1990

Trilogy of Maxine Hong Kingston | The quest for identity and the invention of selfhood

Weili Fan
The University of Montana

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THE TRILOGY OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON:
THE QUEST FOR IDENTITY AND THE INVENTION OF SELPHOOD

By
Weili Fan
B.A., Shandong University
1982, People's Republic of China
M.A., Institute of International Relations
1985, People's Republic of China

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Master of Arts
University of Montana
1990

Approved by:

[Signatures]
Chairman, Board of Examiners
Dean, Graduate School

Date
August 2, 1990
The Trilogy of Maxine Hong Kingston:
The Quest for Identity and the Invention of Selfhood (82 pp.)

Since Maxine Hong Kingston came into the American literary arena in 1976, her writing has successfully gained its way into the mainstream of American literature and firmly established her position as a major American writer. This thesis treats her three books, The Woman Warrior (1976), China Men (1980), and Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1989), as a trilogy and focuses on the author's quest for identity and her creation of a new literary dialect.

The Woman Warrior is a quest for personal and gender identity, which is embodied in her struggle for voice. Her journey from silence to song vividly portrays her difficult struggle and final triumph.

China Men is an effort to establish identity through historical context. It claims the national identity for Chinese Americans by recovering their history from deceit and neglect. The structure of the book is unique in that history and fiction, ancient myths and modern stories, are interwoven as text and intertext.

This thesis demonstrates how the mythical and the concrete, seemingly unconnected, commingle to give the stories of China Men an epic beauty and tragic poignancy, as well as historical significance.

Tripmaster Monkey, a widely allusive and wildly dense book, presents a modern China Man's fight for identity, which is often diminished in the predominantly white culture. He is an anti-racist and anti-stereotypic hero, who fights with language as his powerful weapon, and strives to give voice to a Chinese-American culture.

Kingston has created a mixed genre of her own invention, bespeaking her mixed experience with two cultural traditions. She has developed a Chinese-American literary dialect from book to book, adding to the multicultural tradition of American literature. She not only claims America for Chinese Americans through her writing, she also gives voice to a Chinese-American culture within the mainstream of American literature. It is through the act of writing itself that she has established her selfhood as an American, a Chinese American, a woman, and a writer.
Acknowledgements

I wish to thank Prof. Lois Welch, my thesis director, for her guidance and support throughout this project. Thanks are also due to Prof. Henry Harrington, Prof. Julia Watson, for their criticism and suggestions. I would also like to thank my special friend, Bruce Ammons, for his generous help with editing and printing, as well as his abiding friendship.
# Table of Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter I From Silence to Song: The Voice of <em>The Woman Warrior</em></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter II From the Mythical to the Concrete: A Reading of <em>China Men</em></td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter III From Me to I: The Fight of <em>Tripmaster Monkey</em></td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter IV The Birth of a New Literary Dialect</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Endnotes</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

When Maxine Hong Kingston sneaked into the American literary arena out of nowhere with her first book The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), it shocked the world with its daring originality and startling freshness. It was highly acclaimed, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for general nonfiction in 1976. Three years later, it was named one of the top ten nonfiction works of the decade by Time magazine.

The subsequent publication of China Men (1980), which was equally applauded and won the American Book Award for general nonfiction in 1981, brought her further success as a writer. If Kingston was, as Susan Currier suggested, "on her way to recognition as a major American writer" (235), she has now firmly established herself in the American literary canon as "a major American writer."

She has been included in such authoritative literary histories as Harvard Guide to Contemporary American Writing (1982) and the Columbia Literary History of the United States (1988). Excerpts from her writing have appeared in such prominent anthologies as The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Tradition in English (1985) and The Harper Anthology of American Literature (1987). Her writing has
also been collected in such popular college readers as *Crossing Cultures: Readings for Composition* (1983), *The Conscious Reader* (1985), and *The Bedford Reader* (1985).¹ The past decade has also witnessed a steady growth of the criticism and scholarship on Kingston.²

Kingston has now further expanded her literary horizons in new directions with her third book, the first novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989). Early reviews have indicated that this new book may fare as well as its predecessors.

The three books will be treated as a trilogy in this thesis, for consistent themes recur in all of them. This trilogy constitutes the author's earnest quest for identity, her justifiable claiming of America and forceful assertion of the right to belong, as well as her artistic invention of selfhood.

In *The Woman Warrior*, the author writes page after page about herself and her female relatives in an effort to find voice and define identity. In *China Men*, she devotes story after story to her father, her forefathers, and other male relatives in an effort to discover their origins in China and claim their position in America. The two books are organically linked together, or, in Kingston's own words, form "one big book" (Pfaff, "Talk" 25). For the quest for identity inevitably involves the quest for origin, "Where did I come from?".
By virtue of Kingston's identity as a Chinese-American woman, Kingston's quest encompasses another double dimension -- defining gender identity as well as national identity. She has to assert herself both as a woman and as an American. The Woman Warrior, her "mother-book," and China Men, her "father-book," complement each other in this double quest for gender as well as national identity.

The quest for identity, the struggle for assimilation, the fight for the right to belong, are continued right into the third book, even though it is no longer "auto/biographical" like the first two.

In China Men, Kingston has rightfully captured the image of China Men of the past and forcefully redressed their history. In Tripmaster Monkey, she has poignantly created an image of a modern China Man: offspring of Bak Goong, pupil of Whitman.

In her sketch of Kingston's literary biography in 1980, Susan Currier describes Kingston's writing as blending "myth, legend, history, and autobiography into a genre of her own invention" (235). This description seems to do less than justice to the characteristics of Kingston's writing, especially after the publication of her third book. It is more proper to say that whether one calls Kingston's writing autobiography, biography, or fiction, she has convincingly created her own form, her own style, her own dialect and thus opened a new territory within the tradition of American
literature. She has given voice to a Chinese-American literary dialect within the mainstream of American culture. Furthermore, in this artistic invention Kingston has invented and developed her selfhood, her womanhood, and her writerhood.
Chapter I
From Silence to Song:
The Voice of The Woman Warrior

If you don't talk, you can't have a personality.
(The Woman Warrior)

"You must not tell anyone . . ." begins The Woman Warrior with the mother's injunction of silence as prelude to the daughter's struggle of breaking silence.

The Woman Warrior consists of five stories of different women. It is through those stories of herself and the other --her female relatives that make part of her life--that Kingston records her difficult yet triumphant journey from silence to song.

The first story, "No Name Woman," is about the nameless aunt of the author, told to her by her mother to warn her about life, about responsibility and conformity. The mother's version of the story is barely complete. She tells only the "useful parts" necessary to pass the warning message. The author had to imagine a life, many lives, for her aunt out of the punitive silence that effaced her. She gives this nameless and selfless aunt a self, gives her life a meaning, out of words. She gives her an "individuality," "a secret voice, a separate attentiveness" away from the
community (9, 11). The aunt was rebellious in breaching the community code by her adultery, whatever the reason. She rebelled silently, never revealed the man's name; she suffered silently, never whined or begged for mercy. The author is rebellious too, by showing sympathy and understanding towards this nameless aunt who was despised, denounced, and deliberately forgotten by the family; by regarding this family outcast as her "forerunner" (8); by breaking the punitive and obliterating silence around her; by devoting "pages of paper to her" (16). "No Name Woman" is thus the author's first triumphant effort in breaking the silence of her life.

Kingston's "memoirs of a girlhood among ghosts" constitute a continuous effort to break the silence, to find words and voice. Her consciousness of the self-effacing silence, her efforts and frustrations in breaking that silence, seem to have started with school where she had to cope in an alien environment and with a foreign language. "It was when I found out I had to talk that school became a misery, that the silence became a misery. I did not speak and felt bad each time that I did not speak." She realized, as a child, that "the silence had to do with being a Chinese girl" (166). Her silence is a double bind: being Chinese dislocated from her root culture into an alien and hostile environment, she was unable to articulate in a foreign language; she was also ordered "Don't tell" in order to keep
the family secrets; as a female growing up under the antifemale influence of the feudal traditions of China, her sense of self-worth and self-esteem was roughly trampled on and her voice was hushed.

Talking about women's status in pre-liberation China, Kingston said, "I think during bad times women kept alive the stories, the myths [about powerful women], which inspired their liberation." She herself has kept alive the stories, the myths, during bad times when "[her] American life has been such a disappointment" (45); when she has had to live with such antifemale sayings as "girls are maggots in the rice," "feeding girls is feeding cowbirds," "it is more profitable to raise geese than daughters" (43, 46). These stories not only made her realize that girls "could be heroines, swordswomen" (19), but also gave wings to her imagination and inspired her articulation. Part Two, "White Tigers," is a story of the author's imagined life as a Fa Mu Lan, a legendary woman warrior in Chinese culture.

In her fantasy inspired by "the song of the warrior woman" (20), she had the valor and the power of commanding an army to fight the enemy; she had "glorious songs" to inspire her army. "When I opened my mouth," the narrator imagined, "the songs poured out and were loud enough for the whole encampment to hear" (37). As a little girl she could do nothing but "thrash on the floor and scream" (46) at hearing the antifemale sayings. As a Fa Mu Lan, she could
slay the feudal lord who uttered such sayings in front of her and set free the women he imprisoned. Leading her army raging across China, she was not only an avenger of her family, but also a liberator of women.

Her accomplished imagined life contrasts with her real and disappointing American life. She had no glorious songs, no powerful voice. Even though she easily recognized her racist enemies, "business-suited in their modern American executive guise," each two feet taller than she was and "impossible to meet eye to eye," she couldn't confront them like the warrior woman. Instead she could only resist the racists in her "bad, small-person's voice that makes no impact," she could only "squeak" or "whisper" her protest, with "voice unreliable" (48-49).

Kingston traces this squeaking or whispering voice of hers and depicts her painstaking effort in finding an articulate voice in the last part of the book, "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," a story of her real life upon the American soil. "When I went to kindergarten and had to speak English for the first time, I became silent." "I read aloud in first grade, though, and heard the barest whisper with little squeaks come out of my throat. 'Louder,' said the teacher, who scared the voice away again" (165, 166).

In order to have a personality, to have a self, to survive in the new land--let alone to live up to her aspirations inspired by stories and myths--she had to find
her voice, both literal and figurative. We approach the truth of her struggle through metaphor.

The author's fight with voicelessness reaches its climax in the scene in which the narrator confronted another Chinese girl who could not talk. She tried various ways, both hard and gentle, to make the girl talk. But she elicited only "quarts of tears but no words" from the quiet girl. She poured out her overwhelming hatred on this girl: "I hated the younger sister, the quiet one. I hated her when she was the last chosen for her team and I, the last chosen for my team. I hated her Chinese doll hair cut . . ." "I hated fragility . . . I hated her weak neck." "You are disgusting," shouted the narrator to the quiet girl. "You are such a nothing." "If you don't talk, you can't have a personality," she warned the speechless girl. "You've got to let people know you have a personality and a brain." She at last exhausted all her energy and her means, totally defeated by the complete silence of the girl. The two were reduced to one big failure. "Her sobs and my sobs were bouncing widely off the tile, sometimes together, sometimes alternate" (173-181). This fierce fight reflects the author's arduous struggle to find her own voice, for the dumb girl embodied everything she hated in herself. It vividly conveys to us the humiliation, the pain, the frustration she underwent in the struggle for voice.

This battle-against-silence scene parallels a central
event in the preceding part, "At the Western Palace," in which Brave Orchid drags Moon Orchid to Los Angeles to reclaim the husband who has left her for a new life, a new career in America with a new wife. Despite Brave Orchid's strength, determination, and good intentions for her sister, she could not make her summon up courage to speak up for her rights. All Moon Orchid could do in the confrontation with her Americanized husband was whimper: "Moon Orchid started to whimper. Her husband looked at her. And recognized her. 'You,' he said. 'What are you doing here?' But all she did was open and shut her mouth without any words coming out." Brave Orchid had to speak for her even though she had decided not to "interfere with this meeting after long absence" (152). Instead of gaining the husband back, Moon Orchid was rendered by this meeting a paranoid who finally perished at the "Western Palace."

These two events seem to carry the same message to the narrator: Nobody can speak for you but your own self; nobody can make you speak but your own self. If you don't speak, you don't even have a self. To save herself, she had to break the silence, she had to do it out of her own will and determination rather than waiting till she was given a chance. "My throat hurt constantly, vocal cords taut to snapping . . ." She had to speak up, so at last her "throat burst open." She asserted firmly to her parents, "I'm not going to be a slave or a wife . . . I won't let you turn me
into a slave or a wife. I'm getting out of here . . . " (200-201). This is a daughter's voice declaring independence; this is an individual's voice asserting her self. This is also a private voice, which is yet to be complemented by a public voice that could fulfill her selfhood.

The author's final triumph is powerfully related through metaphor too. The end of the book is an account of Ts'ai Yen, the Han dynasty poetess once taken captive by barbarian nomads. She was made wife of their chieftain and spent twelve years among the barbarians. Nobody spoke or understood her language, including her own children, who insensitively laughed at her attempt to teach them Chinese. Her own voice was silenced and her own language obliterated by the barbarians. One night "she heard music tremble and rise like desert wind." She saw hundreds of the barbarians blowing on flutes. "They reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found and held --an icicle in the desert" (208). The music disturbed her night after night, no matter how far away she walked from it or how hard she tried to hide herself in her tent, until one night, out of her tent rose a woman's voice singing "a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes" (209). She sang about China and her family, the song carrying sadness and anger that touched even the hearts of the barbarians. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along with her. She brought her songs back from the savage lands when she
finally returned to China. One has been passed down by the Chinese. "It translated well" (209).

The Woman Warrior thus ends with the story of Ts'ai Yen, with a celebration of the woman who is powerful because she has a distinctive and articulate voice. This is an illuminating end to the whole book; a triumphant end of the author's journey from silence to song. At the beginning of the book, she is told a story, a story to silence her, to warn her; but at the end, she tells a story, a story to assert herself, to celebrate herself.

To Kingston, voice is central to her book as well as to her self. Her no-name aunt, with a voice strangled by the rigid spiritual shackles imposed on women in China, was capable only of a voiceless rebellion. Moon Orchid, with no "hardness" for the new country, no self to control her own life, was capable of silly chattering at her sister's home and pitiful whimpering in front of her husband. The narrator suffered painful dumbness at school and was much handicapped by her inability to talk. Only her mother had a powerful voice which was constantly ringing at her ears, a voice that turned into "the voice of the heroines in [her] sleep" (19).

Kingston devotes Part Three, "Shaman," to her mother, Brave Orchid. It is a story of Brave Orchid's unusually accomplished life in China. "She could make herself not weak" (67) and braved the boulder ghost that scared all the girls at the medical school dormitory. She exorcised the
ghost by her powerful talking: "I do not give in . . . There is no pain you can inflict that I cannot endure . . . You have no power over a strong woman . . ." (70). She put herself through medical school and returned to her home village a doctor. She earned herself money, position, and respect through her successful practice. Her individuality, independence, professionalism, and strength set her high above the ordinary women of her time. Although Brave Orchid is, as Miller points out, "diminished by the American reality" and left with only one power to bequeath her daughter--the power to "talk-story"9--this one power is nevertheless great enough to inspire the daughter to achievement, to equip the daughter for fulfillment.

The daughter has also recognized this great power: "At last I saw that I too had been in the presence of great power, my mother talking-story" (19-20). With this power supporting and sustaining her, encouraging and inspiring her, she has gone through all the hardships and frustrations inflicted by the inability to talk and finally found her voice, a voice more powerful than her mother's, for the latter forever remains a Chinese voice, whereas the former becomes a Chinese American's voice, a feminist's voice, a writer's voice. Yet without the mother's voice, there would be no daughter's voice as such. The last talk-story of the book well illustrates this point.

"Here is a story my mother told me . . . The beginning
is hers, the ending, mine" (206). By attributing the beginning to the mother, the author acknowledges her link to her; by adding a triumphant end of her own, she also asserts a separation from her. The author has not only come to voice, but also come to selfhood.

As Morante contends, "articulation creates selfhood" (78); it is in telling the stories of herself, her female relatives, that Kingston captures the coming into being of her own identity. "It is through words--through finding them, forming them, saying them aloud, in public--that Kingston reaches selfhood" (Juhasz 236). Her articulate voice and her literary eloquence have not only generated her poetic invention, but also created her fulfilling selfhood.
Chapter II

From the Mythical to the Concrete:

A Reading of China Men

I'm leaving it to my readers to figure out how the myths and the modern stories connect. (Pfaff, "Talk" 25)

When reviewing Kingston's first two books, Clara Park refers to them as "an unknown universe, and it is not obvious where to enter it" (589). Not only is its subject matter new, its structure is also unique, incorporating separate stories into one whole, weaving fact and fiction, history and myth, memory and imagination into a "remarkably complicated tapestry, deftly intertwining continents, cultures, centuries" (Kauffman 205). But this "unknown" universe will become known once one finds a way to enter it, although one may not find a proper entrance until one has already wandered about in it.

The unfamiliar structure and the apparent lack of order --both spatial and temporal--of Kingston's writing have been received differently. There are reviewers who praised her techniques as brilliant in that "the reader participates in the confusion and frustration which marked her own efforts of comprehension" (Kauffman 205), critics who creatively
constructed unities of her strangely structured books. But there are also reviewers who "faulted [China Men's] unconnected interludes of myth and history" (Currier 240). The latter may have been a little too hasty in their reading and a little too incautious in their conclusions.

Talking about her writing of China Men, Kingston makes it clear that she is intentionally "leaving it to [her] readers to figure out how the myths and the modern stories connect" (Pfaff "Talk" 25). It is therefore up to the reader to work out connections between the myths and the stories, the episodes and the interludes, with whatever clues he or she may acquire from the text. "Assuming that a work makes sense and has significance," Dasenbrock maintains, "the reader will try to find that sense and significance even when they are not readily apparent" (14). So assuming that the stories and interludes of China Men are connected, a reader should try to find out connections between them through active and creative reading, even though they may seem unconnected. Such a reading constitutes a dynamic process of exploration and discovery, and is always the way to enter into the meaningfulness of any "unknown universe."

The ingenious structure of China Men makes it appear as a mere collection of stories of Kingston's father and forefathers (or other kindred). Each story is separated from the others, on the one hand, by a title cover with four Chinese characters, "The Gold Mountain Heroes," in the form
of a traditional Chinese signet; on the other, by its predominant character(s). Furthermore, attached to each story are one or two brief interludes of myth, history, or other accounts which seem to have no necessary connection with the stories. Yet however loosely these individual parts may seem to be linked together, there runs behind these seemingly "unconnected" stories and interludes a connecting thread.

Every part of the book, large or small, is organically connected with every other and with the whole. The opening of the book is a passage entitled "On Discovery," which tells about Tang Ao's adventure in the "Women's Land." "Once upon a time," it begins, "a man named Tang Ao, looking for the Gold Mountain, crossed an ocean, and came upon the Land of Women . . ." The man was captured and subjected to a series of womanizing acts: ears jabbed, feet bound, each facial hair plucked off and face powdered white . . . It was a strange place where women take charge. Though not the Gold Mountain he was looking for, it was nevertheless not a bad place: "In the Women's Land there are no taxes and no wars" (3-5).

Right after "On Discovery" and before the main story is another brief passage, "On Fathers": "Waiting at the gate for our father to come home from work, my brothers and sisters and I saw a man come hastening around the corner. Father! . . . 'But I'm not your father, you've made a mistake.'" Looking closely, they saw that "he probably was
not." They watched the father-like stranger walk away. "A moment later," the passage ends, our own father came . . . We ran again to meet him" (6-7).

"On Discovery" should not be taken simply as a borrowing from a Chinese classical novel, to add color and mystery to the writing, to catch the attention and arouse the interest of the reader. All this it certainly does, but greater significance lies beyond. It is an allusion to the American dream. In fact, the term "Gold Mountain" itself is a Chinese version of the American dream. The stories to follow all revolve around it: how Chinese immigrants created an America—Gold Mountain—at home, out of hearsay, report, and desire; how they crossed the ocean to pursue their Gold Mountain dreams; how their dreams were met by the American reality; and how they coped and survived in America. China Men is, in a sense, a saga of the men in pursuit of these dreams.

Besides, Tang Ao's experience in the Women's Land also foreshadows the emasculation and humiliation that the Chinese immigrant males are going to suffer. As Linda Sledge argues, "Footbinding thus becomes a symbol for the immigrant male's 'emasculature,' his loss of power and position after his emigration to America" (8). With their displacement from their native culture, the China Men lose the power and position granted to them by the long feudal traditions of Chinese society. In the new land, they have to fight for
their power and right, have to create new models of adopt and new ways of living.

"On Fathers" reveals a parallel theme of the book. Waiting for the father at the gate and mistaking another man for him may be taken as a parable of looking for the father's identity. It shows the children's confusion about the father's identity and their desire to find it out, to place the father both in China and in America. Hence the book traces the family history to look for its roots in China and claim its position in America.

Thus "On Discovery" and "On Fathers" together may serve as a prologue to the book. It not only indicates artfully the course of action along which the book will develop, its end also forms a good linkup with the following story and naturally leads from the visionary "Women's Land" up to the tangible family history.

With the last sentence of the prologue, "We ran again to meet him [Father]," the reader is led to meet the father. The main stories of Kingston's father-book unfold, first with "The Father from China," and then through careful chronicles from "The Great Grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains," "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains," to "The Making of More Americans," and come full circle with "The American Father." Despite the factual and historical basis upon which this circle is built, it cannot be a mere compilation of fact, a simple narration of history. The
prologue has already set the tone for the whole book: fantasy commingles with reality, myth with history.

As indicated above, China Men presents mainly a series of fictionalized biographies of the author's male ancestors. The first of the series, "The Father From China," explores the father's life in China and relates why and how he came to America. But this is a father the author herself never knew, since it is a father of the past over which he has kept an unfathomable silence. This has whetted all the more the author's curiosity for the father's past, his Chinese past, and started off her quest for understanding the father's real identity, which forms an integral part of Kingston's quest for her own identity.

At the very beginning of "The Father from China" is an emotional apostrophe addressed to the father:

Father, I have seen you lighthearted. . . .
But usually you did not play. You were angry. You scared us. . . .
Worse than the swearing and the nightly screams were your silences when you punished us by not talking . . .
You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China.
. . . Do you mean to give us a chance at being real Americans by forgetting the Chinese past? . . .
I want to be able to rely on you, who inked each piece of our own laundry with the word Center, to find out how we landed in a country where we are eccentric people . . . (11-15)

Here we meet the same inquisitive child in The Woman Warrior, who thought "insane people were the ones who couldn't explain themselves" and had a lot of things to figure out (186). She wanted to be the sane one, to be able to explain herself and
her family. From the word Center (which stands for China) she sensed the inseverable tie of the father with China, even though his thick silence submerged his Chinese past. So out of the father's frustrating silence comes the daughter's constructive effort: "I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories. . . . 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" (15).

The author then constructs the father's life story through her mother's talk-stories, through supposition and imagination. From the father's birth and childhood, to his experience of passing the Imperial Examination and becoming a village teacher, step by step she builds up the father's past, uncovers the father from China.

She traced the father's Chinese past to his home village, where so much hearsay and report about America, coupled with the villagers' hungry need and desire, created a heaven on earth in their minds: "'America--a peaceful country, a free country.' America. The Gold Mountain. The Beautiful Nation." Men sat late talking stories about the Gold Mountain. "The hungrier the family got, the bigger the stories, the more real the meat and the gold." And they "did not need to sleep in order to have dreams" (42-43). It was these Gold Mountain dreams that drew the father to America. "He wanted to taste the rain fish; he wanted to pocket some
gold. He wanted to say good bye to the students. 'You'll have to find a new teacher; I'm going to the Gold Mountain'" (45).

Then five different versions tell how the father crossed the ocean and came to America, either as an illegal or a legal father. The author is "very proud of" such renderings (Pfaff, "Talk" 25). And well she might be. Whether the father came in one way or another is not an important issue here; what counts is that these are the possible alternatives any father would have come by. The more significant truth is that they embody not only one father's past, but many fathers' pasts; they reveal the very survival techniques the China Men developed over a hundred years. It is history, one true page of Chinese immigrant history.

After all, the father from China "had passed the American examination; he has won America. . . . This legal father then worked his way across the continent to New York, the center of America" (60), where he began his real courting of the American dream.

He and three Chinese partners set up a laundry. They worked hard till midnight and then made the ironing tables into beds. Through industrious efforts, they seemed to have had the first sweet taste of the American dream. He wore a gold watch; he smoked Lucky Strikes; he bought a two-hundred dollar suit, "the most expensive suit he could find" and made himself look "like Fred Astaire" (63). He even gave himself
an American name, Edison, after the "cunning, resourceful, successful inventor in the movie *Young Tom Edison*. Others bought a Kodak, a car, a motorcycle; one even took flying lessons and invited each of his friends in a rented aeroplane to come up into the sky. At weekends they went to American movies; they went to tearooms and danced with as many different blondes as they pleased; they rode to Coney island to swim and take pictures . . . They were "appropriating bits of American popular culture" to become Americans (Rabinowitz 183). The American dream seemed promising for the father: "How good life was. He was young, and was in New York with three friends who sang at their work" (61).

When his wife wrote to him that their children had died and he ought to come home right now, "he would not end his American life but show her how to live one" (67). He sent her money for a western education, and prepared to send for her to the United States as soon as she got her degree. The father finally had his wife come to live an American life together with him, only to find one day that he was betrayed by his three partners: "They had ganged up on him and swindled him out of his share of the laundry." Thus ends the story of "The Father from China." He and his wife had to leave; they went to start a new life in California, "which some say is the real Gold Mountain anyway" (73).

The author abruptly stops the father's story, leaving some suspense for the reader. We wonder what they would find
the "real Gold Mountain" to be? What would become of them once they came to the "real Gold Mountain"? Instead of getting to these questions, a tale entitled "The Ghostmate" is inserted here, which produces such a surreal atmosphere that one feels that whatever might become of the father after he moved to the "real Gold Mountain," his life would be anything but easy as a Gold Mountain dream. In addition, "The Ghostmate" conveys a feeling of homesickness, a magic pull from the "hero's home" which is to follow every Gold Mountain hero of the book, adding a tragic bite to this "song of exile."

"The Ghostmate" tells how a young man, failing his Imperial Examinations, is tempted by a beautiful woman on his way home. Caught in a sudden thunder shower, "the young man hurries along, hoping for a shrine to use as shelter. . . . a big house appears in the woods, and simultaneously the smell of a strong flower fills his head . . . a gold, silver, and pink mist covers the house." The lady who lives there alone turns out to be "the most beautiful woman he has ever seen." "He follows her on a long path to the inner door . . . She turns one corner after another until he wonders if he can find his way out alone." She speaks in a singing voice; she serves him expensive meals. "He feeds like an aristocrat." He ought to "stay only until the rain stops, only until the end of a slow night." But the woman feeds him more foods he has never eaten before, shows him more things
he has only known in stories. He stays on and on until one day he feels an irresistible pull to leave and manages to break away from her charm.

"On the road, breathing dizzies him. The sky looks as big as it is . . . Its immensity dazzles him--blue without end." His appearance startles the townspeople; they run. Dogs slink from him. He wanders like a ghost until a villager from his former life grabs him, offers to see him home. "The villager puts his arms around the young man. The familiar is so comforting that he sobs." But midway home, the young man stops. "Marionette strings pull him into the tall grass. He remembers a beautiful lady he met in a previous incarnation or a dream last night." He comes involuntarily to where the home had been and only to find a grave, a noblewoman's grave, who had been dead for centuries. "Fear burns along the young man's spine, and he runs from the lonely spot where no paths meander, no house looms, no peacocks or dogs stalk among the lilac trees," which had somehow been there before. The young man seems to have traveled in a strange dreamland, and now the dream ends, he is brought back to the real life. He returns to his family. At the end, the author comments, "The hero's home has its own magic. Fancy lovers never last" (74-81).

While on first reading this tale may seem unconnected either with the preceding or the following stories, it sets one thinking. The language, with all its simplicity and
clarity, carries something elusive yet haunting. We are compelled to catch that something, to make the connection.

If "On Discovery" can be taken as an allusion to the American dream, "The Ghostmate" can be treated in the same light. "On Discovery," the American dream discovered—the father, pursuing this dream, came to America. Despite the various hardships he encountered, he once seemed well on his way to realizing the dream, but all of a sudden he found himself betrayed by his friends and by his promising dream. "The Ghostmate," the American dream lost.

In the narration of the first part, before the father and the other men of the family started for America, there is a scene of the men talking about the Gold Mountain: "Grandmother brought the gold that Great Great Grandfather, Great Grandfather, Grandfather, and the uncles had earned. . . . The family took turns hefting the gold, which was heavier than it looked; its density was a miracle in the hand. . . . Grandmother boiled gold and they drank the gold water for strength. Gold blood ran in their veins. How could they not go to the Gold Mountain again, which belonged to them, which they had invented and discovered?" (43).

The gold, in the eyes of the China Men, was the incarnation of the Gold Mountain dream. But how had the forefathers earned the gold? How was it that the Gold Mountain belonged to them? Starting with the second part, the author traces the tracks of forefathers in America,
explores their experiences of building America, so as to rightly position her father, therefore herself, and to better understand her father's identity, therefore her own.

In search of great grandfathers, the author went to Hawaii, where she "stood alongside the highway at the edge of the sugarcane and listened for the voices of the great grandfathers." She went to the island called "Chinaman Hat." Though shocked to hear it so named, for she only encountered that slurred-together word in taunts from racists, she nevertheless realizes, "It's a tribute to the pioneers to have a living island named after their work hat" (88-90).

Upon the land of her Chinese American pioneers, the author writes: "I have heard the land sing, I have seen the bright blue streaks of spirits whisking through the air. I again search for my American ancestors by listening in the cane" (90). And she heard their voices, she heard their struggle to have a voice. She vividly captures the bitterness and poignancy of their struggle in her writing.

She tells how Great Grandfather Bak Goong and his brother came to Hawaii to make their fortunes planting sugarcane. Bak Goong was affected by the sweet taste of the sugarcane and tempted by the sweet talk of the agent from the Royal Hawaiian Agricultural Society. The two great grandfathers and other China Men came riding on hopes and promises, "free passage, free food, free clothing, and housing," "six dollars' advance," "instant raise" . . . What is more, the
Sandalwood Mountains were very close to the Gold Mountain . . . But once in Hawaii, they found "no farm, no sugarcane ready to tend. It was their job to hack a farm out of the wilderness, which they were to level from the ocean to the mountain" (98). They found themselves in "some kind of a labor camp" (102). They "chopped, hacked, and sawed," reclaiming the land. They toiled and moiled, building sugarcane plantations out of the wild jungles. They endured all the physical hardships. But they could not put up with the prohibitions the "white demons" forced on them that they should not talk during work. "It wasn't right that Bak Goong had to save his talking until after work when stories would have made the work easier" (114).

Hard labor and no talking reduced Bak Goong to illness. He was left behind among the sick. In his fever he yearned so hard for his family that he felt he appeared in China. He tried to talk to his wife, "but his tongue was heavy and his throat blocked. He awoke certain that he had to cure himself by talking whenever he pleased." He told the sick men: "I have diagnosed our illness. It is a congestion from not talking. What we have to do is to talk" (115).

That evening he talked an apt story to the silenced men about a secret-burdened king, how that secret grew larger and larger inside his chest and mouth until one day he could not hold it inside himself any longer . . . The talk-story gave the men back their voices:
The next day the men plowed, working purposefully, but they dug a circle instead of straight furrows. They dug a wide hole. They threw down their tools and flopped on the ground with their faces over the edge of the hole and their legs like wheel spokes.

"Hello down there in China!" they shouted. "Hello, Mother." "Hello, my heart and liver [sweetheart]."

"I miss you." "What are you doing right now?" "Happy birthday. Happy birthday for last year too."

... They had dug an ear into the world, and were telling the earth their secrets.


Talked out, they buried their words, planted them.

... (117-118)

The men were so united, like the spokes of a wheel, that the centripetal force was the magic pull from home. They made such a noise, they were so riled up, that the white demons hid themselves instead of charging upon the shouting men for breaking rules. By "talking out," the China Men asserted their rights to voice, to identity: they were human beings, not machines that could be shut off. They had feelings, needs... "From the day of the shout party, Bak Goong talked and sang at his work, and did not get sent to the punishment fields" (118).

Bak Goong made such talking a custom. "We made it up. We can make up customs because we're the founding ancestors of this place." Their survival technique and fighting tactics enabled them to invent new customs, just as the Chinese-American experience of the author enabled her to invent a new genre to tell Chinese-American myths.
Bak Goong and his fellow China Men not only talked out, they also planted their words, their identity, which would grow and be passed down to later generations. Maybe that is why the author tried to search for her American ancestors "by listening in the cane." She must have heard Bak Goong's voice that "we're the founding ancestors of this place." We seem to have heard it too, when we have followed the author to the ancestral place of China Men. We have come to see that Chinaman Hat Island is not only a tribute in name to the pioneers, but also a living witness of China Men's pioneering contribution, a living witness of the unfair treatment they suffered, and the ingenious technique of survival they invented.

This single section is as finely designed as the whole. At the beginning the narrator went to the sugarcane field to listen for the voices of great grandfathers; at the end the voices are heard, not only by the author, but by the reader as well. And the narrative in between has convincingly and consistently worked toward this result.

What follows are two mythical tales, "On Mortality" and "On Mortality Again." They both deal with gaining immortality for the human race. But what predominates the two tales is the acute description of enforced silence and the inevitable breaking of that silence. This motif not only bears strong connection to the previous story, in which breaking the enforced silence forms a dramatic climax; but
it also intensifies the poignancy of China Men's tender feelings for their homes and the dehumanizing experience they suffered.

The first tale, "On Mortality," lends itself more aptly to the story of Bak Goong. It tells about the Chinese legendary figure Tu Tzu-chun, who was instructed by a Taoist monk to help him gain immortality for the human race by going through a series of ordeals in illusion. "All that you'll see and feel will be illusions," instructed the Taoist. "No matter what happens, don't speak; don't scream." "How easy," Tu thought and without hesitation swallowed the pills that would produce the illusions (120). He descended into nine hells; he saw horrible scenes; he witnessed his wife being tortured, cut into pieces, her bones cracked; he walked over mountains of knives, forests of swords, his head chopped off . . . He kept reminding himself, illusion, illusion, it's only illusion. At last he was reborn a deaf-mute female named Tu, married to a man named Lu, who at first thought she did not need to talk to be a good wife. But years later, he was tired of Tu's dumbness:

"You're just stubborn," he said, and lifted their child by the feet. "Talk, or I'll dash its head against the rocks." The poor mother held her hand to her mouth. Lu swung the child, broke its head against the wall.

Tu shouted, "Oh! Oh!" . . . (121)

Tu had broken his silence and was back with the Taoist, who said to him, "You overcame joy and sorrow, anger, fear, and evil desire, but not love," and went on his way. This tale
adds a more biting touch to the scene in which Bak Goong and other China Men broke the imposed silence and shouted their love and longings into the earth.

After the two brief interludes the author proceeds to "The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains." She now searches for her American ancestors from the railroads, by making out her grandfather's railroad message. "Grandfather left a railroad for his message: We had to go somewhere difficult. Ride a train. Go somewhere important" (126). He himself had been to somewhere difficult; he went to the Sierras, where workingmen were badly needed to do all the labor of building a new country.

Ah Goong felled redwood which was thick enough to divide into three or four beams; he blew up stumps with gunpowder. He and his fellow China Men slogged away, tunneling through rocky mountains with picks, axes, and crude explosives to band America. There were men blown up by blasting, men falling down to the bottom of the valley from their dangling baskets. Survivors threw piles of rocks and branches to cover bodies from sight. "At night Ah Goong woke up falling, though he slept on the ground, and heard other men call out in their sleep. No warm women tweaked their ears and hugged them" (132). Their life was lonely, without love, without warmth. Ah Goong told Chinese stories to calm his yearning for home.

As spring turned into summer, and he lay under that sky, he saw the order in the stars. He recognized
constellations from China. There—not a cloud but the Silver River, and there, on either side of it—Altair and Vega, the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy, far and far apart. He felt his heart breaking of loneliness at so much blue space between star and star. The railroad he was building would never lead him to his family . . .

Pretending a little girl was listening, he told the story about the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy. (129)

When the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy visited earth, they met each other, fell in love, and married. When they returned to the sky, they were still so engrossed in each other that they neglected their work. The Queen of the Sky separated them by scratching a river between them with her silver hairpin—"the river a galaxy in width." The lovers suffered, and devoted their time to their work. The King of the Sky took pity on them and ordered the magpies to form a bridge across the Silver River once each year to allow them to meet. On the seventh day of the seventh month of the Chinese lunar year, the lovers meet for one night. On their parting, the Spinning Girl cries the heavy summer rains (129-130).

This beautiful Chinese fairy tale vividly sets off Ah Goong's loneliness for being so far away from home. Every night he located the two stars and gauged how much closer they had come since the night before. "The Spinning Girl and the Cowboy met and parted six times before the railroad was finished" (130); whereas the hard-working China Men could not meet their loved ones even once in the six years.

The earth-changing China Men displayed indomitable human
spirit in face of many dangers and hardships. They were so resilient that they would even make fun out of their hard and bitter life. When dangling over valleys in a basket, Ah Goong would piss overboard and shouted, "I'm a waterfall." Once dangling in the sun above a new valley, "sexual desire clutched him so hard he bent over in the basket. He curled up, overcome by beauty and fear, which shot to his penis. . . . Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space," shouting, "I am fucking the world." He grew a habit: "whenever he was lowered in the basket, his blood rushed to his penis, and he fucked the world" (133). Instead of submitting to the emasculation and enslavement from the white demons, the China Men were asserting their masculinity and humanity. Like the China Men of the Sandalwood Mountains who organized the "shout party" in defiance of the enforced silence, the railroad China Men went on strike for equal treatment. If China Men were, as suggested by the opening passage on Tang Ao's adventure in the Women's Land, "emasculated" because of their loss of power and the subjection to the dominance of the white; they fought back against that emasculation by asserting their right and power, by asserting themselves as pioneering heroes rather than slaves. Once when artists climbed the mountains to draw the China Men for newspapers,

The men posed bare-chested, their fists clenched, showing off their arms and backs. The artists sketched them as perfect young gods reclining against rocks, wise expressions on their handsome noble-nosed faces, long
torsos with lean stomachs, a strong arm extended over a bent knee, long fingers holding a pipe, a rope of hair over a wide shoulder. . . . (141-142)

Ah Goong felt these "brown muscular railroad men were beautiful," and was proud that he was one of them, one of the "ten thousand heroes" (142).

"China Men banded the nation North and South, East and West, with crisscrossing steel. They were the binding and building ancestors of this place" (146). At the completion of the transcontinental railroad, the "white demon officials" gave speeches: "The Greatest Feat of the Nineteenth Century." "The Greatest Feat in the History of Mankind." "Only Americans could have done it." So Ah Goong "was an American for having built the railroad," the author thus concludes (145). Maybe this is also part of Grandfather's railroad message. Yet by the time the railroad was completed, Ah Goong had to hide, had to dodge lynch mobs. He could not go anywhere "important," because the roundup and exclusion of Chinese had begun.

Ah Goong, good at hiding, disappearing, survived the exclusion. His presence at the San Francisco Earthquake and Fire of 1906, out of which every China Man was reborn a citizen; the railroad he built out of sweat and blood, were "his accomplishments as an American ancestor, a holding and homing ancestor of this place" (150-151).

That China Men with their remarkable and undeniable contribution to the building of America were awarded such
unfair treatment makes the author so indignant that she stops to tell us of discriminatory legislation against the Chinese in America. Starting from the first years of Chinese ancestors being Driven Out till the present, eight pages of pure history appear in front of the reader. This is the interlude entitled "The Laws."

Rather than being unconnected, this interlude of history is integrally connected with the main stories and enforces their effect. It speaks with authority the truth of this unpleasant past. After the convincing account of China Men's heroic deeds of building America, it denounces, with force and anger, the abuse and discrimination awarded to China Men.

"The anger of China Men causes some seams, some scars, in its narrative," observes John Leonard in his review of China Men. The author's "indignation is a hook in her throat; she is properly outraged at the blue-eyed "white demons"; the past wasn't pretty; we miss, for a beat, her brilliant music. But the anger is in the service of amplitude" (Gunton 19: 249). And the interlude of the U.S. discriminatory history is in the service of amplitude as well. Set at the center of the accounts of the remarkable heroism and undeniable contributions of China Men in building America, this pure history speaks louder than polemics. If the anger causes "some seams and scars" in the narrative of China Men, so much the better for the author and her writing. We can see and feel, through these seams and scars, other
seams and scars in the hearts of China Men. This power and poignancy need not be viewed as a fault in her writing. Hong Kingston is, as predicted in The Woman Warrior, an avenger "reporting crimes."

Following "The Laws" is another interlude "Alaska China Men," which supplements the pure history with examples from diaries of Alaskan settlers and tells about the survivor of the Driving Out, China Joe. "The only China Man not set adrift was China Joe," who was a baker and "had saved the miners in the Cassiar District from starvation and bad winters by giving bread away"; or who owned a laundry and a big garden and "had provided vegetables during the bad winters. As French Pete was probably the name of more than one man, as were Dutch John and Missouri Frank and Arkansas Jim . . . perhaps any China Man was a China Joe" (162). China Joe is any Gold Mountain hero who survived and stayed.

The fourth part, "The Making of More Americans," presents a collection of miscellaneous experiences of the author's other relatives. They claimed America in various ways, they made a living by various means, they either stayed or left for various reasons.

For all that had happened in the past, the family has settled in America; the China Men have established themselves in America. They are American citizens. They are Chinese Americans.

Subsequent to "The Making of More Americans" are two
interludes: "The Wild Man of the Green Swamp," and "The Adventure of Lo Bun Sun." The first is a newspaper story, adding another example from outside the family to the making of more Americans. Only this is a different example, an example of failure rather than making. It seems to indicate that not all Chinese immigrants are Gold Mountain heroes.

"The Adventure of Lo Bun Sun" may evoke Defoe's Robinson Crusoe for an English reader, as some other mythical tales would evoke Chinese myths and classics for a bilingual reader. It is "a book from China" which the mother read to the children. As Isobel Grundy notes, "Lo Bun Sun has a complex and enigmatic role to play in this complex and enigmatic book" (123); this interlude has its own function in the whole dynamic system of the book. It comes after the full, vivid account of China Men's hard physical labor and the great material achievement they made in America: Hacking away at wild jungles, they farmed sugarcane fields in Hawaii; chipping at granite rocks and dynamiting tunnels through rocky mountains, they built the transcontinental railroad; they mined gold in Alaska, they opened laundries and restaurants in New York or California . . . They survived various hardships and great jeopardy. They also brought and developed their cultural traditions. They made civilization with their own hands in the Gold Mountain, as Lo Bun Sun did on the deserted island. Their American dreams, if realized, were realized through the industrious efforts and unremitting
struggles of enduring spirits.

The story of Lo Bun Sun comes here as a summary of those Gold Mountain heroes' struggle and contribution. It is a eulogy of labor, a song of survival.

Having thus traced the family saga and the history of China Men, the author comes round to her father, whose story is left unfinished, in the fifth part entitled "The American Father." This is a father she knows and remembers well from childhood: the silent father. The story begins with memories of "father places." As a child, the author tried to understand the silent father by the places he commanded. He had "the power of going places where nobody else went, and making places belong to him." As the silent father is difficult to approach, so the "father places" are off limits to the children. The child-narrator was eager to explore every "father place": One was a dirt cellar with a bottomless well—"a hole full of shining, bulging, black water." To the child, it was "alive, like an eye, deep and alive." It was "the opening to the inside of the world . . . the black sparkling eye of the planet. The well must lead to the other side of the world," to China (238-239). What a mysterious place. What a mysterious father.

The best of the father places was the gambling house which she "did not have to win by cunning," he showed her himself. He worked there illegally to support the family. But one day during World War II, he came home with his abacus
and other things. "A dismal time began for him."

He became a disheartened man. He was always home. He sat in his chair and stared, or he sat on the floor and stared. He stopped showing the boys the few kung fu moves he knew. He suddenly turned angry and quiet. For a few days he walked up and down on the sidewalk in front businesses and did not bring himself to enter. He walked right past them in his beautiful clothes and acted very busy, as if having an important other place to go to for a job interview. (247)

"The American Father" is a story of unemployment and depression, to which the father fell victim. He seemed to have lost his feelings. He sat drinking whiskey. He no longer bought new clothes. He dozed and woke with a jerk or a scream. He screamed in his sleep. He was getting skinnier. . . . We seem to have come back to the beginning, to the angry, silent father to whom the author addressed the apostrophe. Only now, having come a long way from "The Father From China" to "The American Father," we seem to discover what makes him scream, why he says few words or nothing at all.

Somehow the father found himself; maybe it was the children's energy--their running wild--that "broke BaBa loose from his chair." He managed to buy a laundry and had a "Grand Opening." "BaBa's liveliness returned. . . . So my father at last owned his own house and his business in America. He bought chicks and squabs, built a chicken run, a pigeon coop, and turkey pen; he dug a duck pond . . . He told a funny story . . . He talked . . . he sang . . . he
planted many kinds of gourds, peas, beans, melons, and cabbages . . . peaches, apricots, plums of many varieties—trees that took years to fruit" (254-255).

This is the end of "The American Father," a meaningful and fruitful end. "Nearly a half century after The Father from China left one house, one family, and one career in China, The American Father attained their equivalents in America" (Currier 240). The father had started a new life, an industrious life, a fruitful life. This life would bear its fruits, year after year; this family would prosper, generation after generation.

Kingston declares that what she is doing in China Men is "claiming America."

That seems to be the common strain that runs through all the characters. In story after story Chinese American people are claiming America, which goes all the way from one character saying that a Chinese explorer found this place before Leif Ericsson did to another one buying a house here. Buying that house is a way of saying that America--and not China--is his country." (Pfaff, "Talk" 1)

From the great grandfathers and grandfathers building and banding America, to the father buying his own house and establishing his own business, planting "trees that take years to fruit," these China Men have made America their country; they have earned their right to belong.

However, the American father and his new life cannot yet fully explain his identity; the accomplishments of their "binding and building ancestors" of this place are not enough
to locate the rightful position of the father. The author's quest for the real identity of the father culminates in the interlude "The Li Sao: An Elegy," which comes after "The American Father."

This is a father's story. It tells the epic elegy Li Sao, in which Ch'u Yuan, "China's earliest known poet, a Homer," told how he wandered in exile. "'All Chinese know this story,' says my father; if you are an authentic Chinese, you know the language and the stories without being taught . . ." (256). So with this story, the author discovers, or rather proves, her father's double identity: the American Father as an authentic Chinese.

This story traces their Chinese roots, reminds them of their Chineseness. The story is also a song of exile, as the story of Lo Bun Sun is the song of labor and survival. And the whole book is a song of exile, of labor, of survival --an epic for her father and forefathers, for all China Men.

China Men is thus far brought full circle from "The Father From China" to the "The American Father." The stories in between trace the family history to the forefathers, which help explain how The Father from China became The American Father.

However the book is not ended here. Since China Men forms a companion volume to The Woman Warrior, which is generally regarded as an autobiography, the author's own generation is yet to be represented in "The Brother In
Vietnam."

"The Brother in Vietnam," though focusing on the brother, represents the life and experience of the younger generation of Chinese Americans. There were no Gold Mountain adventures, no strenuous labor of building America, no hard struggle for survival in the foreign land. The author's memory seems to be a memory of wars: the movies she remembered seeing were war movies; people of draft age worked out schemes to dodge the draft so as to avoid going to war; her father got drafted and flunked by the doctor for being too skinny; her parents stood on ladders to cover windows with blackout curtains for World War II; her cousins went to war in Europe; she and other kids went to a movie "where the attendants gave each kid a free picture of an atomic bomb explosion . . . a souvenir to celebrate the bombing of Japan." The Korean War. The Vietnam War. "'The War,' I wrote in a composition, which the teacher corrected, 'Which war?' There was more than one. . . . The government said that the Viet Cong weapons came from China. We ought to bomb China into the Stone Age, the generals said. Soon the war would be Chinese Americans against Chinese. And my brothers old enough to be drafted" (276-277).

"Freedom from the draft was the reason for leaving China in the first place. The Gold Mountain does not make war, is not invaded, and has no draft" (269). But the Gold Mountain was involved in more than one war; and her brothers were
drafted. Soldiers were sent to Vietnam. And the rumor went that "'Orientals' belonged over there fighting among their own kind" (277). What a big irony of the Gold Mountain dream.

The brother enlisted in the Navy, because "on the ocean, he would not have his heart broken at the sight of Vietnam grandmothers and babies." He also reasoned that "in a country that operates on a war economy, there isn't much difference being in the navy and being a civilian... Everything was connected with everything else and to war... we couldn't live day-to-day American lives without adding to the war... He resolved that in the Navy he would follow orders up to a point short of a direct kill. He would not shoot a human being; he would not press the last button that dropped the bomb. But he would ride the ship that brought the bombs, which his taxes had already paid for. ... he would be a Pacifist in the Navy rather than in jail, no more or less guilty than the ordinary stay-at-home citizen of the war economy" (284-285).

The brother claims America by serving in the U.S. Navy, by getting through the security check with "Q Clearance." "The government was certifying that the family was really American, not precariously American but super American, extraordinarily secure--Q Clearance Americans." The brother has gotten "something out of the Navy... something good out of the Vietnam war"--"Q Clearance," "Secret Security,"
for himself and his family as well (298-299). "He had survived the Vietnam war. He had not gotten killed, and he had not killed anyone (304).

All China Men are survivors; they survive hardship and adversity; they survive Exclusion and Driving Out; they survive war. They represent the triumph of the indomitable human spirit and imperishable human strength. China Men is a celebration of that strength, a tribute to that spirit.

Appended to "The Brother in Vietnam" is a brief account of "The Hundred-Year-Old Man." At his one-hundred-and-sixth birthday party in 1969, he told the guests how he came to Hawaii in 1885 on the S.S. Coptic, bringing with him plants and animals from China, dividing his ration of fresh water with them.

On this one-hundred-and-sixth birthday, the United States was still fighting in Vietnam, and people asked him how to stop the war. "Let everybody out of the army," he said.

"In one hundred and six years, what has given you the most joy?" the reporters asked.
He thought it over. He said, "What I like best is to work in a cane field when the young green plants are just growing up." (306)

The unquenchable passion for life, the intrinsic love for work, add a finishing touch to the innate quality for survival in China Men. China Men presents "a portrait of men of diverse generations and experiences" (Kim 212), each as a hero who lays claim on America for Chinese Americans in his own way.

The passage that winds up the whole book is entitled "On
Listening." The Woman Warrior ends with "A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe," which is "high and clear," and "translated well." China Men ends with listening, with a group of young Chinese Americans gathered listening to a Filipino scholar tell about the Chinese who came to the Philippines to look for the Gold Mountain. The story was confusing, the audience chipped in with other hearsay, adding more confusion to what really happened. The Filipino man never got to what really happened in the end, for "he went on to something else." "Good," the author concludes, "Now I could watch the young men who listen" (308). She listened. She watched. She could no longer contain the silence. She wrote. No more lies. No more confusions. No more misrepresentations or misunderstandings. Through her writing, Kingston has given voice to China Men, the Gold Mountain heroes, to their anger and protest, to their hard labor and their remarkable contributions, to their justifiable claim on America. By doing so, perhaps she will also inspire more voices out of "the young men who listen," voices also "high and clear," also "translated well."

"China Men attempts to recover history from deceits and lies by telling that story from a Chinese American point of view," contends Elaine Kim in Asian American Literature (211). It extends far beyond history. Nourished by the rich literary tradition of China, by immigrants' talk-stories, and by the flourishing American literature, Kingston has combined
the mythical and the concrete, recasting them into a fascinating, convincing epic.

It is all connected—from the mythical Gold Mountain the early immigrants invented to the concrete reality of their Gold Mountain adventures; from the mythical tales and legends to the concrete legal documents discriminatory against China Men; everything is connected with everything else. Although each story can be read separately from the others, the link between individual stories helps achieve a more profound truth and more historical significance for the book as a whole. The interludes add more beauty and poignancy to the stories. "[The] straight myth and the straight history," observes Mary Gordon in her review of China Men, "are far less compelling than the mixture she creates in the stories of her own ancestors" (24). But without the straight myth and history, the effect of the stories would not be the same. Stripped of the interludes, the stories would not be as compelling and convincing, as poignant and significant.
Chapter III
From Me to I

The Fight of Tripmaster Monkey

In my new book, the Monkey who took the Journey to the West keeps going and arrives in America.
("Chinese Garland" 42)

"I have told all my childhood stories that I want to tell," says Kingston in an interview shortly after the publication of China Men, "and I don't have any more stories accumulated. . . . I feel like I am looking out over an ocean. It's a blank ocean, and the sky is empty too. I'm watching to see what comes up over the horizon . . . And I'm willing to wait a long time" (Pfaff, "Talk" 25). Now over that horizon comes the Tripmaster Monkey, an anti-racist and anti-stereotypic angry hero, an extraordinary creation of bite and verve, a book which makes the waiting all the more worthwhile.

Like its predecessors, Tripmaster Monkey is also about being a Chinese American. The Woman Warrior, as Juhasz argues, "is about trying to be an American, when you are the child of Chinese immigrants; trying to be a woman, when you have been taught that men are all that matter; trying to be
a writer, when you have been afraid to speak out loud at all" (231). *China Men* is about being "the binding and building ancestors" (146) of America, when you are awarded no recognition but exclusion and discrimination; about being *China Men* in a historical context, when deceit and ignorance distort that history. *Tripmaster Monkey* is about being a present-day China Man, when your American education makes you unfit in Chinatown and your ethnic background makes your Americanness unrecognizable in the predominant white world; about being a Chinese American in its cultural entirety, when you are trying to create a Chinese American culture that incorporates your dual cultural heritage.

Our present-day China Man, Wittman Ah Sing, the self-professed "present-day incarnation of the King of Monkeys" (33), finds himself in a difficult position. On the one hand, "people who have gone to college--people their age with their at-tee-tood . . . have no place. You don't easily come home, come back to Chinatown, where they give you stink-eye and call you a saang-hsu lo, a whisker-growing man, Beatnik" (10-11). "In Sacramento," his hometown, Wittman has to admit, "I don't belong" (12). On the other hand, despite his fifth generation American birth, despite his American "kiddiehood" marked by Mickey Mouse and the Wizard of Oz, despite his American education at Berkeley, Wittman's Americanness goes unrecognized because of his face and race. His identity is often diminished, intentionally or
incidentally, by white Americans. This enrages our monkey hero. He's got to fight it. "And don't ask 'Where do you come from?' I deign to retort, 'Sacramento,' or 'Hanford,' or 'Bakersfield,'... Don't ask: 'How long have you been in the country?'... Don't ask: 'How long have you been in the country?'..." (317). Wittman vehemently fights against the racial slur that befalls China Men, from which even the Brother in Vietnam, who served in the U.S. Navy with "Q Clearance" and "Secret Security," cannot escape. His Company Commander would stop in front of the Brother during basic training and holler,

"Where you from?" and he had to shout out his hometown Sir. "Louder. Where you from?" "Stockton, California, Sir." "Where is that?" "West Coast, Sir." "What country?" "U.S.A., Sir." Each time the Chief shouted at him, it wasn't about his shoe shine or his attitude but his "Where you from?"... The Chief didn't ask anyone else about his hometown. (286)

Wittman is outraged at such treatment that denies his Americanness, and pours out his anger openly:

The one that drives me craziest is "Do you speak English?" Particularly after I've been talking for hours, don't ask, "Do you speak English?" The voice doesn't go with the face, they don't hear it. On the phone I sound like anybody, I get the interview, but I get downtown, they see my face, they ask, "Do you speak English?" (317)

He keeps telling stories to keep up his fighting spirit, as his forefathers did:

In the tradition of stand-up comics--I'm a stand-up tragic--I want to pass on to you a true story... Wellington Koo was at a state dinner in Washington, D.C. The leaders of the free world were meeting to figure out how to win World War II. Koo was talking to his dinner partners, the ladies on his left and right, when the diplomat across from him says, "Likee soupee?" Wellington nods, slubs his soup, gets up, and delivers
the keynote address. The leaders of the free world and
their wives give him a standing ovation. He says to the
diplomat, "Likee speechee?" After a putdown like that,
wouldn't you think Mr. and Mrs. Potato Head would stop
saying, "You speakee English?" (317-318)

Wittman is fighting against racial discrimination, fighting
for equal opportunity. "For a moment a hundred years ago,
we were China Men. After all, the other people in the new
world were Englishmen and Frenchmen and Dutchmen. But they
changed themselves into Americans, and wouldn't let us change
into Americans. And they slurred 'China Man.' 'Chinaman,'
they said dactylically" (326).

Yet to be fully American is no easy job even for a
reflects Wittman. "Alienated, tribeless, individual. To be
a successful American, leave your tribe, your caravan, your
gang, your partner, your village cousins, your refugee family
that you're making the money for, leave them behind" (246).
But for a Chinese American like Wittman, leaving his people
means being further alienated, for his Americanness is lost
on white Americans and he would end up with no place to
stand. Wittman wants a tribe, he wants to belong in the
tribe where he can be "the reader of the tribe" (247). He
wants to have a cultural mission for his tribe. He must also
have realized, like his creator, that his tribe is
indispensable to his cultural mission. He finds himself in
a dilemma. With his people he feels he does not belong;
leave his people he cannot, he needs a place in a community.
His dilemma is that he cannot be the alienated American and the tribal Chinese American simultaneously.

Not to leave or forget his people, Wittman went back to visit his father, who was gambling with his pals:

"Hi, Ba. Hello, Uncles."
"Eh."
"Um."
"Haw."
They won; he had said Hello, and they had cleared a throat, snorted, breathed hard. Don't want to make you feel too good . . . (197)

Upon leaving, "Pop whacked him [Wittman] on the shoulder with a sheaf of paper. . . . Pop handed him the paper and left."

"Bye," said Tana [his bride].
"Um," said Pop without turning.
"Um," said Wittman.
. . . "Pop isn't so bad," said Wittman by way of apology. "I know a family where the son had to throw a cleaver at his father's head--this was in the kitchen, a restaurant family--and got him to start saying Hi." (205)

Wittman then reflects, "We wouldn't mind our fathers so much if Caucasian daddies weren't always hugging hello and kissing goodbye" (205). Echoes of such cries for assimilation, of bafflement at their folks' eccentric practices, can also be found in the other two books.

"When the other kids said, 'They kissed me good night,'" confesses the narrator of China Men, "I also felt left out; not that I cared about kissing but to be normal" (253). "They don't say hello to me," the narrator in The Woman Warrior complains to the mother, who replies, "They don't have to answer children" (203). When sent by her mother to
the drugstore to "make them rectify their crime" of making a wrong delivery, the narrator felt sick, "I couldn't stand her plans."

"You get reparation candy," she [her mother] said. "You say, 'You have tainted my house with sick medicine and must remove the curse with sweetness.' He'll understand."

At the drugstore, she was baffled by what she had to do.

"My mother said you have to give us candy. She said that is the way the Chinese do it."
"What?"
"That is the way the Chinese do it."
"Do what?"
"Do things." I felt the weight and immensity of things impossible to explain to the druggist. (170-171)

For the younger generations born and educated in America, their two cultures often put them in awkward positions. To be "normal," they have to fight both the eccentricity from within and the racism from without.

As Wittman declares, "my task it to spook out prejudice" (332), he is fiercely against all kinds of prejudice, even the kind which may otherwise be considered as a compliment. At an insurance company where he was applying for a job, our liberal-art major was asked, "'You people are good at figures, aren't you?' I can't think of how to answer right off. I should take that as a compliment? It's within his realm of insurance to recognize in me one of a tribe of born mathematicals, like Japanese? I say, "Who, me? Not me, man ... I'm more the artistic type. What do you have in the creative line?'" (332). As we would have expected, he didn't
get a callback. Wittman refuses to be fixed into a stereotype, he firmly insists upon being regarded for what he is and what he does. In a call he made to the Yale Younger Poet, his former toy department colleague, he was asked, "'Who is this?' 'It's me, remember?' Not by my looks, and not by my race, nor by my deformities, I will yet identify myself. 'I was moving bicycles,'" Wittman thus identified himself (274). To have himself always identified by what he is and what he does rather than by what he looks, he has to fight. And he fights with his most powerful weapon: language.

Wittman is predominantly a talker, a playwright, poet, and reader. Language is his world and his weapon. His weapon to build his community, to create his culture, to fight for his identity, and to realize his ambition. "Do we have a culture that's not these knickknacks we sell to the bok gwai?", cries Wittman. "If Chinese-American culture is not knickknackatory . . . then what is it? . . . what do we have in the way of a culture besides Chinese hand laundry?"
"plant and grow a pear garden" in the West. Perhaps this was inspired by Bak Goong, who, in defiance of the white demons' prohibition, had led his fellow China Men in planting and growing their identity and culture in the Sandalwood Mountains. Driven by his ambition and inspired by his stories, he created "A Pear Garden in the West" with an integrated cast which almost included every one who ever crossed his path. Like Bak Goong who made up the custom of the "shout party" and declared that "we can make up customs because we're the founding ancestors of this place" (118), Wittman declares, "we make our place... We make theater, we make community" (261). The community he made through his Pear Garden embraces everyone—old and young, male and female, Chinese and Caucasian. It discriminates against nobody. Wittman's Pear Garden embodies not only his strong desire for an integrated and non-discriminatory society, but also his ardent ambition for a Chinese-American culture in its true value. The Pear Garden draws a large integrated audience and brings his fake book to a clamorous climax. It provides for him a stage to demonstrate equality among races and to act out his outrage at discrimination.

In the acrobatic twins show, Wittman stages a hyphenated identity—his A.J.A. (American of Japanese Ancestry) friend Lance tied together with the Yale Younger guy. In a riot where the curious audience tried to see and touch the ligament, "[a] doctor gets between the twins, examines it,
and says, 'He is as human as the next American man'" (293). The hilarious scene bespeaks the absurdity of the hyphen and the humanness of the hyphenated person, which prepares for Wittman's speech on de-hyphenating in the last show. "'Chinese-American' is inaccurate," expounds Wittman in his One-Man Show, "as if we could have two countries. We need to take the hyphen out--'Chinese American.' 'American,' the noun, and 'Chinese,' the adjective. From now on: 'Chinese Americans.'" But the de-hyphenating doesn't solve the problem: "However, not okay yet. 'Chinese hyphen American' sounds exactly the same as 'Chinese no hyphen American.' No revolution takes place in the mouth and ear" (327). And neither will revolution take place in racism by simply de-hyphenating the name.

Wittman bitterly resents the I-less talk of Hollywood movie Chinese: "Me no likee." "Me find clue to identity of murderer." "Me name-um Li'l Beaver" . . . "[They] are cutting our balls linguistically," raves Wittman. "They depict us with the inability to say 'I.' They are taking the 'I' from us. 'Me--that's the fucked over, the fuckee. 'I'--that's the mean-ass motherfucker first-person pronoun of the active voice, and they don't want us to have it" (318). And he, the American Monkey King, is fighting with his language weapon to get the "I" back.

We used to have a mighty 'I,' but we lost it. At one time whenever we said 'I,' we said 'I-warrior.' You don't know about it. You lost it. 'I-warrior' is the same whether subject
Wittman illustrates the components of the Chinese character "I," one of which is also the word for "long weapons," and the same component also means "fight."

... To say 'I' was to say 'I fight.' ... We are the grandchildren of Gwan the Warrior. Don't let them take the fight out of our spirit and language. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I. I-warrior win the West and the Earth and the universe. (319)

He is changing the "fuckee Me" into the fighting "I." Like the poet that his father tried to name him after, Wittman is singing a Song of the Self, a Song of the Chinese American's Self. He is singing the song to keep up the fighting spirit of China Men, whose fight for identity in a country that is supposed to consist of "either white or Black" will never stop. The whites and blacks sing "Black and white together/Black and white together," they wear the "civil-rights button with the Black hand and the white hand shaking each other." Wittman is afraid that "someday Blacks and whites will shake hands over [his] head" and he'll be reduced to "the little yellow man beneath the bridge of their hands and overlooked" (308). So his Monkey's aria

I. I. I.
I. I. I.
I. I. I.

and his exposition of the Chinese "I" remind Chinese Americans that they have to fight for the "I," for the Self, for their Chinese American identity.
As Le Anne Schreiber contends, Tripmaster Monkey is mostly "a book of talk, Wittman's talk" (9). His "fake book" provides Wittman with a battle ground to fight against the racism that denies him his Americanness, the racism that freezes him into exoticism and inscrutability. Kingston has given our outraged hero a voice, an articulate and angry voice, to lash out at that racism. She has made him a spokesman for herself.

In her essay "Cultural Mis-readings by American Reviewers," Kingston reacts vehemently towards critics measuring her writing and herself "against the stereotype of the exotic, inscrutable, mysterious oriental" (55). She is, like the monkey hero she created, angry that her Americanness is lost to many Americans:

"Another bothersome characteristic of the reviews is the ignorance of the fact that I am an American. I am an American writer, who, like other American writers, wants to write the great American novel. The Woman Warrior is an American book. Yet many reviewers do not see the Americanness of it, nor the fact of my own Americanness. (58)

She resents the inscrutable, mysterious, and exotic stereotype. "To say we are inscrutable, mysterious, exotic denies us our common humanness, because it says that we are so different from a regular human being that we are by our nature intrinsically unknowable. . . . To call a person exotic freezes us into the position of being always alien" (57).

Wittman echoes this resentment in his reaction to the
reviews of his theater. "What's so 'exotic'? . . . Do I have to explain why 'exotic' pisses me off, and 'not exotic' pisses me off? They've got us in a bag, which we aren't punching our way out of. To be exotic or to be not-exotic is not a question about Americans or about humans" (308). Wittman is equally mad at "inscrutable." "We do tears. We do ejaculations. We do laffs. And they call us inscrutable. . . . We're not inscrutable at all. We are not inherently unknowable." He wants to "crack the heart of the soap opera" so as to "make them cut that inscrutable shit out." "We need to be part of the daily love life of the country, to be shown and loved continuously until we're not inscrutable anymore" (310).

Throughout his "fake book," we hear Wittman talk, we hear Wittman's thought. Being a "fool for literature," "fool for books," a Berkeley graduate in literature, Wittman has a mind swarming with humanities, from Chinese legend to American beatnik culture, from Shakespeare to Whitman, from Hollywood movies to Chinese operas. His "fake book" is not fake, it is widely allusive and wildly dense. It defines a community marked by its own cultural, linguistic, and ethnic characteristics. Like the ancient Tripmaster Monkey who, through the Journey to the West, helped bring Buddhist teaching to China, our modern Tripmaster Monkey is trying to transplant the Chinese story onto the American soil through his "Journey In the West" (308). "Naming tells the world who
you are" (Islas 15). And the name, Wittman Ah Sing, loudly tells us who he is. He actually acts out his name by singing like Whitman for himself and his people. His assertive Song of the Self has changed the Chinese "fuckee Me" into the Chinese-American fighting "I."
Chapter IV

The Birth of a New Literary Dialect

I am creating part of American literature, and I was very aware of doing that, of adding to American literature.

(Rabinowitz 182)

There is much discrepancy in the reviews of Kingston's first book, as shown by the following statements: "In fact, this book seems to reinforce the feeling that 'East is East and West is West and never the twain shall meet'" (Kingston, "Cultural Mis-readings" 56). "Rarely does East meet West with such charming results as occur in The Woman Warrior" (Bryfonski 13: 312). Kingston is against the use of "that stupid Kipling British-colonial cliché" to get a handle on her writing, and clearly states that "I do not want the critics to decide whether the twain shall or shall not meet. I want them to be sensitive enough to know that they are not to judge Chinese American writing through the viewpoint of nineteenth-century British-colonial writing" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 61, 62). Her Monkey hero responds more fiercely to American reviews of his theater:

Deep in my heart, I do believe we have to be of further outrage to stop this chanting about us, that 'East is east and west is west.' . . . My mouth doesn't want to say any more wog-hater non-American Kipling. 'Twain shall.' Shit. Nobody says 'twain shall,' except in reference to us. We've failed with our magnificence of explosions to burst through their Kipling. I'm having

61
to give instruction. There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West. All you saw was West. This is The Journey In the West. I'm so fucking offended. (308)

In the same essay, in response to "an ecstatically complimentary review in The Boston Phoenix: 'Subtle, delicate yet sturdy, it [The Woman Warrior] is ineffably Chinese,'" Kingston writes, "No. No. No. Don't you hear the American slang? Don't you see the American setting? Don't you see the way the Chinese myths have been transmuted by America?" (58). While it is unfair to view Kingston's writing as "Chinese," or to use the "British-colonial cliché" to judge it, it is fair and proper to recognize her writing as a multicultural phenomenon. This multiculturalism is not only demonstrated by the Chinese American experiences she describes in her writing, but also by the literary dialect she has created through her writing.

Her special vocabulary, marked by such words as "ghost," "talk-story," etc., brings Chinese meanings into the American English. "Ghost" means either a spirit (the weeping ghost of the no-name woman, the hungry ghost of Mad Sao's mother) or an alien (White Ghosts, Black Ghosts, Gypsy Ghosts, Mexican Ghosts) depending on the context. "Talk-story" is both a verb and a noun, denoting either an action, a literary tradition, or a cultural practice. The Chinese character Kuei, a word tag meaning an alien or foreigner, translated in The Woman Warrior as "ghost," has become "demon" in China
Men. So against the Taxi Ghosts, Sales Ghosts, Police Ghosts, Newsboy Ghost in *The Woman Warrior* we find white demons, police demons, Jesus demons in *China Men*. After we enter the semantic world of Kingston's writing, it is not difficult to see that *ghost* emphasizes the foreignness of the person, *demon* stresses their cruelty. Both words acquire new meanings in Kingston's writing, which provides those who are not Chinese "with the different way of using the word and hence a different way of seeing the world" (Dasenbrock 14).

Kingston's distinctive vocabulary is also marked by special imagery pertaining to Chinese culture. In her English, the galaxy is no longer the Milky Way but the Silver River, no longer the path to the palace of Zeus but the river separating the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy. Through her writing, exclusively Chinese imagery moves naturally into English. Another case in point is the Chinese idiomatic use of "vinegar" in describing jealousy or envy. Such a meaning is inevitably lost or rendered rather awkward by way of explanation in translation, but under Kingston's agile bi-cultural pen, it spontaneously becomes English. For example, in *China Men*, when the grandfather who longed for a girl had just gotten a fourth boy, he went in his disappointment to check what his neighbors got. "His mouth and throat, his skin puckered all over with envy" at the sight of this loveliest dainty of a baby girl. "He discovered why to be envious is 'to guzzle vinegar'" (18). Kingston has
developed this bi-cultural language from book to book.

In describing the father burning the midnight oil preparing for the Imperial Examination in *China Men*, Kingston transplants the stories behind a Chinese idiom onto her father:

. . . for a moment or longer he had fallen asleep. He tried propping himself up by the elbows. His eyes closed, and shapes and colors began turning into dreams. He tried holding his eyelids open with his fingers, but in the dark they might as well have been closed . . . . He stood on the chair and stretched--and felt a hook or a ring in a beam directly overhead. So there it was; of course, the poets said it would be there. He looped the end of his pigtail into the ring and tied it tight. Then he sat in his chair to study some more. When he dozed, his own hair jerked his head back up. Hours later, when the pull on his scalp no longer kept him alert, he opened the table drawer, where he found an awl. Like the poet whose blood had been wiped off it, he jabbed the awl into his thigh, held it there, and studied on. (26)

Here the two anecdotes of two famous scholars in ancient China are skillfully blended with the story of a more recent scholar, the Father from China. In this story the Chinese idiomatic allusion of "Xuan-liang Ci-gu" (Hang by the beam and jab the thigh) will be immediately recognized by a bilingual reader, yet its meaning will not be lost on an English reader who knows no Chinese.

Another feature of Kingston's vocabulary is its special rhythm and accent, like "at-tee-tood," "goot mah-ning," "Ah-mei-li-cans," which captures the peculiarity of the Chinatown English. While her writing constantly rings Chinese, with such special vocabulary or such typical syntax of a traditional Chinese novel as "If you . . . go on to the next
chapter"; her slangy, colloquial, everyday English is irresistibly American.

Raised in Stockton Chinatown and educated at Berkeley, Kingston is not only a receptive listener to Chinese myths, legends and stories, but also an avid reader of Western writers. Her rich bi-cultural heritage plays an important role in inspiring and shaping her writing. Although many reviewers are so blinded by its "exotic" Chineseness that they fail to see its Americanness, her writing still comes from, as well as adds to, the American tradition.

Kingston herself admits the influence of such writers as William Carlos Williams (his poetic retelling of the American myth in *In the American Grain*), Virginia Woolf (her skillful handling of time—both "big expanses of time and little moments"—in *Orlando*), and Gertrude Stein (her creation of a language with its special syntax and rhythm in *The Making of Americans* and "Melanctha"). Kingston's writing has successfully demonstrated her benefit from these writers. Her mosaic style and interpolated texts, her mixture of history and fiction, also seem to be a continuation of the fictional experimentation started by such writers as Dos Passos, whose writing combines history with fiction and is characterized by its collage-like format and unmediated shifts from story to story. With the emergence of more and more experimental writings, the line between fiction and nonfiction, novel and autobiography, became permeable in the
1960s and the genre categories eventually collapsed, which, as McCaffery argues, has engendered "all sorts of strange, undefinable texts" (Elliott 1174). Kingston's writing is definitely one example of this phenomenon in the contemporary American literature, though this experimentation may be obscured from many readers' view by its "Chineseness."

Like many other successful writers from ethnic backgrounds who "draw on the non-Western, nonempirical traditions of their native cultures ... to present a world view more in keeping with their experience" (Elliott 1172), Kingston liberally draws on the Chinese culture she inherited from her immigrant parents. She manipulates creatively the old myths and legends in her writing so as to recreate the old in the new and create the new with the old. For example, the "White Tiger" section of *The Woman Warrior* originates from "The Ballad of Mu Lan" of Northern dynasty (386-534 A.D.). The ballad itself is short, about three hundred words, praising Hua Mu Lan's filial piety (she disguises herself as a man to join in the army so as to save her old father from conscription), her patriotism (she fights heroically for the emperor and the country), and her military success (she rises to the rank of a general, leads her armies into numerous battles, and comes back with flying colors). But Kingston has recreated the legend in an American way and combined it with the Chinatown movies. "The section in *The Woman Warrior* where Fa Mu Lan is fighting with swords that
jump up in the air," Kingston acknowledges, "I took from the cartoon sections from those movies" (Pfaff, "Whispers" 62). Elsewhere Kingston calls it "the childish myth, . . . not a Chinese myth but one transformed by America, a sort of kung fu movie parody" ("Cultural Mis-readings" 57).

In "White Tigers," assuming the role of the male, Fa Mu Lan did not forfeit her female identity and role. She became a wife and mother in the course of her training and fighting. After the completion of her mission, she came back to perform her duty as daughter, wife and mother. In this recreated "childish myth," the author is demonstrating that she could be a hero while being female. At least it reflects Kingston's wish for an accomplished womanhood and her faith in her worth as female amid the antifemale traditions.

Kingston has also incorporated the image of another Chinese hero into this "childish myth." It is not Hua Mu Lan, but Yue Fei, a Song dynasty general (1103-1142) famous for his patriotism, who had words (jing-zhong-bao-guo: total loyalty and utter devotion to my country) carved on his back by his mother on going to battle for his country.  

"We have to do more than record myth," Kingston says in reply to the accusation of tampering with the Chinese myths. "The way I keep the old Chinese myths alive is by telling them in a new American way" (Pfaff, "Talk" 25). After all, she is creating Chinese-American myths to tell her and her ancestors' bi-cultural experience in a poetic rather than
literal way. This creative and transformative incorporation of the myths and legends into her writing not only gives the old myths and legends new meaning but also illuminates the symbolic subcontext of the Chinese-American myths she is creating.

Her double cultural heritages sometimes come into her writing so spontaneously, the weave is so fine and the edges are so subtle that one can hardly distinguish one from the other in the world Kingston creates. For example, two traditional stories, the apt story of the secret-burdened king Bak Goong told to cure the men's congestion from not talking, and the beautiful fairy tale of the Spinning Girl and the Cowboy Ah Goong told to quench his loneliness for being so far away from home, are both naturally woven into the lives of the characters and the dynamism of the work. The former is familiarly Western (it may remind a Western reader of Ovid's King Midas), while the latter is freshly Chinese. A reader engrossed in Kingston's beautiful and fluent prose would be hardly aware of such distinction in the act of reading. Perhaps to describe Kingston's writing either as "ineffably Chinese" or "ineffably" American is equally partial. It is American and Chinese, truly Chinese-American. It is a new tributary with the mainstream of American literary tradition.21

In The Fantasy Tradition in American Literature, Brian Attebery points out, "A fantasist may make use of any
memorable character, scene, or incident from an earlier work, so long as he really understands the borrowed item and had a new use for it in his own story" (184). Kingston's writing, scattered with various borrowings from earlier works, also belongs to this fantasy tradition. Her borrowed items, passed to her through the oral tradition of her Chinese folk culture, are naturally incorporated into her writing but with new meanings. They are either transmuted or transplanted, and each serves a necessary function. Sometimes it is the successful assimilation of such borrowed material that helps bring out the power and beauty of her writing. The metaphorical ending of The Woman Warrior with the story of Ts'ai Yen is as significant as the allegorical beginning of China Men with the adventure of Tang Ao. The image of Fa Mu Lan sets off the confusion and frustration of the narrator's American life, which in turn highlights her final triumph. The interludes of myth and legend in China Men suggest meaningful associations not conceivable otherwise, which in turn adds weight to the main stories. The mixture of the old Chinese legends and the new American myths in Tripmaster Monkey is central both to the theater Wittman creates and to the character of Wittman which Kingston creates.

"A primary element in expressing the truth of the self in women's autobiography," according to Suzanne Juhasz, "is to find verbal forms appropriate to that act" (221-222).
Kingston, in attempting to express the truth of the self as a Chinese American, has created a unique verbal form for her writing not only as a woman writer, but also as an ethnic writer. From *The Woman Warrior* through *China Men* to *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston has developed, step by step, a voice more and more powerful and a vision more and more broad. She writes for herself in *The Woman Warrior* (Kingston calls it a "selfish book"), to give her Chinese-American female self a voice deserving recognition. She writes for *China Men* in the second book, to claim their place in history as well as their position in America; she claims America for all Chinese Americans by giving their ancestors' remarkable history a voice so loud and clear. While her Chinese women had legendary models to adopt in order to become powerful as warriors, her Chinese men had to create and adopt new models in order to become American. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston speaks for Chinese Americans, male and female, old and young. With her protagonist adopting the Monkey model, a powerful and miraculous model in Chinese culture, Kingston has adopted the voice of the canny Tripmaster Monkey, whose capability of seventy-two transformations and sexual metamorphoses empowers her voice and expands her vision. As a result she is producing stories of an inventiveness and depth which are of major stature in American literature.

She has also created a mixed genre of her own, which befits her mixed experience with two cultural traditions.
She has developed a style sometimes bewildering and ambiguous, which indicates the bewilderment and ambiguity she confronted growing up as a Chinese-American female. She has added a Chinese-American dialect to the tradition of American literature. Kingston frankly declared in an interview, "I am trying to write an American language that has Chinese accents . . . I [am] claiming the English language and the literature to tell our story as Americans" (Rabinowitz 182-183). In fact, she is not only claiming America, claiming the English language and the literature, for Chinese Americans through her writing, she is also creating a Chinese-American culture. It is through the act of writing itself that she has firmly established her selfhood as an American, a Chinese American, a woman and a writer. As one critic suggests, if more writers could manage the kind of writing Kingston has done, American literature would be richer (Gunton 249). Multiculturalism, as an intrinsic characteristic of the American "melting pot," has enriched and expanded the American literature. Maxine Hong Kingston, with her creation of a new literary dialect, contributes significantly to this important tradition.
Notes

1. I'm indebted to David Leiwei Li's article "The Naming of a Chinese American 'I'," Criticism, 30.4 (1988): 497-515, for some of these findings on Kingston's canonical position.


4. Kingston's first two books have been discussed by reviewers and critics mainly as autobiography or biography.

5. This chapter title coincided with Linda Morante's article "From Silence to Song: the Triumph of Maxine Hong Kingston," *Frontiers*, 9.2 (1987): 78-82. I had formulated this chapter before I discovered her brilliant article, which helped me further expand my argument.

6. The injunction "Don't tell" from the parents appears many times in *The Woman Warrior*.

7. See *Contemporary Authors*, New Revision Series, eds.

9. Margaret Miller, in her article "Threads of Identity in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Woman Warrior,*" *Biography*, 6.1 (1983): 24, argues that "even Brave Orchid is diminished by American reality that so frustrates Maxine . . . even her capacity for hard work makes her not a warrior but a slave, a slave of the laundry and of the tomato fields. There is only one power she has left to bequeath her daughter: the power to 'talk-story.'" I slightly disagree with Miller on this point. To me Brave Orchid's resilience and industriousness also constitute a great power, which played a key role in the family's survival and prosperity in the terrifying new land. This power should by no means be slighted because it takes the form of laboring in the fields and toiling in the laundry.

10. Tang Ao's adventure in the Women's Land originates from the Qing dynasty novel, *Jing Hua Yuan* (Flower in the Mirror), by Li Ru-zhen (c. 1763-c. 1830).
11. The first character in the word "Zhong-guo" (China) means center or middle (the second means country), which is often used to stand for China as in the case of the laundry of the Hong family.

12. Kingston, in "Imagined Life," notes that "I used the very techniques that the men developed over a hundred years. They made themselves citizens of this country by telling American versions of their lives."

13. "The Journey to the West" is a popular Chinese legend which is found in many literary forms such as the novel, opera, etc. The best-known work based on this legend is the Ming dynasty novel, The Journey to the West, by Wu Cheng-en (c. 1500-c. 1582). Its protagonist is the Monkey, a personified hero, who plays an important role in bringing the Buddhist teachings to China. His heroism, wisdom, optimistic fighting spirit, and sense of justice make him one of the most popular heroes in Chinese folk culture. In America, it has been popularized by the translator Arthur Waley under the title, Monkey: Folk Novel of China by Wu Ch'eng-en.

14. In an interview, Kingston talked about her relationship with such minority women writers as Toni Morrison and Leslie Silko; she attributed the "aliveness" of their writings to their "senses of a connection with people who have a community and a tribe" (Rabinowitz 184). Kingston
uses the term tribe loosely, never raising Native American issues.

15. In Chinese culture, the Pear Garden is a nickname for theater, which Kingston applies to Wittman's theater.

16. According to Brewer's Dictionary of Phases and Fable (London: Cassell & Company Ltd., 1975), in Greco-European culture, the galaxy is the path to Zeus' palace.

17. Although this meaning of vinegar is usually used in connection with sexual love, we should not regard Kingston's use of it as inaccurate. After all, she is re-creating in her own writing the Chinese culture she inherited through the oral tradition.

18. Kingson mentions these writers' influence in several interviews. See Contemporary Authors, 13:292; Pfaff, "Talk with Mrs. Kingston" 25; Rabinowitz 182.

19. This name is spelled Fa Mu Lan as pronounced in the dialect of Hong Kingston's family in The Woman Warrior, which should be Hua Mu Lan in mandarin Chinese.

20. There are other variations from the original Chinese myths and legends in Kingston's writing. Since her Chinese cultural heritage is passed to her mainly through the oral tradition, which is likely to produce different versions of the same story, tracing in detail other such sources and
permutations would be a scholarly project beyond the scope of this work.

21. Although there have been Chinese-American writers before Kingston, their writing has been largely neglected by the dominant white culture. Kingston is the first writer who has given voice to a Chinese-American culture within the mainstream of American literature.

Works Cited


Morante, Linda. "From Silence to Song: the Triumph of Maxine


