

# philippine studies

Ateneo de Manila University • Loyola Heights, Quezon City • 1108 Philippines

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## **Chinese-America's Woman Warrior: Maxime Hong Kingston**

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*Philippine Studies* vol. 31, no. 2 (1983) 243–252

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Fri June 27 13:30:20 2008

## Review Articles

### Chinese-America's Woman Warrior:

Maxine Hong Kingston

SUSAN EVANGELISTA

THE WOMAN WARRIOR. By Maxine Hong Kingston. Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976. Reprinted by Vintage Books, Random House, Inc., 1977. 243 pages.

CHINA MEN. By Maxine Hong Kingston. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1980. 301 pages.

Prior to the (re)discovery of Asian-American consciousness in the seventies, the only established names in Chinese American literature were Pardee Lowe, Jade Snow Wong, Virginia Lee, and Betty Lee Sung. These were for the most part writers who consciously sought, with both their lives and their work, to function as intermediaries between the Chinese minority and the white majority: Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* tells the typical story of a talented Chinese-American girl fighting to break through the barriers of, on the one hand, traditional and repressive Chinese family structures, and, on the other hand, racist white stereotyping which had long silenced the Chinese. The young woman solves the dilemma by winning scholarships, studying hard, making it in the white world, and then using that (financial) success as leverage against repressive family structures. This is all done gently and delicately with the feminine touch that non-Asian men admire so much in Asian women, making it a neat and successful solution, and one that white America found pleasantly acceptable. And of course it was primarily for white America that Ms. Wong was writing.

Then came the new writers of the seventies: Jeffrey Paul Chan ("The Chinese in Haifa"), Frank Chin (*The Chicken-coop Chinaman*), Louis Chu (*Eat a Bowl of Tea*), and the whole Asian-American movement. This was an important political and literary movement, for it gave Asian-Americans a much clearer, fuller sense of their own identity and of the historical development of their roles in American society. At this stage Filipinos in America

suddenly rediscovered Carlos Bulosan, and found in him an honest account of the struggles and contributions of the early *Pinoys*. Unfortunately the Chinese had nothing of this sort to look back to: Chin and Chan claim that writers like Jade Snow Wong were accepted precisely because they had completely absorbed the white racist stereotype of the Chinese, so that their books did not disturb white America as Bulosan's did.<sup>1</sup> So they had to start from scratch, creating a political literature that sometimes seemed more political than literary. It was interesting, though, and it was important. The seventies saw at least three good collections of Asian-American writing: *Roots: An Asian American Reader*, published by the Asian-American Studies Center at UCLA in 1971, the more literary *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers*, published through the joint efforts of several young Chinese-Japanese, Filipino-American writers in 1974, and *Counterpoint: Perspectives on Asian America*, another UCLA publication put out in 1976.

But these collections are all dated now, from another era. The modern reader looks at them and immediately asks, "Where is Maxine Hong Kingston?" And it would indeed be interesting to find out where Ms. Kingston's early work is published, what kind of writers she associated with or was influenced by, why she apparently did not align herself with the Asian-American writers of the seventies, for in 1976 with the publication of *The Woman Warrior*, and again in 1980 with *China Men*, Ms. Kingston gave Chinese America its most sensitive, most authentic, and certainly most compelling voice. Ms. Kingston is not a particularly political writer, but perhaps it is fitting that she is concerned with so much more than the simple fact of being Chinese, for in the end life isn't that simple, and *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* will outlive *Eat a Bowl of Tea* precisely because of their breadth of scope.

Ms. Kingston has first of all given voice to women, Chinese American women in particular, but all women will see reflections of themselves and their own personal struggles against subtle or blatant forms of sexism. Then she has given voice to the Chinese and what is one of the richest folk cultures in the world. Chin and Chan reject the idea that China's great classical culture provides a source of identity for Chinese Americans, attacking the assertion that "the average Chinese-America at least knows that China has produced 'great philosophies,' and with that knowledge has come a greater sense of ethnic pride" as simply a racist attempt to keep the Chinese "foreign."<sup>2</sup>

1. Chin, Chan, Inada, and Wong, *Aiiieeee! An Anthology of Asian-American Writers* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1974). See introduction.

2. *Ibid.*, p. xxiv.

They are right in pointing out that the peasants who immigrated participated only minimally in this classical culture. However, Ms. Kingston isn't concerned with Confucian philosophy but with the folk culture of a particular Chinese village (in the revolutionary era called New Society village), with the ghosts and legends and chants and traditions that came from her family, her village, and came to her through the voice of her mother. In pre-liberation China, village culture did in fact carry much more weight with the peasant than the aristocratic national tradition, and the Chinese were hardly one of a piece. In *The Woman Warrior*, Ms. Kingston says she has stopped checking "bilingual" on job applications, for an interviewer at China Airlines could not understand her Chinese, nor she his.

In the same reflective evaluation of her childhood, she says "I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living" (p. 239). One might also wonder how much of it is just being poor, just being a woman, just being Chinese, just being Chinese-American. Of the two books *The Woman Warrior* is most heavily personal, familial, concerned with Ms. Kingston's own growing up. The subdued feminism, the sickening at the Chinese treatment of women and attitudes towards women — maggots eating the food that rightfully belongs to men — is most evident here. *China Men*, on the other hand, is more panoramic, more historical, as it deals with the men of the villages, their politics and family fortunes, their travels and immigration, the contribution of Chinese men to the development of the sugar industry in Hawaii, the hacking and dynamiting out of roads and the laying of railroad tracks in the Western U.S., immigrant attitudes towards the Chinese revolution and the war in Vietnam. In this sense *China Men* is the greater contribution to Chinese-American historical consciousness.

#### THE NEED FOR TALK

Thematically the two books have much in common. One overriding theme is the need for talk, for talk-story and communication. The mother talked more than anyone, and it is from her that Ms. Kingston's village heritage came. But even in the villages in China the men would talk-story late into the night, and the women would warn them not to wake the children, but it really didn't matter because no one wanted to miss the tales of the Gold Mountain. In the Hawaiian sugar fields the Chinese worked like animals, and could bear anything except the denial of their very humanity in the order not to talk at work. Words are power, and Bak Goong, the Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains, does talk, camouflaging his words in coughs: "Take — that — white — demon . . . Fall — to — the — ground — demon. Cut — you — into — pieces . . . Die — snake — chop — you — down — stinky — demon" (*China Men*, p. 114). This same great grandfather later

remembers the legend of the old king who burned with the secret that his son had been born with cat ears, and finally dug a hole and shouted it into the ground, so that later the grasses whispered the guarded secret to the world. Bak Goong dug his own hole where he and his fellow workers shouted their anger and hurt, their hatred of the foremen, the work, the demon-owners, their loneliness and longings, so that they might hear the sugar cane whisper these words back to them as they worked silently in the fields.

Ms. Kingston herself — maybe, she says, because her mother cut her tongue when she was an infant to keep her from being tongue-tied — felt a compulsion to talk, to tell her mother her private guilts, which numbered over 200, so that the pain in her throat would go away and she could be accepted in spite of her “evil nature.” One particular guilt was that she envied the Mexican and Filipino girls in school because they went to church in nice white dresses and had a chance to confess all their guilts, a chance to tell “even thoughts that were sinful”:

If only I could let my mother know the list, she — and the world — would become more like me and I would never be alone again. I would pick a time of day when my mother was alone and tell her one item a day. I'd be finished in less than a year. If the telling got excruciating and her anger too bad, I'd tell five items once a week like the Catholic girls, and I'd still be through in a year, maybe ten months.

(*The Woman Warrior*, p. 230)

#### LANGUAGE BARRIER

The need to talk is essentially the need to bridge a gap, to alleviate alienation, and in this sense the “language barrier” was overwhelming to Chinese immigrants in the U.S. Chinese-American children grew up thinking that the ghosts (alternately called demons, barbarians, foreigners) actually could not hear anything said in Chinese. On the other hand, the gap between the Chinese and the white Americans was, if anything, zealously guarded and exaggerated by the Chinese because they were always afraid of coming to public attention, being investigated, being deported. Historically Chinese immigration was cut off with the Exclusion Act of 1882: after that time, aside from an extremely small quota (which varied from year to year) only Chinese who had been legal residents of the U.S., and their immediate families, were allowed to reenter the U.S. The Certificate of Return thus became a family possession, almost an heirloom, since the Chinese were well aware that the whites could neither tell one Chinese from another nor estimate the age of a Chinese within twenty years. Thus when the men in the village, including Ms. Kingston's father, decided to go to Gold Mountain, first they gathered all the Certificates of Return they could produce, then decided who would go

with what set of papers, then set about memorizing the inevitable "how many steps from the house to the well" type questions which immigration officials used to try to trap "impersonators." (One wonders today whether the immigration authorities really kept all this information on how many pigs in a particular village on file, or whether it was simply a game of bluff. Filipinos will recognize parallels in the visa interviews today, but the Chinese peasant, usually speaking no English, was infinitely less prepared to face such an ordeal.)

At any rate, these Certificates of Return were invalidated in 1888, and many Chinese immigrants after that time were, in fact, illegal. But since "Citizenship Judges" went around in the mining camps and among the road crews, *selling* citizenship papers (Ah Goong, the Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains in *China Men*, bought such papers for a bag of gold), many Chinese did not know whether they were legal residents or not. Thus the children were not to draw attention to themselves, not to talk, not to give their father's names. Anyway, most fathers had different names for every occasion, for every arrest, etc. In *The Woman Warrior* a teacher tries to get the class to ridicule a little boy who says he does not know his father's name, but the Chinese in the class understand the boy all too well. In Ms. Kingston's own history, this is the reason not to inquire too much about China, not to try to go there, the reason why her brother could not be too vocal about his anti-war feelings during the Vietnam conflict, the reason why she seems truly not to know exactly how her father entered the U.S., whether he used one of the grandfather's sets of papers, or came on the strength of his own scholarship, or stowed away in a crate in steerage from Cuba. ("I think this is the journey you don't tell me." *China Men*, p. 49).

Chinese went back and forth: some of Ms. Kingston's relatives made two or three journeys to the Gold Mountain. But others stayed in the U.S. for years or forever. Thus the pain of separation is always there, and runs through both books, but stronger still is the *guilt* of separation, for the Chinese in China fared badly before 1949 and even for awhile afterwards, and the Chinese on Gold Mountain at least continued to eat. A Gold Mountain relative in *China Men* sends less and less money to his mother in China as his own family grows and their needs expand. She writes whining, complaining letters, accusing him of feeding worthless daughters, whom he might always sell instead, while his mother starves. Why does he not come home? Why does he waste his money there? Finally, she dies, and the letters stop, but then her ghost haunts him, making it impossible for him to eat or sleep, until at last, desperate, he buys passage to China, bringing his mother's ghost with him, performs the burial rituals, and returns to the U.S. at peace.

The Hong family has its own set of obligations, people to whom money must be sent, people who will write pleading letters when they want the money for a new bicycle and accusing letters when someone else receives

something special. Chinese Americans complain about these "obligations," and even doubt that old Grandma whom they are supporting is actually still alive, but they continue to send money. In this respect they are, of course, like most first generation Americans. Ms. Kingston's mother works in the fields picking tomatoes and generalizes:

Every woman in the tomato row is sending money home, my mother says, to Chinese villages and Mexican villages and Filipino villages, and now, Vietnamese villages where they speak Chinese too. The women come to work whether sick or well. "I can't die," they say, "I'm supporting fifty," or "I'm supporting a hundred."

(*The Woman Warrior*, p. 239)

And the tradition will be passed on to the next generation:

What I'll inherit someday is a green address book full of names. I'll send the relatives money, and they'll write me stories about their hunger.

(*Ibid.*)

#### PSYCHOLOGICAL EFFECTS

Always a central theme in Asian-American writing, and present but subdued in Ms. Kingston's work, is the problem of the psychological effects on Asian men of white racism and the status hierarchy that cannot be broken into.<sup>3</sup> Ms. Kingston's father goes into a deep depression when he loses his job and cannot readily find another and thus has to rely on his wife for support. An uncle begins to view the whole capitalistic structure of the U.S. as a personal plot against him: the bank is tampering with his account, milkmen and bakers are trying to poison his food, and even the garbage collectors are gathering refuse for the sole purpose of burying him alive. He isn't the only China Man to go crazy in the U.S.: a "wild man" is discovered in Green Swamp, Florida, and turns out to be a lonely, homesick China Man who had escaped from the mental hospital to which he had been sent when he begged to leave the ship he was working on and return home.

But the most interesting and yet most subtle statement about the effects of racism is made in the opening section of *China Men* in which a male traveller falls into the hands of a band of women who proceed to "feminize" him, breaking his toes to bind his feet, piercing his ears with sharp needles, pluck-

3. Ms. Kingston never uses the word "racism" and would probably consider it a terrible oversimplification. I use it here to refer to various social and economic structures and attitudes which made it difficult for foreign, particularly Asian, men to realize their full potentials, to find jobs which fit their training and abilities, etc. Ms. Kingston's mother was a doctor in China and a tomato picker in California. (It happens to women as well, but there is no such word as "effeminating".)

ing his facial hair and applying make-up and dressing him up. They also threaten to sew his lips closed. Only at the very end of this section is the emasculating locality identified as being in North America. The idea that racism emasculates its victims has been voiced by many minority groups, notably blacks — women are apparently everyone's classic underdogs — but it is interesting that in this case the man is feminized by Chinese women and in accordance with Chinese norms.

The influence of Ms. Kingston's feminist consciousness is pervasive in both books, although the attention is more directly focussed on women in *The Woman Warrior*. In both books one feels the pain associated with being despised for being female: In *China Men* after listening to her father ranting anti-female obscenities (why, in every language, are so many of the "bad words" specifically derogatory to women? ), she says

What I want to hear from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female. "Those were only sayings," I want you to say to me. "I didn't mean you or your mother. I didn't mean your sisters or grandmothers or women in general."

(*China Men*, p. 14)

The tone of *The Woman Warrior* is set in the opening chapter entitled "No Name Woman": as a child Ms. Kingston was told in confidence by her mother that her father had had one lone sister, now never mentioned and nameless forever, because she had an illegitimate pregnancy, bore the child in the pigpen, and then drowned it and herself in the family well. Ms. Kingston tries to understand this woman's plight, how lonely she must have been with her husband gone for years in Gold Mountain, how her heart may have lifted in response to love, or how she may have simply been commanded, as a submissive female, to lie with a man who would later join the neighbors in attacking the disgraced household. Of the mother killing her child, she says,

Carrying the baby to the well shows loving.  
Otherwise abandon it. Turn its face into  
the mud. Mothers who love their children  
take them along. It was probably a girl;  
there is some hope of forgiveness for boys.

#### FEMALE AVENGER

But the high point of Ms. Kingston's feminism comes, of course, in the title section of *The Woman Warrior*, in which she portrays herself as the Female Avenger. This is a fantasy adventure, in which she goes through fourteen years of training in the martial arts under the guidance of a magical old couple on a mountain. After this training she reenters the world, gathers an



army, and slays the traditional exploiters of Chinese peasants, more specifically of Chinese women. After killing one particularly vicious landlord, she searches out his "harem," finds the women cowering in a locked room, gives each a sack of rice, and allows them to hobble away on their bound feet, free. Later she hears that they too formed a band of female avengers.

Although this section may seem somewhat lengthy and boring to those who are interested in neither Chinese martial arts nor the early Chinese revolutionary movement, as fantasy it brings together several important elements in Ms. Kingston's childhood. It is put in context immediately after it is told:

My American life has been such a disappointment.

"I got straight A's, Mama." "Let me tell you a true story about a girl who saved her village."

(*The Woman Warrior*, p.54)

Ms. Kingston's mother must have been a feminist in her own way, in spite of her attempts to raise her daughter according to the accepted model of Chinese womanhood. She was trained as a doctor in China — in *China Men* we find out that her husband ordered her to "get an education" so that he could send for her — and throughout this training she was a strong, independent young woman, at the top of her class in her studies, the only one in the dormitory not afraid of ghosts, etc. In medical school she was able to be a person onto herself, released from family pressures and village identities, and Ms. Kingston envies her this liberation and at the same time speculates on the women in new China:

Not many women got to live out the daydream of women — to have a room, even a section of a room, that only gets messed up when she messes it up herself. The book would stay open at the very page she had pressed flat with her hand, and no one would complain about the field not being plowed or the leak in the room. She would clean her own bowl, and a small, limited area; she would have one drawer to sort, one bed to make . . . I've seen Communist pictures showing a contented woman sitting on her bunk sewing. Above her head is her one box on a shelf . . . The woman looks very pleased. The Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women they wanted: a job and a room of their own.

(*China Men*, pp. 72-73)

Many of the different thematic threads that run through these two books are pulled together in the wonderings and questionings about New China. There is first of all the fact that showing interest in it seemed dangerous, seemed to be something that would draw attention to one and perhaps get one deported. There is also the problem of separating fact from fancy in relatives letters: at one point Ms. Kingston says,

Soon I want to go to China and find out who's lying – the Communists who say they have food and jobs for everybody or the relatives who write that they have not the money to buy salt . . . It would be good if the Communists were taking care of themselves; then I could buy a color T.V.

(*The Woman Warrior*, pp. 239-40)

But maybe the issue of women in China is the most decisive one in Ms. Kingston's own attitude towards it:

Nobody wrote to tell us that Mao himself had been matched to an older girl when he was a child, and that he was freeing women from prisons where they had been put for refusing the businessmen their parents had picked as husbands. Nobody told us that the Revolution (the Liberation) was against girl slavery and girl infanticide (a village-wide party if its a boy). Girls would no longer have to kill themselves rather than get married. May the Communists light up the house on a girl's birthday.

(*The Woman Warrior*, p. 222)

The pain she has expressed over the treatment of no-name aunt, over her father's anti-woman obscenities, and over the general attitude of the Chinese towards girl-children, seems so central to her own growing up that the idea of a new China in which women are treated more fairly must certainly have a strong appeal. Old China and its folkways have been so strongly, and in this instance so painfully, part of her background that the idea of a hopeful new China stirs the mind with nostalgia and regret as well as optimism. And so it must be for most Chinese-Americans, for the changes in China, and the American attempt to isolate The People's Republic, did cut them off rather completely from their village heritage. In this respect the Chinese are unique among Asian-Americans.

By way of evaluation, Ms. Kingston's two books are much much more than Asian-American "statements" of a political sort. Her writing is art, almost poetry, as she interweaves strands of legend, family stories, happenings in her own life, her own reflections and imaginations. Nevertheless she gives a clear and genuine voice to Chinese-America, first by reflecting the Chineseness of her heritage with truth and honesty. We see the influences from which she draws sustenance as well as those which hold her back: we see her mother's strength, her father's grace as the family scholar, the village chants and traditions which comfort and give meaning, but we also see the crippling attitudes towards women which left young Chinese girls in America psychologically foot-bound. On the American side of the equation we see the giant contribution of Chinese labor in the United States, and we see it in a personal and again almost poetic way as Ms. Kingston pictures grandfather Ah Goong swinging over mountain ledges in a basket, using

dynamite to reshape the face of the earth for the railroads, or Bak Goong, with the sun in his face, chopping through Hawaiian jungle for new cane fields. And then in the end we see what it means to be Chinese-American, to have this double heritage, and more specifically to be a woman with this heritage. Ms. Kingston is the first writer since Carlos Bulosan to give voice to the struggles, defeats, and triumphs of ordinary Asian-Americans, not as whites would have them, but as they see themselves. Bulosan's experiences were limited to the depression and its aftermath; Ms. Kingston can call up several generations of immigrant experience, and this is broader and more comprehensive. But Filipinos have also played an important role in the history of Asian-America and thus should find in these two books a fascinating new vision of that experience.