

林 润 著

THE IRON CURTAIN OF LANGUAGE

语言的铁幕

汤亭亭与美国的东方主义

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON
AND AMERICAN ORIENTALISM
by JENNIE WANG

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Preface

The book is entitled “*The Iron Curtain of Language: Maxine Hong Kingston and American Orientalism*. ” Kingston’s genius lies in her ability to part “the black curtains” on a piece of white paper, playing with light and darkness, subverting the stereotypes and dominant paradigms in American Orientalism. The metaphor of the curtain first appears in *The Woman Warrior* —

I was making a stage curtain, and it was the moment before the curtain parted or rose I spread them [the pictures] (so black and full of possibilities) and pretended the curtains were swinging open, flying up, one after another, sunlight underneath, mighty operas. (165)

A decade later, composing *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston literally staged the curtains in Wittman Ah Sing’s theater. In a booklet entitled *Through the Black Curtain*, she speaks of the curtains during war times —

All my life, I’ve looked for those black curtains; I wanted to part them, and to see what is on the other side. Probably, the curtains were not only imaginary; I saw actual curtains. The blackout curtains of World War II. My mother and father laughed and talked while climbing up and down the ladder and unfurling lengths and folds of drapery. They have owned curtains before. Sun rays shot out the top and side edges. We were safe from the street, the city, strangers, World War II.¹

The black curtains are metaphorically linked with a world war, the blackout, the writer’s room without a view, insulated and isolated from the world outside. The

author of *The Woman Warrior* is writing in a “prison-house” of language, in an attempt to reach “the other side,” out of darkness into light.

What enables her to imagine the Other, tracing history and her “mythic origin” back to China, to represent and recreate the self and the Other in America? Where comes the light that allows her the vision to penetrate the black curtain and the spirit to resist the “deathly embrace” of American Orientalism?² How does she weave the tapestry of her texts, twist the wires, untie the knots, and tear down the Iron Curtain of language? As we see in the metaphor quoted above, the curtains are imaginary. In the “unfurling” hands of her parents, who “have owned curtains before,” the “draperies” are associated with an ethnic heritage, reminding us of the blank Buddhist scrolls obtained from India by the Chinese pilgrims in the legend of *Journey to the West* (Kingston was translating the Chinese legend into *Tripmaster Monkey* the time when she wrote *Through the Black Curtain*.) Wonderful ideas from “mighty operas” of Chinese literature, like red lanterns, lit up the stage curtain, filling in the blank scrolls of American Literature with powerful voices from another tongue, the voices of Asian-American men and women. The most alien system of thoughts and languages, literary forms and classic philosophy provide the most stimulating, dynamic, revolutionary energy in the creative mind. It is her ethnic heritage — her parents’ “draperies” — that enlivens the soul and spirit of the author, like “the sunrays shot out the top and side edges” of the black curtain, that blocks the view of the outside world. Inside the prison house of language, we could hear the laughter of her parents, breaking the silence in darkness.

In Kingston, the redeeming strength of women’s liberation comes from her mother’s talkstories and the Chinese theater. The war in *The Woman Warrior*, as I discuss in the book, is theatrical rather than real. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, it is a stage war, directed by the puppet master “through the black curtain,” voicing over a multitudes of puppet heads. The author’s masked, mandarin, matriarchal voice carries the might of a mother tongue, which penetrates cultural myths and stereotypes — “swinging open, flying up” the black curtains of the Cold War language, the school language, the media language, the colonial language, and the master narrative of American Orientalism. The grand performances of Kingston’s “mighty operas” open the eyes of the West to the heroic spirit of Asian women. Her stories of Golden Mountain Women and Golden Mountain Heroes challenge

and change the images of Chinese women and China men in America, and in “China.”³

Such is the power of creative writing that academic writing in prosaic language fails to compete. *The Woman Warrior* was published in 1976 when the Iron Curtain between US and China was expected to thaw. The book lighted the fireworks that celebrated the dawn of a new epoch. Since then three decades have elapsed, the Iron Curtain has been lifted in diplomatic relations, immigration laws, China trade, and popular culture; yet in mainstream media and press, the Iron Curtain stands still. Sheltered behind the Iron Curtain of television shows, movies and missionary preaching, popular consciousness in large parts of the country remain hostile, prejudiced, and ignorant of Chinese people and Chinese culture. The China discourse in American Orientalism remains ahistorical — unenlightened, immune to the social, economic, and political changes and progresses taking place rapidly and dramatically at home and abroad.

In academic writing, to write on the subject of “China men” and Chinese women, Chinese culture and the Chinese tradition in American English is to write in a negative language. First, one has to struggle against the existing stereotypes and clichés in American English, and dance with Death — the “deathly embrace” of American Orientalism. Second, one is subjected to editorial taboos and tattoos. The taboos are the don’ts — do not speak for the Chinese (I was warned writing on Kingston). Do not break the rules of the game, the masculine and feminine principles in Western conception of the East, the West always in the position of the savior, and the East the saved. Without Said’s theory of Orientalism, one would not understand the mechanism of such restrictions. The tattoos are the dos that attract attention — the color coded signs and labels of identity politics, which list the value of the work in acceptable market price, and print on the body and skin of an author, regardless of the author’s originality or creative genius. If the label is a “Chinese woman,” she is expected to “cry rape,” “third world” sexual abuse, and violation of “human rights,” “at the bottom of the well,” so on and so forth, so as to follow the first world feminist agenda. If a “China man,” he must express the anguish of “emasculatation,” or “castration,” join the “queer,” and turn against the women of his own kind, inflict self-abuse, self-denial and self-negation in a self-destructive fashion. If the author writes with human dignity, self-esteem, and a strong voice, s/he will be labeled a “nativist,” or “national-

ist,” an academic alien, excluded from the institution of English Studies, and marginalized to the field of minority studies.

To speak or write positively on the subject is “unidiomatic.” But, in the theory of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, it is the idioms and idiomatic expressions that have corrupted the system of representation. “I would not have undertaken a book of this sort,” as he states in *Orientalism*, “if I did not also believe that there is scholarship that is not as corrupt, or at least as blind to human reality, as the kind I have been mainly depicting.”⁴ I felt the same way during the twelve years of researching and writing on the subject. To deal with the Iron Curtain of language in Kingston criticism in America is an impossible task. Maybe it is a vain effort to reach out to an audience that is schooled in the Cold War language, the biblical language, the colonial English language, the Euro-centric theoretical language, the insensitive, dehumanized, jargon-ridden, high-tech language, the colonizers’ language, the gender-split language, the self-abusive language, not to mention the official language in the media.

The Iron Curtain of language not only blocks the perception of positive features of China and Chinese culture, the humanities of China men and Chinese women, more seriously, it denies critics the ability to articulate what they actually see or read in Kingston’s texts. Hence cultural misreadings a central issue in Kingston criticism. The stereotypes Kingston demystifies with her postmodern fictive strategies, the refreshing ideas, images and metaphorical language that she recreates through the performance of “puppet shows” are *unnamable* in everyday American English. They are lost in literary criticism, in the dead language of American Orientalism, with which critics criticize unthinkingly on the subject of China, China men and Chinese women, Chinese culture and tradition.

To lift the Iron Curtain of language in academic writing, if possible at all, it is the scholar’s job to name the unnamable, empty the signs and idioms in Orientalism, and invent a new language, which must be antibiotic, affirmative, and liberating, as the fictionists do in creative writing. In Kingston study, what is needed is a close reading and hard listening — listening to the accents and differences, possibilities and surprises, the dialogic, disruptive, bilingual puns, the alien voices, the metaphorical language, and the metaphysical conceits, that shoot like “the sun rays” through the edges of the black curtain, so that we may borrow something from another tongue, either through translation or through comparative

studies. “Thus interesting work is most likely to be produced by scholars whose allegiance is to a discipline defined intellectually and not to a ‘field’ like Orientalism defined either canonically, imperially, or geographically,” as Said believes (Said 326). Accordingly, I find it limiting to place Kingston study in the narrowly defined fields or critical concerns of Ethnic Literature, Asian-American Studies, Women’s Studies, Gender Studies, or Multicultural Literature.

In writing this book, I find the most useful information and critical concepts come from Comparative Literature, Postmodernist Fiction, Postcolonial Theory, Social History, Transnational Study, and also from 18th Century English Study, 19th Century American History, 20th Century Women’s Liberation in China, as well as the study of Chinese Theatre and Drama. To address “what is Chinese and what is American” in Kingston’s writing, which is a main subject in this book, I had to do research in the original language. Incidentally, I was raised in China, and like Kingston, grew up with talkstories, folk tales and legends. I loved all sorts of regional ballads and opera. It was from the scrolls of scripts that hung by the stage in traditional opera performance where I learned the living language of Chinese classics and narrative verse. But I must say that I did not know what was Chinese until I came to America; and I did not know what was American till Kingston’s writing challenged me to tell what was and was not Chinese.

In order to determine what Kingston was possibly informed of China the time she wrote *The Woman Warrior and China Men*, I chose to examine a marginal media — the Chinese newspapers published in the United States and circulated among the Chinese immigrant communities in California, that her parents read. I surveyed three newspapers with varied editorial bias from the period of 1966 to 1976. In dealing with the critical controversies over the story of “No Name Woman,” I discovered a comparable text — an English translation of a short story written by a Chinese woman writer — Ding Lin’s “A Girl in the Xia Village.” The most effective critical methodology I drew from a new historicist study of Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*. To explore the lyricism in Kingston’s narrative structure of *China Men*, I enjoyed reading the original text of Cai Yen’s “Eighteen Laments Sung to a Hujia” (《胡笳十八拍》)⁵ To hear the language of a fifth generation Chinese-American young man, Wittman Ah Sing in *Tripmaster Monkey*, I loitered around Telegraph Avenue in Berkeley, Haight-Ashbury district and North Beach, listening to the black vernacular, street music, the San Franciscan Ameri-

can accent. I read a most informative and exciting social history — Todd Gitlin's *Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage*, a rich reservoir. Another social history, Mary Roberts Coolidge's *Chinese Immigration*, published as early as in 1910, gave me proper insight into American politics on the subject. To sort out the complexity of genre classifications in Kingston study, I discovered a minor genre to be most helpful in reading Kingston — the Arabesque. In that literary tradition, the East has long lived in the Western imagination, and the West has recreated an Eastern form in German, English, and American Literatures.

The structure of this book is organized in a self-reflective form, that of a Postmodern Chaotic Arabesque.⁶ Each chapter is organized in a series of essays; each can be read by itself on individual topics, as indicated by the subtitles; but the chapters are linked by related topics and sequenced in a thematic progression, focusing on Kingston's dance with the "deathly embrace" of American Orientalism. In writing this book, I learned most from Kingston. Her freedom of imagination and innovation, her literary borrowings and literary disruptions, her creative energy and subversive power — have been an infinite source of inspiration. Her "talkstories" are never artless, formless fibs, or documentary oral narratives, but fictive digressions, which offer metaphorical reflections on thematic progressions. They open up not only a marginal space to accents and surprises, but also a transnational space for cultural as well as literary transformations. Transnational juxtapositions and digressive disruptions become a beautiful formal principle to represent historical discontinuities.

My critical methodology is apparently eclectic and interdisciplinary, developed over the years through various stages from postmodern aesthetics to transnational theory and practice. In the meanwhile, I never gave up close reading. Without close reading, one cannot address the misreadings effectively and convince the experts. Without text and context, theoretical impositions only turn into literary stereotyping, and cultural studies are out of touch with language and its function in cultural transformation.

One of my good intentions in writing this book is to produce substantial useful readings for teachers of Kingston's works in English literature classes. Therefore, each essay contains a close reading of sort, which can be used individually to teach a story or two from Kingston's books, or deal with a certain critical issue in Kingston criticism. Some of the essays were developed from my lecture notes, so

I have some confidence in their usefulness for teachers. The book is open to the reader like a feast at “China Buffet,” one may select a combination of both American and Chinese cuisine to please one’s appetite. I hope my multiple critical discourses and seasoned Chinese spices will be to the taste of Kingston readers.

For the past ten years, I taught American Literature in a regional university in Cedar Falls, Iowa, the heartland of America. On the front lawn of my house, there stood an American flag. My little Ford carried two bumper sticks— “Land of the Brave, Home of the Free” and “God Bless America!” We Iowans have a national reputation for being patriotic as well as xenophobic. We are proud of who we are, and innocently believe “we are the best,” without having been exposed to the world outside. My students from the English Department are almost all white, few immigrants, blacks or Asians. Except for a couple of graduate students from Taiwan or Indonesia, I have taught none of my kind. Many of my students come from family of war veterans or soldiers in military service. Many of their families have suffered losses from war, either the death of family members or postwar nightmares. I feel deeply for the kind of students who ask leave of absence to say good-bye to their fiancées before going to war, and those who come to my classes to find their voices to tell their family stories. It was with these students in mind, I wrote on Kingston, speaking against the cold wars and hot wars, the Iron Curtain of language and American Orientalism — the war in words.

This book is dedicated to my students in Iowa, those quiet, deep, sensitive, caring, patient, polite, innocent souls from cornfields, small towns, Indian reserves, and ethnic villages. It was their wish to broaden their horizon, their friendly interest and feedback, their dedication and support, their intelligence and sensitivity, and their sense of justice, that assured me of the value of teaching Kingston, the difference I could make, and have made in their liberal arts education, in their souls.

Notes

[1] Kingston, *Through the Black Curtain*, 5.

[2] I borrow a metaphor from the title of Ma, Shen-Mei’s book *The Deathly Embrace: Orientalism and Asian-American Identity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). Ma uses this phrase to depict the enthralling power of Orientalism over Asian-American writers. Ma’s idea comes from the dragon lady image on the book jacket of the first edition of Kingston’s *The Woman Warrior*. See Introduction to his

book, xvii-xix.

- [3] I am aware that Kingston used the word “Gold” (Mountain) at one time. The Chinese word Jin (金) means “gold,” and also “golden. ” I prefer the “Golden Mountain” as in “the Golden Gate Bridge. ” For me, California is a golden state, blessed with sunshine. The golden color gives glory to yellow. Yellow is the color associated with the Chinese as a race. “Golden Mountain Women” gives glory to the pioneers and heroic immigrants in Kingston’s books, who deserve it, to my mind, not for the gold they made, but for the hope they had, the glorious spirit they carried on — the spirit of the American West. They are hopeful Western American Californian folks.
- [4] Said, *Orientalism*, 326.
- [5] Hujia (胡笳) is a reed flute or whistle used by the northern tribes in ancient China. The last chapter of *WW* is entitled “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe. ”
- [6] I shall discuss “Postmodern Chaotic Arabesque” as a genre in Chapter 2.

Introduction

In summer 1996, when I was examining Kingston's manuscripts and archive material in The Rare Book Collection in the Bancroft Library at Berkeley, in an attempt to assess Kingston's achievement, her contribution to humanities in Western civilization, I came across a book review of *China Men* published in *Washington Post*, June 22, 1980. The cover featured three passport-size pictures: Maxine Hong Kingston, Pablo Picasso, and Charles Darwin. It was either an odd combination or a happy coincidence that Kingston stood in such good company. It placed her in a position seldom acknowledged by Kingston critics. Its editorial perspective was at once enlightened and enlightening. The visual illustration constructed an intellectual paradigm otherwise unthinkable in Western imagination; its pictograph gave me a language and logic to articulate my appraisal and admiration. Indeed, if Darwin revolutionized the Western concept of the human origin in the 19th century, and Picasso revolutionized the Western vision of the human self in the early 20th century, in the late 20th century, it was Kingston, an American woman writer, who revolutionized the Western perception of the human other. "In her ground-breaking book *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*," as President Clinton spoke of her achievement at the reception of her Presidential Humanities Medal in 1997, "she brought the Asian-American experience to life for millions of readers and inspired a new generation of writers to make their own unique voices and experiences heard."

Maxine Hong Kingston, the first Asian-American writer accepted in the canon of American Literature in the late 1970s, only after a decade and half, by the early 1990s, was reported to be the most widely read, anthologized, and taught living American author. Her works are acclaimed masterpieces in world literature, which have established her reputation not only as a leading Asian-American writer, but also a major American author, a leading author of our times. Her first

book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) ¹ creates one of the most powerful and memorable female characters in American fiction — Brave Orchid, a Chinese immigrant woman who raises her daughter(s) with the “talkstories” of Chinese legendary women. Reinventing ethnic tradition with fantasy, dreams, and imaginary speculation, Kingston dynamically introduces into American literary imagination a heroic tradition of Chinese women. The book won the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977 and the Anisfield-Wolf Race Relations Book Award, 1978. Her second book, *China Men* (1979) ², reconstructs the lost history of Chinese immigration in North America from the late 19th century to the period of the Vietnam War, composed in a unique form, mixing myth, tall tales, lyric, and metafiction with documentary history. This “Chinese Ulysses,” immediately recognized by critics as an “American classic” upon publication, won the National Book Award in 1981 and the 1981 Hawaii Award for Literature. Her third book, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) ³, won both Pen USA West Award in Fiction and also the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters Award in 1990. The book is what I call “Kingston’s post-modern representation of a new ‘China Man,’” in which a native-born, fifth generation Asian-American, 1960s Berkeley graduate, Liberal Arts major, a poet, playwright, street artist/activist, named “Wittman Ah Sing” is incarnated with the spirit of the Monkey King from Asia. His colorful features, artistic talents, and locomotive voice can be identified with the beat poets, the rock musicians, the street activists — an archetype of today’s ethnic minority community leader. Thus, Kingston redefines American identity and recreates the role of the Artist in relation to his community. Self-conceived as a Maker of the American language, like Walt Whitman, Kingston wrote another book *To Be the Poet*, which was published by Harvard University Press in 2002. *The Fifth Book of Peace*, its original manuscript had been burned in a fire in Oakland Hills, was finally re-composed and published in 2003. It was intended to produce a new language, a language of Peace, in order to heal our national wound from the Vietnam War. ⁴ Kingston is an ambitious writer, and her works are important in American literary history.

In 1991, to meet the demand of curriculum instruction, Modern Language Association published its *Approaches to Teaching Kingston’s The Woman Warrior* under its “Approaches to Teaching World Literature” series. Edited by Professor Shirley Geok-lin Lim, the book produced pages of references to books, articles,

interviews, films, video productions, and recordings for Kingston study. Since then, an increasing number of journal articles and conference papers, dissertation and book chapters appeared, written by writers across race, gender, and nationalities (see “Kingston Criticism”) creating a substantial body of Kingston criticism.⁵ In recent years, book-length publications began to appear, including a volume of interviews with Kingston, a collection of critical essays, a critical companion, a book on Kingston’s use of Chinese sources, a major author book, etc.

Kingston’s influence on contemporary Asian-American literature is monumental. Since she opened the door for a generation of Asian-American writers and critics in mainstream American literary criticism, Kingston has become the “Muse,” the “guardian angel” in Asian-American writing today. *Almost every publication on the subject of Asian-American literature in general contains either an evocation of her name or a reference to her pioneer work.* Her three exemplary books have mapped out the major themes and directions for a generation of Asian-American writers. It was Kingston who nourished the spirit of what critics call a “renaissance” of Asian-American literature. As Garrett Hongo puts it in *Under Western Eyes*, a collection of personal essays by rising stars of Asian-American writers, “if it weren’t for Maxine Hong Kingston, I wouldn’t have my imaginative life”; and he dedicated the book to Maxine Hong Kingston, “the Gold Mountain Hero.”⁶

However, Kingston’s fame was not created by Asian-American critics in the first place. Much of Kingston criticism is written and published by non-Asian feminist critics and writers. Popularly known as the author of *WW*, Kingston’s impact on a generation of American feminist writers and critics across ethnic and national boundaries is dynamic and far-reaching. The stories of Chinese heroines she introduces into American literature make a radical difference and provide alternative models for the women’s liberation movement in America. For a generation of American feminists, Kingston enables and empowers women writers to liberate the voices of “mothers and daughters” from a patriarchal cultural and literary tradition, as portrayed in American classics such as Hawthorne’s *The Scarlet Letter*, (which had challenged Kingston’s literary imagination in writing *WW*) . From Alice Walker’s *Color Purple* and Joyce Kogawa’s *Obasan* to Amy Tan’s *The Joy Luck Club*, and many contemporary female narratives, it has been literary history ever since.

Kingston's achievement reaches beyond the claim of feminist criticism. In *Ethnic Passages*, Thomas J. Ferraro points out that Kingston not only reclaims the literary market for female and Asian-American narratives, but also provides paradigms in ethnic literature for readers and for writers of other groups to do the same as she does before a literary public. In the study of ethnic literature, immigrant writing, multiculturalism, and postcolonial theories, Kingston is always the most fascinating, powerful, and stimulating subject for scholars and teachers across gender and race. For some critics, Kingston may serve as a token "minority, ethnic, Asian-American, woman writer" to be included from the "margin"; for others, to the contrary, Kingston attracts critical attention because her creative genius challenges such tokenism. In *The Politics of Voice: Liberalism and Social Criticism from Franklin to Kingston* (1992), Malini J. Shueller places Kingston in the center of the canon instead of the margin. Shueller recognizes Kingston's unique position as a woman writer who "destabilizes" the concept of gender. Even though postmodern critics have different aesthetic interests from that of the new historicist, feminist, and the multiculturalist, in *Poetics of Postmodernism* (1988), Linda Hutcheon identifies Kingston's fictions as "historiographic metafiction," which opens the metafictional discourse to issues of gender and race, thus "historicizing the postmodern." Kingston study covers a good variety of areas in literary and cultural criticism.

From Malaysia to Australia, Kingston is treated as a subject of "diaspora," while in California and Florida, a model of "internal colonization."⁷ In Canada, Kingston's achievement offers an exemplary case for the debate over bilingual education. In Europe, she is the promise of multiculturalism under a new world order. (Ferraro's Yale dissertation reports that *The Woman Warrior* is studied for the second-year oral comprehensive at the University of Geneva.) In Hong Kong and Taiwan, Kingston deconstructs national and ethnic identities, initiates a dialogue between the "barbarian" and the "exotic." Mimi Chan's article "'Listen, Mom, I'm a Banana'" (meaning white inside) calls our attention to *The Asian Voice in English* with an inviting metaphor.⁸

The quantity of Kingston criticism itself is an intriguing subject in the study of Orientalism in America. The different perspectives and varied readers' responses to Kingston's works, Kingston's own response to her critics and reviewers' cultural misreadings, the protest and defence from the Asian-American communi-