired by the peasants for learning at such wondrous speeds – my mother returned to her home village a doctor. She was welcomed with garlands and cymbals the way people welcome the “barefoot doctors” today (Kingston, 1989).*

When mother returns to her hometown after completing her medical studies, she is enthusiastically welcomed by the villagers, who even dress up in their best clothes. In addition, as an adult woman, the mother is able to continue to adopt her own name after marriage instead of taking her husband's surname according to the traditional practice, which shows that the mother's identity as an independent individual is respected and recognized by the male-dominated society, and that the mother's social status is acquired precisely because she has learned the knowledge of medicine that only a few people, or only a few males, could acquire, and the knowledge becomes a powerful weapon for fighting for the power of female discourse within the hands of females.

## **5. Conclusion**

In the traditional context of the feudal society in *The Woman Warrior*, patriarchy has become the system that dominates social discourse, males use male discourse to evaluate and construct female identity, and female discourse power has always been in a marginalized position, and the traditional image of female has always been silent. However, the situation of women's discourse power is not fixed, females have been struggling with male discourse and gradually expanding females' own discourse power. The female characters in *The Woman Warrior* have gradually acquired the right to have equal conversations with males by way of receiving

knowledge education or strength education. Although due to the time limitation, for example, there are still some shortcomings of the progressive female characters in *Shaman* and *A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe*, such as the existence of superstitious thoughts and the remnants of feudal patriarchal authority thoughts and so on, it is believed that with the expansion of female's right of education and the stage for their development, the discourse power of female will continue to be extended in the future.

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## 《女勇士》中华裔女性话语权力的变化分析

在《女勇士》中，中国传统封建女性往往处于沉默失语状态，无法表达自己的个人诉求和价值观。然而，随着时代的进步和美国移民社会的影响，一些女性通过接受教育或增强自身力量，逐渐获得了与男性平等对话的机会，女性话语权也逐渐扩大。本文从福柯的话语权理论出发，探讨《女勇士》中华裔女性话语权从沉默到反抗的变迁过程，最终得出结论：中国女性话语权经历了从沉默失语走向逐渐扩大的过程，虽然在这一过程中仍存在一些不可避免的时代局限性，但它仍代表了中国女性话语在男权社会中的重构与进步。

**关键词：**福柯，话语权力，华裔女性，变化