
MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

A Critical Companion

E. D. Huntley

CRITICAL COMPANIONS TO POPULAR CONTEMPORARY WRITERS
Kathleen Gregory Klein, Series Adviser

Greenwood Press
Westport, Connecticut • London

CRITICAL COMPANION
TO POPULAR
CONTEMPORARY
WRITERS



Maxine Hong Kingston's first book, *Woman Warrior* gained instant popularity and critical success, winning top national literary

awards as well as a place on the best seller list. Readers recognized in *China Men*, a follow up memoir, and *Tripmaster Monkey*, a genre-defying novel, the same beguiling narrative voice and panoramic prose. This critical study provides an introduction to Kingston's works with in-depth literary analysis of her three prose works. It helps students understand the important thematic concerns, such as the immigrant acculturation process and the literary innovations such as the talk story narrative mode introduced by Kingston. Taking readers beyond these works, this volume offers a guided tour through the Asian immigrant experience, and the history of Asian American Literature. This study examines the tremendous crossover appeal of Kingston's works with readers of all ages, genders, ethnic and national backgrounds.

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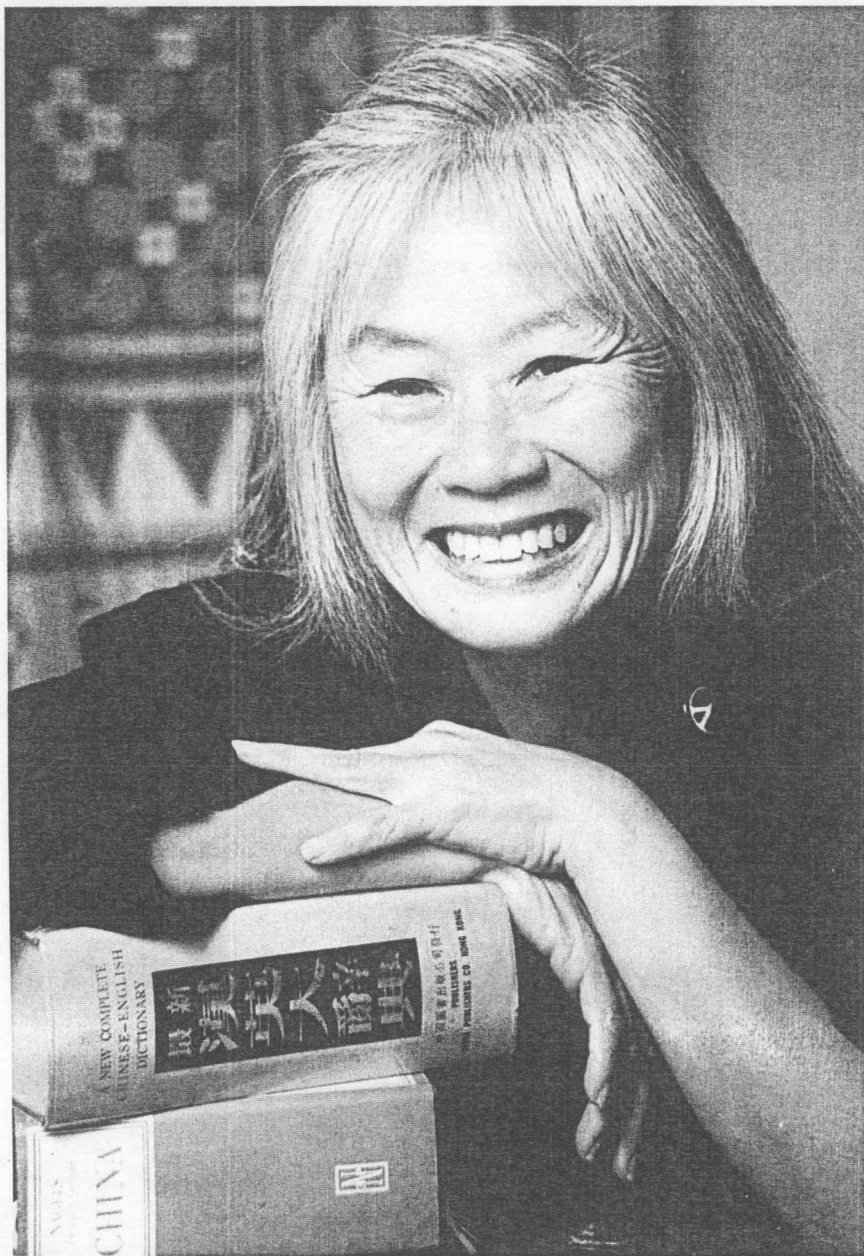
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**MAXINE HONG
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Maxine Hong Kingston. Photo by Jane Scherr. Courtesy of Jane Scherr and University of California, Berkeley.

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For all of the Women Warriors whom I have encountered along the way—Sarah Brabant, Betty Brown, Joan Brown, Judith Domer, Charmazel Dudt, Mary Dunlap, Lisabel Huntley, Janet Lembke, Joyce Lawrence, Elisa Manalaysay, and Jane Solem—*Thank You* for inspiring, mentoring, supporting, and believing in me.

And for Aisha Nicole Ahmad and Alyssa Noelle Ahmad, who will be Women Warriors one day.

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Series Foreword

The authors who appear in the series *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* are all best-selling writers. They do not simply have one successful novel, but a string of them. Fans, critics, and specialist readers eagerly anticipate their next book. For some, high cash advances and breakthrough sales figures are automatic; movie deals often follow. Some writers become household names, recognized by almost everyone.

But their novels are read one by one. Each reader chooses to start and, more importantly, to finish a book because of what she or he finds there. The real test of a novel is in the satisfaction its readers experience. This series acknowledges the extraordinary involvement of readers and writers in creating a best-seller.

The authors included in this series were chosen by an Advisory Board composed of high school English teachers and high school and public librarians. They ranked a list of best-selling writers according to their popularity among different groups of readers. For the first series, writers in the top-ranked group who had received no book-length, academic, literary analysis (or none in at least the past ten years) were chosen. Because of this selection method, *Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers* meets a need that is being addressed nowhere else. The success of these volumes as reported by reviewers, librarians, and teachers led to an expansion of the series mandate to include some writ-

ers with wide critical attention—Toni Morrison, John Irving, and Maya Angelou, for example—to extend the usefulness of the series.

The volumes in the series are written by scholars with particular expertise in analyzing popular fiction. These specialists add an academic focus to the popular success that these writers already enjoy.

The series is designed to appeal to a wide range of readers. The general reading public will find explanations for the appeal of these well-known writers. Fans will find biographical and fictional questions answered. Students will find literary analysis, discussions of fictional genres, carefully organized introductions to new ways of reading the novels, and bibliographies for additional research. Whether browsing through the book for pleasure or using it for an assignment, readers will find that the most recent novels of the authors are included.

Each volume begins with a biographical chapter drawing on published information, autobiographies or memoirs, prior interviews, and, in some cases, interviews given especially for this series. A chapter on literary history and genres describes how the author's work fits into a larger literary context. The following chapters analyze the writer's most important, most popular, and most recent novels in detail. Each chapter focuses on one or more novels. This approach, suggested by the Advisory Board as the most useful to student research, allows for an in-depth analysis of the writer's fiction. Close and careful readings with numerous examples show readers exactly how the novels work. These chapters are organized around three central elements: plot development (how the story line moves forward), character development (what the reader knows of the important figures), and theme (the significant ideas of the novel). Chapters may also include sections on generic conventions (how the novel is similar to or different from others in its same category of science fiction, fantasy, thriller, etc.), narrative point of view (who tells the story and how), symbols and literary language, and historical or social context. Each chapter ends with an "alternative reading" of the novel. The volume concludes with a primary and secondary bibliography, including reviews.

The alternative readings are a unique feature of this series. By demonstrating a particular way of reading each novel, they provide a clear example of how a specific perspective can reveal important aspects of the book. In the alternative reading sections, one contemporary literary theory—way of reading, such as feminist criticism, Marxism, new historicism, deconstruction, or Jungian psychological critique—is defined in brief, easily comprehensible language. That definition is then applied to

the novel to highlight specific features that might go unnoticed or be understood differently in a more general reading. Each volume defines two or three specific theories, making them part of the reader's understanding of how diverse meanings may be constructed from a single novel.

Taken collectively, the volumes in the Critical Companions to Popular Contemporary Writers series provide a wide-ranging investigation of the complexities of current best-selling fiction. By treating these novels seriously as both literary works and publishing successes, the series demonstrates the potential of popular literature in contemporary culture.

Kathleen Gregory Klein
Southern Connecticut State University

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The Life of Maxine Hong Kingston

Maxine Hong Kingston was born Maxine Ting Ting Hong on October 27, 1940, the Year of the Dragon, in Stockton, California. Named "Maxine" after a blonde gambler who was always remarkably lucky, and "Ting Ting" from a Chinese poem, she was the third child of Chinese immigrants Ying Lan Chew and Tom Hong, and the first of their six American-born children. Much of the available published information about Kingston's parents and her own childhood is embedded in her first two books, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). Additional facts—including records of Kingston's education and early career—have emerged in the numerous interviews that she has graciously granted to scholars and admirers over the last two decades, as well as in *Hawai'i One Summer, 1978* (1987) and *Through the Black Curtain* (1987).

Tom Hong, Maxine's father, who had undergone a rigorous education in his native China for a career as a professional scholar, was a teacher in his home village of Sun Woi (New Society Village) near Canton (Guangzhou) before he, like thousands of other Chinese men in search of a better life, emigrated to the United States in 1925. America in the early twentieth century had little use for an educated immigrant whose years of extensive training in the ancient Chinese classics had honed his expertise in and passion for traditional Chinese philosophy, poetry, and calligraphy. Hong—who had, by this point, christened himself with the English name of "Tom" in honor of Thomas Edison—was

forced to settle for earning a living by engaging in considerably less intellectual employment. By working as a window washer and saving his earnings, he amassed sufficient capital to invest in a laundry in New York's Chinatown, as one of four business partners, all young Chinese immigrants. For several years, he and his partners enjoyed the semblance of a carefree bachelor life. Spending a considerable portion of their incomes on expensive clothes, restaurant meals, dance-hall women, motorcycles, and flying lessons, they sent home to China photographs of themselves in zoot suits and spats, standing beside rented airplanes, or posing beside the stone lions on the steps of the New York Public Library. That freewheeling, pleasurable life was curtailed somewhat when Tom sent for his wife. On her arrival from China, she instituted order in the bachelor chaos of the shared apartment, cooking regular meals and preparing their lunches. Tom's life took an even more drastic turn not much later, when his partners in the laundry cheated him out of his share in the business by drawing up legal partnership documents that excluded him. Tom and Ying Lan, who was pregnant by that point, left New York and crossed the continent to settle on the West Coast in Stockton, California's small Chinatown.

Maxine's mother, Chew Ying Lan (Brave Orchid in *The Woman Warrior*), had married Tom Hong in China and the couple had two children who died very young. When Tom left for America, the couple was separated for fifteen years, during which time Tom sent money to Ying Lan. She first trained in medicine and midwifery at To Keung School of Midwifery in Canton, and subsequently embarked on a successful medical practice as a Western-style physician. Later, when the Japanese invaded Canton during the Second World War, Ying Lan put her medical skills to good use by superintending a field hospital concealed in a cave. Despite her extensive medical training and experience, however, Ying Lan discovered on her arrival in America—as had her husband before her—that her hard-won education in China was not marketable in the economy of her new country.

In a speech at a 1988 conference in China, Maxine Hong Kingston provided additional information about her family's history, revealing that she is the descendant of several sojourners. She told her audience that in her father's family, men traditionally sojourned in North America three or four times before returning permanently to China. The men in her mother's family were also sojourners, but Chew Ying Lan was the first woman in the family to emigrate to the United States. She bribed her way onto a ship to San Francisco in 1939, apparently managing to

get out of China just before the Second World War escalated into the terrible conflict that it would become.

In the first century of Asian immigration to America, the term "sojourner" was employed in China to describe those men who left their families to live and work in the United States for several years. Sending most of their earnings home to China—where the money often supported large extended families in the ancestral villages—these men returned home every few years or so to deal with family matters and to father children before returning to America for another temporary working sojourn. Tom Hong, Kingston's father, was somewhat unusual in that after he departed from his village, he never returned to China, but instead managed to send for his wife to join him in the United States where they settled and raised their children.

Kingston never deliberately interviewed her parents about their histories, preferring instead to wait until they decided to speak about themselves; and for most of her life, she believed that her mother first set foot on American soil at Ellis Island because all of the family stories began with the New York period. She also imagined her father's story to be fairly straightforward. Not until Maxine Hong Kingston was an adult and an internationally renowned author did her mother elaborate on the family's immigration saga. According to Ying Lan Hong, Tom Hong came to the United States through Cuba, stowing away on a Cuba-to-New York ship, getting caught, jailed, and deported—three times! This story may explain the family fear of deportation that Kingston remembers from her childhood. Ying Lan herself arrived in California and spent three weeks at the Immigration Station on Angel Island before she was allowed to enter the continental United States. From California, she traveled by train to New York to meet her husband. Clearly, well into her old age, Ying Lan was continuing to exercise the storytellers' ancient right to modify stories, setting the family records straight, providing her storytelling daughter with additional information about the family history.

CHILDHOOD AND EDUCATION

Tom and Ying Lan took up residence in Stockton, California, where Tom had been offered a position as manager of an illegal gambling house owned by a wealthy Chinese immigrant. In Stockton, at age forty-five, Ying Lan gave birth to their first American child, Maxine. The Hong

would have five more children. Facing the reality of her new life in the United States, and realizing that the American medical establishment was not receptive to the idea of a Chinese-trained doctor, Ying Lan was forced to do menial labor as a tomato picker, cannery worker, and house-cleaner. Tom's position at the gambling house required him not only to oversee its operation and supervise its staff, but also occasionally to be arrested during almost predictably regular police raids. He was canny about his arrests, never giving his real name and—because he apparently sensed that quite a few people thought that all Chinese looked alike—inventing a different name for each arrest. Consequently, he never acquired a police record in his own name. When World War II put the gambling house out of business, Tom Hong started the New Port Laundry on El Dorado Street in Stockton, and Ying Lan, in addition to raising their children and juggling her multitudinous jobs outside the home, began helping her husband in the family laundry. Like other immigrant children, Kingston and her siblings were put to work in the family business as soon as they were old enough to be of help. Years later, she recalls inventing games to ease the drudgery of her tasks: "If I did ten T-shirts I'd allow myself to take a break" (Brownmiller 210).

Growing up on Hazleton Avenue in Stockton and surrounded by Chinese immigrants who had made their homes there, Maxine spoke Chinese at home and around her parents' friends. Her first language was Say Yup, the dialect of Cantonese that was spoken by nearly everyone in their community, an enclave which was composed largely of people who had emigrated from the same village—Sun Woi—in China. Although Stockton's Chinatown—not much more than a block of small businesses and houses—was demolished when a freeway was routed through the area, Kingston emphasizes that even when every trace of the geographical entity, the physical Chinatown had vanished, the community that was Chinatown continued to flourish in the rituals, celebrations, memories, and communal activities of its inhabitants. Kingston's childhood neighborhood on the south side of Stockton was working-class and racially diverse. She remembers that "the people next door were Black, and there were Mexicans and Filipinos" (Seshachari 21), and that the neighborhood, close to the less desirable sections of the city, was rough, with the ethnic groups tending to keep to themselves. It was there that Kingston experienced very early the shame of being called "Chinaman," in addition to learning to dodge attacks from bicycle-riding bullies; and as a Chinese child, she associated only with other Chinese

and spoke only the Chinese language. Until she was five and the Hongts put her in school, she had no English-speaking acquaintances or playmates.

Maxine Hong Kingston also remembers the more joyful aspects of her childhood. Available in Stockton were variety shows to raise money for the China Relief fund, Chinese opera on stage and on the screen, American movies on Saturdays, and films imported from Hong Kong on Sunday afternoons. She recalls "parades with a red flag, street-wide for the bystanders to throw money into" (*Black Curtain* 6). Everyday life was punctuated by traditional Chinese theatre and staged performances in all of their many forms. Chinese theatre was alive and well in California, in contrast to what was happening in the old country. From relatives still in China came letters telling the Hongts that Chinese theatres had gone dark, or had turned Communist, featuring only shows that met the approval of the party.

The Chinatown of Kingston's childhood still exists in spirit in the San Joaquin Valley, among the immigrant families whose older members have chosen to remain there instead of moving to other locations. Until their deaths, Kingston's parents continued to live in Stockton, refusing to relocate to a safer neighborhood, and finally allowing Kingston and her siblings to install an alarm system as well as enclose the house and yard within a security fence. Comparing her childhood neighborhood with San Francisco's much larger and more famous Chinatown, Kingston describes the Chinese community in the Valley as an enclave in which people speak the peasant Chinese dialects, and know one another so well that any gossip instantly affects an individual's reputation—a fact that Brave Orchid stresses to her daughter with the story of No-Name Woman in *The Woman Warrior*. Perhaps the primary distinguishing characteristics of Kingston's childhood community is the fact that it was and continues to be a place where neighbors from the same village maintain the same connections and attempt to create the same sense of community that they remember from life before they emigrated. As a child, Kingston experienced this neighborliness daily because the New Port Laundry served as the informal community center for Stockton's Chinese population. Customers and neighbors congregated at the laundry not only to do business, but also to catch up on the news of the day, to disseminate stories and neighborhood gossip, and—most important for Kingston—to reminisce about the life they left behind in China. This communal "talk-story" provided Kingston with a fund of stories—legends, myths,

historical accounts, family tales, and revisions of familiar narratives—from which she would later draw the raw material that shaped her memoirs and fiction.

Maxine Hong Kingston has referred to the early years of her education as the “silent years” because during that period, she found speaking up difficult, possibly because she was a Chinese speaker in an English-speaking environment. When she entered school she was not yet completely fluent in English, and her silence, combined with her unfamiliarity with English and the American school system, may have been responsible for her failure to pass kindergarten that year. While in the first grade, she managed to earn a score of zero on an intelligence test when she colored the examination page black—an act that foreshadowed later developments in her school career. A section of *The Woman Warrior* describes the three years of Kingston’s most profound silence, a period during which she consistently produced her “black curtain” art, much to the consternation of her teachers and her parents, all of whom misinterpreted what the child was attempting to portray. Although like her classmates, Kingston produced drawings of the usual flowers and houses, she then proceeded to obliterate the pictures with thick layers of black paint. Her teachers saw only the black paint and concluded that she was a troubled child, asking her parents to come in for a serious conference about their daughter. But Kingston says that for her, the black paint was a positive image representing a stage curtain at the precise moment before the curtain rose to reveal the set on which a play would be enacted.

Before I could read or write or even speak much, an idea came to me of black curtains that hang over something wonderful—some amazing show about to open. All my life, I’ve looked for those black curtains; I want to part them, and to see what is on the other side. . . . As a kid I loved black crayons and black paint and ink and blackboards, through which I could see glorious light and hear voices and music. (*Black Curtain* 5)

Kingston surmises that her association of the color black with curtains had its origins in the thirty-two blackout curtains that her parents installed in their windows during the years of World War II. To the family, already besieged with letters from China full of dreadful news about the war, those curtains were comfortable symbols of safety and protection:

“We were safe from the street, the city, strangers, World War II” (*Black Curtain* 5). For the child, Maxine, with a mind brimming with stories and mythical images but without the linguistic facility to render those stories into written text, the blackened pictures may have symbolized her awareness that she was the keeper of something precious and significant—her stories—that for the moment she could neither reveal nor express, not having the vocabulary with which to release those creations of her imagination.

Of course, once Kingston became fluent in English, she was released from her linguistic and artistic silence. “When I learned English,” she says, “I wrote that the black curtains rose or swung apart” (*Black Curtain* 5). The English language was a delight to her, and she reveled in the facility with which its twenty-six letters allowed her to represent her thoughts, not only in English, but also in Chinese. Mastering English also expanded her world by making a considerable body of literature accessible to her, and she embraced reading as an escape from the realities of life in Stockton. Two books, in particular, had a significant impact on Kingston. Reading a novel by Louisa May Alcott and—like thousands of little girls—identifying with the March sisters, she was abruptly reminded that she was different from those young women when the book introduced “this funny-looking little Chinaman” and Kingston realized that in the eyes of readers, she was more like the “little Chinaman” than the March sisters (Hoy 62). During the years of Kingston’s childhood, Asian American girls were not the heroines of novels. For Kingston, the second important book, Jade Snow Wong’s *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, had the opposite effect. If Alcott’s novel excluded Kingston and others like her, Wong’s memoir afforded her the rare and beautiful experience of finding someone much like herself portrayed in literature, proving to her that the Chinese did not always have to be represented in books as eccentric servants or peculiar foreigners with laughable accents.

Her early educational setbacks notwithstanding, Kingston eventually did well in school, especially at Edison High School in Stockton, developing into a straight-A student and publishing her first essay, “I Am an American” in *American Girl* (1955) while she was still a high school student. In her senior year, she wrote an article describing Chinese New Year for a Stockton newspaper, and was awarded a journalism scholarship to the University of California at Berkeley, an institution that she had long dreamed of attending.

Kingston entered the University of California as an engineering student with eleven scholarships; but college proved initially to be a major

culture shock for the young woman who had no experience with the university community. Kingston remembers that she began the semester and then was ill for two weeks, in part, she believes, because she “didn’t understand what anything was” (Robertson 26). Her grades suffered, as a result. Lacking any real interest in engineering (which was on her parents’ short list of desirable careers), she thought about changing her major to journalism, and worked for the Berkeley student newspaper, *The Daily Californian*, but journalism proved as incompatible as engineering. On the night shift at the student paper, Kingston was unable to keep from falling asleep. Worse yet, she disliked journalistic writing. Although she had been writing since her childhood, she was not interested in straightforward factual reportorial writing, preferring instead to write creatively from her imagination. English became the logical choice as a major, but Kingston did not make the transition easily. She had always loved to read and write, and she had difficulty adjusting to the idea of earning a university degree in a field she enjoyed, feeling that there was something wrong with any individual who chose to do something that was enjoyable and came easily. To the poet Marilyn Chin, Kingston revealed that she felt as though she had abdicated her responsibilities to her family by pursuing a degree that was fun. In the interview with Chin, Kingston explained that her upbringing had instilled in her the notion that anything valuable was, by definition, also difficult to attain (Marilyn Chin 69).

Once she adjusted to university life, Kingston participated enthusiastically in the culture that was Berkeley in the 1960s, aligning herself with the Free Speech movement, joining in protests against the war in Vietnam, and directing her energies toward activism through which she and other like-minded students hoped to make a difference. Like thousands of young people in that freewheeling decade, she also experimented with drugs, “[and they] messed with our minds and time and space [and] our perceptions of events were changed and expanded” (Vitale). Her experiences within the drug culture inspired and shaped her third book, *Tripmaster Monkey*. During her college years, Kingston frequently played the role of tripmaster, an individual whom she describes as a kind of tour guide for those under the influence of psychedelic drugs, someone who invoked imagery and described fantasy geographies. As tripmaster, Kingston eschewed drugs, concentrating instead on guiding her friends on their psychedelic travels, ensuring their journeys to pastoral landscapes (Seshachari 18).

In 1962, Kingston graduated with a B.A. in English from Berkeley, and

later that year, married Earll Kingston, an actor who was also a graduate of Berkeley and whom she had met during a production of Bertolt Brecht’s *Galileo*. Their only son, Joseph Lawrence Chung Mei, was born in 1963. The next year, she returned to the University of California to complete course work that would earn her a teaching certificate. For five years, she taught English and mathematics at Sunset High School in Hayward, California, while Earll taught at Berkeley High School. At the same time, they both continued to be active in anti-Vietnam war protests and in the Free Speech movement. In 1967, the Kingstons with their young son left California to get away from the disturbingly burgeoning drug culture and the increasingly violent antiwar movement. They had become disillusioned with the protest culture and discouraged about the unstoppable escalation of the war; moreover, their friends were also leaving Berkeley, “retreating from the barricades . . . [and] starting communes in the northern California woods” (*Hawai’i* 15).

En route to the Far East—which was their original destination—the Kingstons stopped off in Hawai’i, and remained there for seventeen years, eventually purchasing their first house in Manoa Valley in Honolulu. Initially, they did their best to live according to their pacifist ideals, refusing, for example, to engage in any employment or activity that might be interpreted as supportive of the war or to collude—however peripherally—in anything that enhanced the war-driven economy. Living in inexpensive lodgings, furnished with castoffs, above a grocery store, they “discovered that a human being could live out of the dumpsters behind the supermarket” (*Hawai’i* 15), and they supplemented their diet with fruit and nuts picked from nearby trees. Not surprisingly, they also immersed themselves in projects that opposed or subverted the war effort; and they became involved, through the Church of the Crossroads, with a sanctuary for military men who were absent without leave (AWOL). The experience proved unexpectedly enlightening. Kingston discovered that contrary to her assumptions, soldiers who were AWOL did not share her political views on the war. Most of them—“mere kids”—could see nothing wrong with the war, and had, in fact, escaped the military life for surprisingly mundane or practical reasons: they hated military food, didn’t get along with superior officers, or wanted a vacation from the army or the navy. Even more disturbing, Kingston found that some of the soldiers she met actually took pleasure in violence, relishing the experience of decimating enemy troops with assault weapons.

The Kingstons found that despite Hawai’i’s distance from the main-

land United States, the island state was not free from reminders of the Vietnam War. On the contrary, Hawai'i was a participant in the official war effort. Kingston says: "We should have thought of it—hardware and soldiers were sent to Hawai'i, which funneled everything to Vietnam. Tanks and jeeps in convoy maneuvered around the rim. Khaki soldiers drove khaki vehicles, camouflage that did not match the bright foliage" (*Hawai'i* 16). In fact, Hawai'i was a way station for troops and supplies en route to the battlefields of Southeast Asia, as well as for the dead on their way home to the mainland. Military activity was noticeably present, with "soldiers shooting at target practice up in those beautiful mountains, doing their war games" (Robertson 90). It became clear to the Kingstons that not only had they not avoided the war, but they had landed "in the very midst of it, as close as you could get and remain in the United States" (*Hawai'i* 16). Predictably, the activist lifestyle, which was already difficult for the Kingstons to maintain, began to seem futile, and they returned to the workforce—Maxine to teaching, Earll to acting. She taught English, language arts, and English as a second language at several high schools as well as at Honolulu Business College and Mid-Pacific Institute. Her husband joined a Shakespearean theatre troupe.

For two and a half years, Kingston worked on the manuscript that would become *The Woman Warrior* before she sent fifty polished manuscript pages to three agents, hoping that one of them might be able to help her to find a small press that would be interested in what she had written. Aware that the manuscript she had produced was nothing like most of the books that she had encountered either in her university studies or in her leisure reading, she nevertheless hoped for at least a small printing. One of the three, the literary agent John Shaffner agreed to represent her, and sent her partial manuscript to Norton and Little, Brown, both of which rejected it. Kingston withdrew that manuscript from circulation and completed the book, whereupon Shaffner resubmitted it, this time to Knopf, which accepted it despite editors' uncertainty about how to market the book. *The Woman Warrior* was published by Knopf in 1976, and immediately attracted the praise of the respected critic John Leonard, who announced in the *New York Times* that a stunning first book by an unknown author was "one of the best I've read for years" (Leonard, "Defiance" 21).

With the publication of *The Woman Warrior* in 1976, Kingston's career as a high school English teacher ended, and a new career as an important American writer was launched. Although Maxine Hong Kingston has definitely not abandoned teaching, her classrooms now tend to be on

college and university campuses where she holds appointments as a visiting lecturer or distinguished professor. In 1990, she was named a Chancellor's Distinguished Professor at her alma mater, the University of California at Berkeley, and although she put in brief stints on other campuses and took a leave of absence from Berkeley in 1993, she returned to that campus in 1997. In addition to her formal university teaching, Kingston is in great demand as a conference speaker and reader, and most recently as a writing workshop leader for Vietnam War veterans.

In 1984, Maxine Hong Kingston, who had never been to China although she had appropriated and reworked its cultural myths in two books, finally traveled to the country of her parents' birth, a country that had been a dominant geographical presence in her imagination since she was a child, a country that had shaped her stories and her voice. The visit, which was sponsored jointly by the University of California at Los Angeles and the Chinese Writers Association, included—in addition to Kingston—the American writers William Gass, Allen Ginsberg, Francine du Plessix Gray, William Least Heat Moon, Toni Morrison, Harrison Salisbury, Leslie Marmon Silko, and Gary Snyder.

Kingston did not undertake her first Chinese journey lightly. For years, she had resisted visiting the country from whence her parents' stories had come, describing her hesitation as the product of a crisis of sorts. Aware that Chinese immigrants invent and reinvent a China about which they tell stories, and having seen "memory villages" (miniature replicas of home villages, complete with houses, trees, and fields, or tremendously detailed dioramas of remembered Chinese landscapes), Kingston had chosen to re-create the China of reconstructed memory—what she describes as "the mythic China"—in her books of memoirs. Years before her first visit, she wrote in *Ms.* about her fear that China "may not be there at all, I having made it up" ("Reservations" 67). Not surprisingly, she feared that the real China might be so unrecognizably different as to render her books geographically and culturally inaccurate: "What if China invalidated everything that I was thinking and writing?" (Rabinowitz 181). Kingston was not alone in her misgivings about the planned trip to China. Her mother feared political repercussions, afraid that because Kingston had criticized the Chinese patriarchy and had described some of the tortures inflicted by the Communist regime, she would be in danger while she was in the country. In fact, so concerned was Ying Lan about her daughter's well-being that she begged Kingston to retract some of her criticism of China.

Neither woman should have worried—the China that Kingston en-

countered closely resembled both the country of her imagination and the setting of Ying Lan's stories. In China, she felt affirmed in her belief that through talk-story, her ancestors and her mother had bestowed on her a centuries-old tradition that remains completely accessible (Skenazy, "University" 134). For Kingston, reality validated the geography of her imagined China: "One of the great thrills was to see how well I had imagined it. Many of the colors, and the smells, the people, the faces, the incidents, were much as I imagined" (Rabinowitz 181). Ying Lan Hong's fears also proved completely unfounded. Her daughter was a celebrity in China, especially in the province of Guangdong, from which the family had emigrated decades earlier. Harrison Salisbury, one of the writers in the traveling group, recalls that nearly every inhabitant of the Hong's ancestral village claimed to be related to Maxine Hong Kong Kingston. Local writers made every effort to ensure that she was feted lavishly and housed in the best corner room in the newest hotel in town.

While she was in China, Kingston had the opportunity to visit her family's home village and her mother's medical college, places that she had described in her books although she knew them only from her mother's talk-story. The visit was an eye-opener: Kingston saw for herself the well in which No-Name Woman had drowned herself, entered the Hong family temple, and discovered the building in which Brave Orchid had attended medical school and faced down the Sitting Ghost. But Kingston also was made aware of at least one small but important detail about which her mother's stories had not been specific—in the ancestral village, the narrow lanes, tightly clustered houses, and small, cramped interiors were forceful reminders that an individual transgression reverberates quickly through a community that is forced to live in such close proximity. Kingston saw for herself how the disturbing and unwelcome news of No-Name Aunt's pregnancy had inevitably become public property, affecting everyone, not only in the family, but also in the village. Specific details aside, however, Kingston was amazed as well as pleased that the China she encountered was so strongly reminiscent of the China in her imagination and in her books. She was gratified when she realized that the landscape she encountered was the one that she had described so often in her prose, and the familiarity of the Chinese geography gave her the feeling of coming home. Moreover, she came to understand completely that talk-story is indeed a strategy for transmitting culture from one generation to another (Bonetti 43). Four years later, on a return journey to China to attend the Fourth Sino-American Writers Conference at Leshan, Sichuan Province, Kingston explained why, years

earlier, she had at first consciously decided not to travel to China before she began to narrate the stories of her forebears—in her books, she wanted to be able to recreate her imagined China, the China of memory, as the setting for her retellings of traditional stories. On her first encountering China at last, she was "relieved and happy to find that my imagination is true. As we travel about, China is confirming for me that the strong imagination can know reality" ("Garland" 42).

During the intervening four years between visits, Kingston's work had become even more popular with Chinese readers, thanks to pirated editions and translations from Taiwan and Hong Kong that made the books more readily available, even to non-English speakers. Again, Kingston found that Chinese writers were eager to discuss her work, but to her astonishment, she also realized that they claimed her as one of their own, as a writer who had helped to preserve some of the traditional genres that the Cultural Revolution had successfully all but obliterated. For these Chinese writers and literary scholars, Kingston represented a link with their cultural roots, with a literary tradition that they had feared was extinct. Kingston realized that she symbolizes artistic continuity to these writers. Despite the fact that she is an American who writes in English, her Chinese colleagues consider her work to reside within the Chinese literary canon, and they look to her for inspiration and direction (Marilyn Chin 65).

CRITICAL RECEPTION

Kingston was overwhelmed with the kind of reception that *The Woman Warrior* received, about which most writers only fantasize. An almost instant popular and critical success, the book won some of the top national awards in the literary world, as well as a place on best-seller lists. That popularity continued for years—a decade later, in 1989, *The Woman Warrior* was still on the list of best-selling trade paperbacks. In their introduction to a collection of interviews with Maxine Hong Kingston, Paul Skenazy and Tera Martin summarize the popular impact of Kingston's first book:

It is estimated that [Kingston's] work is the most anthologized of any living American writer, and that she is read by more American college students than any other living author. Students, particularly Asian American women, look to her as a

model, find themselves in her tales, seek her out with sycophantic regularity. (Skenazy vii)

Early reviews attest to the power with which Kingston's work immediately engaged readers. Writing in the *Washington Post Book World*, William McPherson describes *The Woman Warrior* as "a strange, sometimes savagely terrifying and, in the literal sense, wonderful story of growing up caught between two highly sophisticated and utterly alien cultures, both vivid, often menacing and equally mysterious" (McPherson E1). For Jane Kramer, another reviewer, *The Woman Warrior* is "a brilliant memoir. . . an investigation of soul, not landscape. Its sources are dream and memory, myth and desire. Its crises are the crises of a heart in exile from roots that bind and terrorize it" (Kramer 1). Reviewers cited the poetry of Kingston's prose, as well as the seamless blending of fantasy, myth, and history into the powerful narrative that is *The Woman Warrior*. Kramer describes Kingston's narrative voice as "clear as the voice of Ts'ai Yen [the poet whose story is told in the last chapter of the book] who sang her sad angry songs of China to the barbarians. . . as fierce as a warrior's voice, and as eloquent as any artist's" (Kramer 1). *Publisher's Weekly* praised Kingston's prose for "exhibiting the delicacy and precision of porcelain" (*Publisher's Weekly* 72). Other reviewers focused on Kingston's portrayal of the struggles undertaken by marginalized individuals who seek to create a stable identity. Describing *The Woman Warrior* as an important book, Elizabeth Fifer, of the *International Fiction Review*, writes that Kingston has produced "a poetic, thoughtful, wonderfully subtle reclamation of self" (Fifer 69); and Sara Blackburn, writing for *Ms.*, suggests that the book "illuminates the experience of everyone who has ever felt the terror of being an emotional outsider" (Blackburn 39).

Proof of the enduring power of *The Warrior Woman* is the fact that the book has been translated into several languages, and published in dozens of official and pirated editions. It has also been the subject of hundreds of book reports, term papers and research projects, countless theses—both honors and master's degree—and doctoral dissertations. In the years since its publication, scholars not only in the United States but also in Asia and Europe have read and reread, interpreted and reinterpreted, debated, analyzed, deconstructed, and most of all, appreciated and been profoundly moved by Kingston's narratives. More significant is the book's continuing crossover appeal to all audiences—readers of all ages, genders, ethnic and national backgrounds have been inspired, provoked,

and entertained for more than two decades since *The Woman Warrior* was published.

Published in 1980, four years after *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston's second book, *China Men*—like its predecessor—garnered lavish praise from readers and reviewers. Again critic John Leonard was enthusiastic, describing, in the *New York Times*, the impact of the book as "sheer magic: poetry, parable, nightmare, the terror and exhilaration of physical labor, the songs of survival, the voices of the dead, the feel of wood and blood, the smell of flowers and wounds. History meets sensuality" (Leonard, "Books" C9). In the *New York Times Book Review*, novelist Mary Gordon notes that Kingston's "success at depicting the world of men without women must be the envy of any woman writer who has tried to capture this foreign territory. Her understanding of the lacerations of crushing physical work and the consolations of community is expressed in nearly perfect prose" (Gordon, "Mythic" 24–25).

Readers recognized in the second book the beguiling narrative voice that had drawn them into the world of *The Woman Warrior*. Like others captivated by Kingston's entrancing and provocative prose, one writer, Anne Collins, found herself responding emotionally and creatively: "Her fermentations of myths and dreams and nervy sideways dances at the possible truths of family history are so intoxicating that the next logical step after their reading must be to tear all the pages out, roll them up and smoke them" (Collins 48). Paul Gray, writing for *Time*, labeled *China Men* "a fitting companion" to *The Woman Warrior*, noting that Kingston, with this volume, enables her male ancestors finally to win the respect that they deserve (Gray 26). Frances Taliaferro of *Harper's* suggested that in *China Men*, Kingston is "all of her Chinese ancestors as well as her American self" (Taliaferro 77). This last assessment is particularly appropriate in light of Kingston's insistence that she is first of all an American, and only secondarily a person of Chinese ancestry—a definitive that San Francisco reviewer Tamar Jacoby clearly understands when she praises the clarity of Kingston's "plain American voice" (Jacoby 11).

Enthralled by Kingston's panoramic narratives of the histories of men in her family, by the courage and tenacity displayed by the thousands of sojourners whose stories are embedded in *China Men*, readers embraced Kingston's second effort as they had *The Woman Warrior*. "It tells of emigration, persecution, work, endurance, ritual, change, loss and the eternal invention of the new," wrote Jean Strouse in *Newsweek*, neatly cataloging the themes that inform and shape *China Men* (Strouse 88). And although *China Men* has not achieved *The Woman Warrior*'s iconographic