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Overcoming Obstacles, Finding Strength

In “Chi Li Slays the Serpent,” the reader meets a strong female who challenges traditional roles and overcomes obstacles while being shown a glimpse of Chinese culture and its’ rich literature. As someone who has struggled with various things in life, I can identify with Chi Li even though our challenges in life are different.

Chi Li is a female in China. This alone puts her in a less than ideal place. Although the historical period of this myth is unclear, sons have long been favored in China. In fact, women have long been subject to being “beaten by their husbands or other family members because they did not give birth to a son” (Zhang 676), and although things may have improved somewhat there are still cases of killing female babies or abandoning them today. One can only imagine what a problem it was at the time of this myth. In the Chinese marriage system of the time, a woman had to leave her home for her husband’s home. In this system“the permanence of sons and the transience of daughters” (Zhang 685) became a problem for women and raised the position of men. Chi Li herself mentions the patriarchal state of China when she states that daughters are a burden, and could not take care of their parents later in life (Chi Li 332). She even goes as far as to say that “parents who have only daughters might just as well have no children at all” (Chi Li 332), a very strong indication of the place of women in society. Chi Li eventually defied her parents and went to kill the monster. However, she did not foolishly run off, she came up with a plan first. She requested “a leashed serpent-hound, a sharp-pointed, sheathed sword, and the freedom to make use of them” and carried “a large bag of rice balls” (Chi Li 332). Through careful planning and her own courage, she was able to destroy the beast,save herself and her village and become a famous queen.

In this myth, the serpent is Chi Li, and the village’s adversary. This serpent reveals much about Chinese literature and even culture. The staggering size of the serpent made it difficult to destroy even by magistrates and the king’s own warriors. The snake is said to have killed and eaten many of these people while the survivors “fled in panic down the mountainside” (Chi Li 331). The serpent, while an actual character in the story, is largely symbolic in Chinese literature, and culture. In some Chinese stories and in early society, the snake was honored because of “its tenacity of life” (Chao 197). Certainly, this serpent lives up to that, as he is unable to be overpowered physically.

Another possible symbolic interpretation found throughout Asian literature is fertility. In the Pacific serpents who live in the underworld “are closely associated with fertility” (Wessing 208). Interestingly, in some areas these serpents are thought of as female (Wessing 208), further connecting them to fertility.However, in another article there is some suggestion that the form of the snake may have been worshipped as “representative of phallic significance” (Chao 197). In the myth, young women are specifically selected to sacrifice to the serpent. This could simply be seen as further evidence that women are not valued. However, it is actually another symbol of fertility and the cycle of life found in nature.

If this symbolism is taken with the dominant culture present at the time in China, an interesting picture emerges. The male dominance of the time is shown (perhaps subliminally) through the serpent. As a phallic symbol, it can represent all males and how they (like the serpent) have power, even life and death power over everyone. More obviously, everyone in a position of power in the myth from the magistrates to the warriors is male. When the “maidens” are sacrificed to the serpent, they are brought to the cave from their home and left at the mercy of the serpent. This is similar to the way a young woman would leave her home for her husband’s home, further reinforcing the male dominance in China.

Chi Li breaks this pattern. She volunteers to be killed by the serpent to better the lives of her parents and sisters. Then, she is able to kill it with her quick thinking and planning; a task no man in the myth was able to accomplish. By killing the snake (the symbol of men, and the male centered society), she is able to symbolically kill male supremacy at least in her own life. Unlike the typical woman, she engineered her own future.Through her own heroism, she was able to achieve fame, wealth and prestige for herself and her family. Even her marriage seems far less traditionally male centered. By calling Chi Li “worthy” (333) and praising her bravery, he makes her almost an equal. It is telling that this King who could presumably marry any woman, chooses the untraditional Chi instead of a wealthy, beautiful noblewoman.

I can relate to Chi Li’s fight with the serpent. While I have never had to fight off a serpent, I have faced several challenges. Like Chi Li, I tackle problems through planning.One challenge I have faced is multiple surgeries and health problems.I was able to maintain strength and courage by preparing myself for the surgeries, like Chi Li. I attended doctor’s appointments and learned everything I could about the procedures being performed. I took comfort in packing for the hospital in several cases. This was one way (as I saw it) to ensure that my wants and needs would met. It was also a way to take control in an area that I was not fully able to be in control. It was, and is, sometimes difficult to deal with but like Chi Li; I have to focus on the current task.

Another example was coming to Pace for freshman year. Thankfully, I had a long time to prepare for it. Finally at the end of the summer, all of the shopping, packing, financial, and physical aspects had been arranged. However, it was still a challenge to be three hundred miles away from my parents, friends, and anything familiar. At first I was homesick and unsure if I had made the right choice for college. I overcame this challenge by planning out what clubs I wanted to join, and what activities I wanted to be involved in on campus.Now I am never bored, have many friends on campus, and look forward to coming back after a break from school.

Chi Li and I both face challenges. While Chi Li had to struggle against a dangerous serpent, I had to face health challenges and a brand new environment far away from anything I have ever known. In both situations, both of us used our intelligence and planning capabilities instead of relying on others or solely physical strength to overcome our problems. Having the cultural background and knowledge of symbols helped me understand this myth and Chinese culture in a new and deeper way.

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