An Interview with Maxine Hong Kingston

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ABSTRACT

In this extensive interview with a scholar from Taiwan, conducted through correspondence from November 1994 to March 1995, Maxine Hong Kingston answers questions concerning Asian American literature, her relationship with Chinese literature, the transmission from talk-stories to written texts, and the recent performance of *The Woman Warrior: A Girlhood among Ghosts* on stage (a dramatic adaptation [by Deborah Rogin] based on *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*). She also responds to ethnocentric critics, discusses issues about cultural identity and hybridity, and mentions various responses to her works, including those from her parents.

KEY WORDS

Maxine Hong Kingston
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Tripmaster Monkey
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China Men
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makes community stronger. Also, there is, as the Native Americans say, "mouth-to-ear" transmission. Reading and movie-going are more visual, intellectual, solitary ways of communication; I'm glad I can make use of all these forms.

Shan: It seems that up to now we have been very much involved with the problem of translation in a broader sense of carrying over from one linguistic/cultural situation to another or from one medium to another—the transition of your name, the title of your work, the transformation from talk-story, to the written text, to the play, and probably to the movie. And in your retelling of Fa Mu Lan (花木蘭) story in the book, you made some bold alterations (such as carving words on her back [adopted from the story of a male Chinese historical figure Yueh Fei (岳飛)], giving birth to a child while in the army, killing a male chauvinist villain . . .) which raise questions concerning authenticity and representation on the one hand, and creativity and poetic license on the other. Can you tell us why and how you gave us your version of Fa Mu Lan story and what is the effect intended and achieved? Where did you learn about the story of Fa Mu Lan apart from your mother's talk-story?

Kingston: I was showing how a child hears bedtime stories. Going in and out of sleep, the stories and dreams and imagination and the conscious and the subconscious blend and flux and flow. If you read the Fa Mu Lan sections carefully, you'll see that in addition to the Yueh Fei story, there's *Alice in Wonderland* and the Buddhist rabbit story, and Hong Kong Kung Fu movies. In addition to my mother's chanting Fa Mu Lan, I found her as a papercutting, and long after writing the book, I found her story in text—a small book in the Guttenberg Museum, which collects artifacts in the history of printing.

Shan: What are the further changes of Fa Mu Lan story on stage? What specific effects do they achieve? What do you think about the performance of that Asian American actress?

Kingston: One of the culminating scenes is Fa Mu Lan finding her husband, the man warrior who partners her. Animus and anima are integrated in the psyche of the daughter. I've seen two actresses

play Fa Mu Lan—Yunjin Kim in Berkeley and Kim Miyori in Boston. They brought very different qualities to the play. Yunjin Kim's Fa Mu Lan was down-to-earth, real; I liked this bringing to common life a mythic heroine who is not considered a historical figure by scholars. Kim Miyori's Fa Mu Lan was ethereal, unearthly; I liked this representation of the daughter's ideals.

Shan: If you were to write Fa Mu Lan story today, what changes would you like to make?

Kingston: In my book I am writing now, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, I plan to emphasize the homecoming of Fa Mu Lan from war, and her transformation from manly guise to woman.

Shan: In *China Men*, you told different stories about your father's legal and illegal entries into the US. How did your father (湯思德) *actually* get into the US? Why were you so ambivalent about his way of entering into the US when writing this book? And what's your father's response to your ambivalence?

Kingston: Now that my father has died, I can tell you that he actually came to the US. as a stowaway on a ship from Cuba, and he made this journey not once but three times. He was caught twice by immigration police and deported twice. Of course, I had to tell many legal and magical versions of my father's entry in case immigration authorities read my book and arrest and deport him again, and my mother too. My father was very proud of my writing, and responded in commentary and poetry.

Shan: In *China Men*, your father's silence provoked you to write his story: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'm mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong." Does your father give you any correction about his life-story? What's his major response to your books?

Kingston: My father wrote affirmation and praise, and not corrections. He used to complain about poems not coming to him in America. Poetry comes from the ground and from the voices of the people around us, and he had trouble hearing them. My books got my father's poetry going again.

Shan: Your father wrote on one of the Chinese translations of *China Men* at the age of 80. You also mentioned his marginalia upon your works. What are your parents' response to the (re-)presentation of them in books and/or on stage, such as how these works reflect their past, or how they reflect their relationship with you?

Kingston: My parents read the Chinese translations, which I think are not as powerful as the English. The Chinese pirates did not bother to experiment with language and form but used readymade soap opera. When there were difficult passages, they omitted them. So, my parents think that my work is entertaining. They take my word for it that I write more complexly than what they've read. However, the descriptions of village life and of the dragon got through to them. My mother kept marveling at the accuracy of my pictures of "home," and my father kept wondering how I can know dragons so well.

Shan: Can you say something about your Chinese connections: such as your connection with Chinese folklore or Cantonese opera, your training in Chinese? Did you read stories like *Liao-chai chi-yi* (聊齋誌異, a work of which "The Ghostmate" readily reminds Chinese readers), *Ching-hwa-yuan* (鏡花緣, a book in which T'ang Ao [唐敖] appears), and others in Chinese or in English translation? What are your favorite Chinese works?

Kingston: I know folktales, chants, and epics mostly through my mother's "talk-story." My father often sang and recited classical poetry. They had brought from China half a dozen volumes of *Romance of Three Kingdoms* (三國演義) and *Water Margin* (水滸傳), which they read aloud to us. They also read aloud Chinese translations of *Robinson Crusoe* and the *Doctor Doolittle* series. What reading of Chinese literature I've done has been in English translation—Arthur Waley, Pearl S. Buck, Lin Yutang (林語堂), *Romance of the Red Chamber* (紅樓夢), *The I Ching* (易經). And, of course, classical and modern poetry in English translation. Just before he died, I showed my father Bei Dao's (北島) poetry; he said he didn't get what the contemporary poets are doing.

Shan: You have always been a very avid reader. Can you tell us

some of your favorite writers? Among the writers you mentioned elsewhere, you read a lot of works written by African American writers, apart from many canonical writers. Why?

Kingston: Some of my favorite writers are Virginia Woolf, Toni Morrison, Grace Paley, William Carlos Williams, Walt Whitman, Natsume Soseki, Garrett Hongo, Isaac Bashevis Singer. As a young person, I read African American writers—James Baldwin, Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison, LeRoi Jones—because they inspired me: it's possible to be a minority person and a writer; minority people are worthy subjects of literature. By the way, the Black writers I've named are part of the American canon now.

Shan: In your lecture you mentioned that Jade Snow Wong (黃玉雪) was the only Chinese American writer around when you grew up. Did you read her writings other than *Fifth Chinese Daughter*? Did you feel any anxiety of influence about this immediate predecessor? Do you know her personally, since both of you live around San Francisco?

Kingston: Well, the other Chinese writer I read when I was growing up was Pearl S. Buck. I appreciated her and Jade Snow Wong for enwording Chinese lives and images and ways. They worked against the terrible stereotype that "orientals" do not have feelings. Yes, I know Jade Snow Wong, and have had a chance to thank her for her books. Her son, Deng Ming Dao, made the woodblock prints for my book, *Hawai'i One Summer*.

Shan: *The Heath Anthology of American Literature* (1990) includes selections from the poetry carved on the wall by the early Chinese (all male) immigrants in Angel Island (埃崙詩集) as the prototext of Chinese American literature, while a chapter from *The Woman Warrior*, "White Tigers," is also included. How do you feel seeing both these poems and yourself (a second-generation female writer of Chinese immigrants) being represented in a powerful canon-broadening anthology of American literature on the one hand and serving as a representation of Chinese American literature on the other?

Kingston: I always feel good when I see anthologies of Ameri-

can literature that include writing of and about many diverse cultures.

Shan: You lived in Hawaii for a number of years. Do you have any special feeling about this particular locale where many Chinese and Chinese Americans, including the plantation workers you mentioned in *China Men*, have worked so hard?

Kingston: I wrote *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* in Hawai'i. The languages of Hawai'i gave me important words and concepts—"talk-story," "hui," "paké," "aina." Great grandfathers on both my mother's and father's side of our family worked in the "Sandalwood Mountains" (檀香山). My son lives there now. I am very honored that Hawai'i recognizes my relationship to her by naming me a Living Treasure of Hawai'i.

Shan: In *China Men*, you mentioned your brothers' visit to Taiwan, but did not dwell too much upon their response to this visit. Why? What expectations do you have about your prospective visit to Taiwan?

Kingston: Taiwan has never figured in our family myths of China. When my brothers were stationed there during the Vietnam War, they did not find roots or anything familiar. Once years ago, I gave a lecture and reading in Hong Kong, and heard that scholars from Taiwan boycotted me because they claimed that I wrote inaccurately about China. I am hoping that I will be welcomed when I visit Taiwan for the first time, and that scholars now understand my work. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman Ah Sing says that Taiwan must be a country made up of exiles, misfits, outsiders. He means that Taiwan must be like America, a country where immigrants have taken over the land and dominate the indigenous, primal people. I expect Taiwan to be more like the US. than mainland China is.

Shan: Your writing to a certain extent can be read as your way of imagining your ancestors' homeland. Can you also imagine your reception in the homeland?

Kingston: But I don't have to imagine it. I've been to mainland China four times—once to my parents' villages, and twice with delegations of writers. We were televised being welcomed by the Minister of Culture at the Great Hall of the People. Everywhere, people said,

"Welcome home. We're glad you're back." They welcomed my return though I'd never been there before. I had a sense that "once Chinese forever Chinese." You can be away from China for generations and not even know the language anymore and "return" as a Chinese. Meeting writers who talked about the Cultural Revolution, I had a sense that they valued me for having been able to work in freedom. I could not be touched by the Cultural Revolution. I wrote down our roots; I experimented with modern forms. I could save some things. Chinese artists are looking for forms after the chaos and destruction of the Cultural Revolution. I hope that my writing suggests a free, complex literary form that can gather everything—the mythic past and the modern, scientific present.

Shan: In the 1992 conference on Cultural Identity and Chinese American Literature (sponsored by the Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica, Taiwan, Republic of China), more than half of the papers are on you. And the annotated bibliography of scholarly papers published in Taiwan (including M.A. theses) I have compiled also shows that a large portion is about you. What do you think about this reception in Taiwan?

Kingston: I am joyful to be communicating with Chinese readers. But I really must get someone to translate those essays into English, so that I can know how the scholars read me.

Shan: What do you think about the Asian American literature today? How does it differ from when you first started writing? What do you think is your own role in the present prosperity of Chinese American literature?

Kingston: Today, almost every month, a wonderful new book by an Asian American is published. This month (March, 1995) there are at least four books out: *Native Speaker* by Chang-Rae Lee, *Volcano* by Garrett Hongo, a memoir by Li-Young Lee, *A Little Too Much Is Enough* by Kathleen Tyau. And there are more. I can't keep up reading all of them. When I started reading and writing, in the 1940's, I was lucky to have Jade Snow Wong and Pearl S. Buck. I think that my role in Asian American literature is that I write in such a way that it helps our work to be taken seriously as literature, not

merely as anthropology, entertainment, exotica.

Shan: What do you think about the institutionalization of Asian American literature/studies—for instance, many teachers employed, many courses offered, many centers set up, discussion groups organized via Internet?

Kingston: The quality and quantity of our work is such that it can fill courses and academic departments. We mustn't forget to give gratitude to the pioneers of Black Studies, who had to use aggressive political tactics to open doors in academia.

Shan: In *The Woman Warrior* you played on the Chinese word "bao" (報) and made it to be both "reporting" (報導) and "revenge" (報復). How would you regard this interview as "reporting" and "representing"?

Kingston: I like very much that the Chinese language has the ethic that "reporting"—or writing—is good enough "revenge." Instead of returning evil for evil, we give a poem. Revenge is one person beating down another. Writer and reader, interviewer and interviewee in dialogue, have a relationship of equals, a higher way of being one with another.