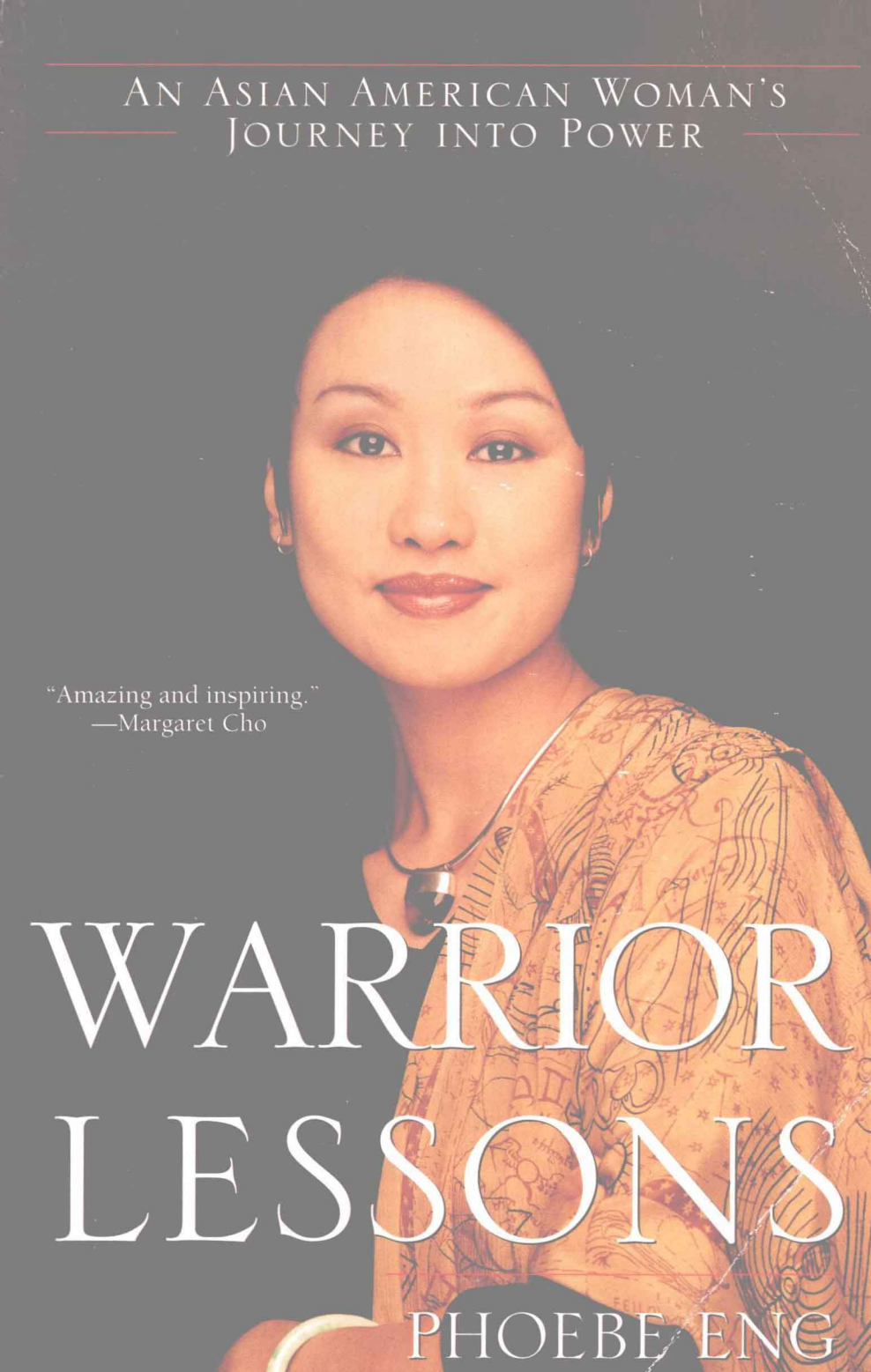


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AN ASIAN AMERICAN WOMAN'S  
JOURNEY INTO POWER

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"Amazing and inspiring."  
—Margaret Cho

A portrait of Phoebe Eng, an Asian American woman, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. She is wearing a patterned orange and yellow top and a necklace. The background is dark.

# WARRIOR LESSONS

PHOEBE ENG

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*An Asian American Woman's  
Journey Into Power*



PHOEBE ENG

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*Praise for Phoebe Eng*  
*and*  
WARRIOR  
LESSONS

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*For my teachers,*

MALLIKA DUTT

ELAINE KIM

HELEN ZIA

PEGGY SAIKA

SHARON HOM

*and for my mother,*

MEI-HUEI

*and my father,*

HARRY KUO-FEI



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## *Introduction*

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# THE NEED FOR A COMPASS

Over the last few years, as I made my way across the country as a lecturer and writer, I have met many hundreds of Asian American women who have shared with me their stories—how they see their lives, whether they feel in control of their destinies, and, if not, what they needed to get there. Whether they were American-born, recent immigrants, professionals, students, or workers, and regardless of where in Asia their families originated, it became clear that they often shared common yearnings for connection to each other and advice as to how to take a middle path between family expectations and realizing their own hopes and dreams. They talked of being strong and knowing their worth, yet still they felt misunderstood and sometimes isolated. Often, especially if they were the American-raised daughters of immigrants, they were trying hard to resolve their feelings of “being in limbo” or “falling through the cracks” of the often divergent

cultures of East and West. What they asked for most was a compass or a road map to guide them into a more powerful, more grounded view of themselves.

Perhaps that need comes from what Filipina American writer Karin Aguilar-San Juan referred to recently as “the complicated relationship [that we have] to the idea of ‘home,’” which to each of us can mean so many things. Where is “home” when our extended families span multiple generations and many continents with intricate social bonds? And, as Aguilar-San Juan suggests, is America truly “home” when even those of us who claim four and five generations born in America can still be perceived as foreigners? I look at my own extended family as an example. In America, the Engs are teachers, we are merchants, some of us have worked in sweatshops, and some of us own them. Among us there are artists, ad executives, waiters, and millionaires. Some speak stilted English; some can’t read a word of Chinese. Yet as different as we might be from one another, “home” for each of us is fluid and multiple in its definition. Comfortable enough in America, Chinatown, and even Hong Kong or Taiwan, we seem to belong everywhere. And because of this, we might also belong nowhere. “Home,” it seems, ends up being a mixed-up notion that must be redefined if it is to have meaning for many of us. No wonder we need compasses. Without knowing where we stake our ground, it is difficult for us to know where we’re going.

With a knowledge of our past that is often shaky at best, and a cultural future that remains uncharted, we have had to figure out by ourselves what it means to live with confidence as Asian American women. How do we learn how to stand up for ourselves? How do we learn to accept ourselves, our weaknesses, doubts, as well as our strengths, and know that we are still worthy? When do we let perfection-

ism and expectation fall away so that we can finally live truer, more powerful lives? Without road maps and compasses, we have grown accustomed to defining our experiences and our validity individually, through blind trial and error, often without mentors, often without hearing the stories of others that might help us understand our own lives. In my life, I have often found myself swinging back and forth, alone and searching for a stabilizing center.



Call it a blessing or a curse. I was the first of two daughters born in America to the Eng family, in the Chinese Year of the Tiger, a year, it is said, that yields girls who grow up to be trouble. Like tigers, the Chinese horoscope says, such girls are too unruly to control, too confident in their own power, too dangerously unpredictable and rebellious. And so, with kicking and fighting in my stars, it was my uncanny good fortune to have been born outside of China, in Philadelphia, home of the Liberty Bell. In America, where rugged rebellion is sought-after and rewarded, I was raised true to my tiger calling. Within one generation of stepping off a steamship onto Ellis Island, the Eng family of my father (a lineage of hardworking Cantonese railroad workers and laundrymen) and the Liu family of my mother (Presbyterian evangelicals from Taiwan) had an American-born daughter who grew to embody the fruits of their hard work. A lawyer in the family! And one who spoke such good English!

By the late 1980s I had become a young international attorney, a Chinese American yuppie (aka “chuppie”) in training. The Pacific Rim was booming, and I was to be stationed at the center of it all in Hong Kong. Finally, I thought, my hyphenated Asian-Americanness, which had

always been a cross to bear in my younger years, might give me some advantage. What I didn't understand then was that in Hong Kong, as an American woman with an Asian face, with one foot planted in America and only my pinky toe planted in the land of my distant ancestry, I would have even less advantage, even less a sense of belonging than I did in the States. In a Hong Kong law office, I would learn the hard way about the complicated intersections of gender, class, and nationality in Asia. I would learn how reluctant the older Chinese secretaries would be to work for me, a young Chinese American neophyte lawyer. I would learn that when Asian clients retain an American law firm, they prefer their counsel to be the tall, blond, blue-eyed men that happened to speak better Chinese than I. I would learn that our Asian clients, as traditional Chinese, Japanese, and Korean men, were even more apt than American clients to presume my subservience, asking me to whip out my steno pad and take dictation. The difference was that, unlike at the Park Avenue law firm where I was often the coffee girl, in Hong Kong, I served the tea.

My American roots would earn me the dubious label of *jook-sing*, a foreign-born, literally a bamboo hollow brain (which, by the way, is *not* a Chinese compliment). With a faltering, American tongue that tried in vain to sound truly Chinese, and a western swagger that hardly fit within the rules of how a good Chinese woman ought to walk, I fell through the crack of an East-West divide. In fact, it was more like a vast, gaping crevasse. I didn't belong in Asia, so I came back to America, resolved to accept it as home.

But back in America, I found that being an Asian American woman means living hidden behind layers of imagery—that of dutiful daughters and mothers, straight-A students and diligent workers, silent and exotic seductresses,



tragic and self-sacrificing Madame Butterflies. With these images of marginality, Asian American women as a group have, until now, been excluded from the core of most American dialogues. Even within a women's movement that is striving to be inclusive, we are an afterthought, an embellishment, if we exist at all. We struggle with our invisibility and we share desires to be treated seriously, past stereotype.

I decided to try to do my part. I left the law and joined a team of like-minded souls in creating a magazine that aimed to reflect more realistically the experience of Asians in America. *A. Magazine* served as a voice for people like myself, caught in that East-West divide and eager to articulate a new future of our own. And now in *Warrior Lessons*, I want to etch out a message of hope and power for Asian American women, continuing the path of one of my personal heroines, the writer Maxine Hong Kingston.

In 1976, Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* was published, a book that is considered the cornerstone of every young Asian woman's coming of age in America. The story was about a young girl like me, with a family like mine, who evoked and experimented with the stories of her past in order to create a viable future. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston talks about her cultural confusion and offers beautifully poetic stories that left us with a starting point from which to venture out into the world. To complement those stories, she told tales of the mythic heroine Fa Mu Lan, a woman who took her father's place in battle in order to save her family's honor. In an interview with Bill Moyers, Kingston tells the rest of that story, which she had chosen not to include in her manuscript. After returning victorious, Fa Mu Lan was able to relinquish her armor and resume her life at home, without internalizing the brutality of war. As Kingston explained to Moyers, "She was not dehu-