

Lori Stoltz

AN INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Maxine (Ting Ting) Hong Kingston was born in 1940 in Stockton, California, to Chinese immigrant parents, Tom Hong and Chew Ying Lan. Kingston seems destined to have been a writer from the very beginning of her life, bestowed with her colorful names as a sort of luck. She was named “Maxine” after an American woman who was lucky in gambling. “Ting Ting,” her Chinese name, comes from a Chinese poem about self-reliance, which Kingston elaborates on in her book, *To Be The Poet*: “My father named me Ting Ting after the four-word poem ‘Ting ting doak lup,’ which means ‘Standing alone as a mountain peak’.”

Although Kingston grew up “talking story,” which she attributes to her mother, “Brave Orchid,” it was hard for her to understand the intention of her mother’s stories. Kingston recalls double-edged messages from her mother within her book, *The Woman Warrior*: “She said I would grow up a wife and slave, but she taught me the song of the woman warrior, Fa Mu Lan.” Kingston became a word warrior, writing that “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar . . . What we have in common are the words at our backs.” She recalls the early part of her school education as her “silent years.” Later, the silent Maxine who had flunked kindergarten, found her voice, became a straight-A student, and won a scholarship to the University of California, Berkeley. In 1962 she received her bachelor's degree in English and married Earl Kingston.

Always politically active, Kingston decided to leave this country with her family in 1967 and lived in Hawaii for seventeen years. It was during this hiatus in a land-of-the-lotus-eater setting that she wrote her two autobiographical books about her Chinese-American identity struggles: *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). Both books won National Book

Awards and forged the genre of creative nonfiction in America. In 1988, Kingston published *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, a whimsical novel set in the San Francisco area during the 1960s. The protagonist of this novel, Wittman Ah Sing, is a fifth-generation Chinese-American, who, like many of Kingston's characters, struggles to escape racism as he inhabits and questions the world around him.

Eventually Kingston and her husband moved back to California. In 2002 she wrote *To Be the Poet*, which was based on her William E. Massey Lectures at Harvard in 2000. Within this text, mostly written in verse, she reflects on her past, how she envisions herself in the present, and how she works to take on the life of a poet into the future: "Let my life as Poet begin . . . I won't be a workhorse anymore; I'll be a skylark." After a fire burned her manuscript, *The Fourth Book of Peace*, Kingston finally, in 2003, finished her longbook, *The Fifth Book of Peace*. This remarkable prose is a combination of memoir, myth, fiction, and history in which the reincarnated Monkey King character, Wittman Ah Sing, reemerges as an older and wiser being in the world. Currently, Maxine Hong Kingston is a Senior Lecturer for Creative Writing at the University of California, Berkeley.

I had the privilege of meeting Maxine Hong Kingston in 2001 when she came as a visiting author to Rochester Community and Technical College where I work as an adjunct instructor. *The Woman Warrior* was the common book taught to students that year.

Stoltz: I know that you wrote *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* as part of your own Chinese American identity struggle, the common struggle of identity that many of us deal with as humans on our journeys. As a student in the M. F. A. program at Hamline University, I am currently writing about my own identity with the unusual heritage of the Romany People, otherwise known as the Gypsies. In *China Men*, you speak of your father's times of frustration in

his Stockton laundry: “You were angry. You scared us. Every day we listened to you swear, ‘ Dog vomit. Your mother’s cunt.’ You slammed the iron on the shirt while muttering, ‘stink pig. Mother’s cunt.’ Obscenities. I made a wish that you only meant gypsies and not women in general. You were tricked twice by gypsies . . . ’ and once shouted, ‘Kill your Romany mother’s cunt.’”

When you came to Rochester, Minnesota, in 2001, I introduced myself by saying, “I am one of those Romany cunts that you speak of in your books.” You laughed and said that although your father always hated the trickery in his laundry, you loved the Gypsies and have always felt a great connection with them, continuing that “our cultures are a lot alike, in many ways, because of the similar beliefs, rituals, stories, etc.” Your words put me at ease, and I thank you for that. As much as America is considered the great melting pot, there clearly are a lot of stereotypes that are not melted yet.

I have been reading your book of poetry, *To Be the Poet*, and have delighted in the incantations of your words. In a country that does not seem to appreciate poetry, why have you chosen to write and talk about poetry at this point in your career? Why didn’t you write about poetry earlier?

Kingston: But I was a child poet. Poetry came to me before any other skill. For me to have poetry now, at the age of sixty-four, means writing in a way that is inspired, natural, inventive, fun. Today at noon I was walking through crowds of students coming out of the Haas School of Business, and I thought, Why in the world would they waste their youth and their education studying business? Why business?

Stoltz: Some students would probably answer, “Because it pays the bills.” Writers know that poetry meets something more than earthly needs, but how do we get this "otherly need" of

poetry across to people? And practically, how do poets survive when bills need to be paid?

Kingston: I give my creative writing students Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf says that the writer needs a room of her own and 500 pounds a year, but she does not explain how to accomplish either feat. Just so, she does not tell you what to write. I tell my students that the artist has to existentially create him/herself. You have to invent new ways of making a living. You must create life, and you must create art. Practically, you shop at the Good Will, the Salvation Army, and St. Vincent DePaul's. You do not need two cars. You do not need three bathrooms. You can form a co-op, a sangha, a family, and support one another.

Stoltz: You write in *To Be the Poet*: "I can will a longbook. The novel can be willed. But a poem is good luck. 'Lucky,' said my mother. The poet is lucky." You also write that "Poets are always happy" and that you want "the easiness of poetry." Poets may be lucky in China, but I'm not so sure about poets in America! Do you believe that American poets are happy? Does poetry really have an easiness for you?

Kingston: Many poet friends have said to me that poets have tragic lives. I wonder if our differing temperaments may just be because of my Chinese background. The reader and writer of the old Chinese poetry wanted to be calm, peaceful, appreciative of beauty. Poetry would inspire the states of mind that we get when meditating. By "easiness," I mean that I would let poetry come to me gracefully – not be forced.

Stoltz: I love your phrase that "worriers and fretters do not attract poetry." But perhaps poetry attracts worriers and fretters because poets are a sensitive lot. You mention that your poet friends have said that poets have tragic lives, but you also offer that perhaps that quality of being tragic is more a trait in western poetry. You suggest the distinction of the element of time. In *To Be the Poet* you write, "The reader of the longbook lives with the story and its characters for a

long time. The reader of poetry is awakened to the one moment. The poet truly lives the happening moment, and gives the very bodily feeling of it to whosoever would read. To put myself into the state of poetry, I need to learn the habit of living constantly within the present moment." How do we, as westerners, as Americans, find a way of "living constantly within the one moment"? How does one allow poetry to come gracefully in a society of instant gratification, fretting, and worrying?

Kingston: Everyday, we make room and time for silence. We sit doing nothing. We go into the woods. We live like Thoreau. We arise early to have dawns like Mary Oliver's.

Stoltz: How does one really sort out what is American in writing ? Have you made peace with your identity struggle?

Kingston: I think that "identity struggle" is what adolescents go through. Since America is a multicultural, global country now, our stories are made up of voices from everywhere. American writing is done in the American language, which is distinct from English anywhere else. By the way, I am on the usage panel of *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*. It's very different from the OED. Look up the word "nimrod" in those two dictionaries, and you will see what I mean. American speech is influenced by Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd.

Stoltz: You quote your father's question, "Why don't poems come to me constantly the way they came in China?" You seem to be mirroring his quest as a Chinese American in "nagging" the poems to come. Is your father still alive? And have you found a good routine for nagging the poems to come?

Kingston: No, my father's not here anymore. I continue to let poetry come or not-come. No nagging. It was my mother who did the nagging, and she isn't here anymore, either. All my

work is really one, evolving book. A quarter of a century ago, in *The Woman Warrior*, I wrote the chant of Fa Mu Lan in prose. In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, the chant of Fa Mook Lan is in verse. The effects are different. The former is a war chant. The latter is a coming-home-from-war chant.

Stoltz: In *The Woman Warrior* you write about your forgotten aunt, "No Name Woman." You immediately bring readers into your story by inviting them to come and hear a secret. Although this story was taboo, you tell it publicly. Your father was alive when you published this first book of family stories and secrets. Was he angry with you for that telling? What advice can you give to writers of memoir as they write their own family secrets?

Kingston: My father read the Chinese translation, which seems to me to be milder than my writing in English. My sister, Carmen, who is a social worker for foster care, tricked my parents into filling out a genealogy chart. ". . . and what's your sister's name?" she asked. My mother said, "You might as well tell her." Writers of memoir can trust the form of story to guide them. Go ahead and write the worst, scariest, pitiful, secret events. As you work along, you will understand people and their points of view. After the clashing conflict, there will be reconciliation and resolution. In rewriting, you go over the core events again and again until the story is beautiful, and ready for the public. My mother gave me the best compliment: "You write so accurately. You described China accurately. How did you know to do that?"

Stoltz: How would you compare writing fiction and nonfiction?

Kingston: Both make use of imagination and narrative. I guess, when I write fiction, I am thinking about made-up people; I am pretending. When I write nonfiction, I am thinking about actual people, and imagining them alive and in action. The processes are not all that different.

Stoltz: I know that you, like many activists, like many writers, oppose war. Could you elaborate on how fire becomes the metaphor for war within your longbook (“the fire is to make us know Iraq”)? Also, should we interpret the recent Tsunami as the water element metaphor for war?

Kingston: I was mulling the possibility that the instinct for war is like storms that blow through the human psyche. Can it be that even a homicidal maniac is just having a storm in his brain? By the end of the book, I understand that human beings can build a moral ethical system, and not be at the mercy of crazy, murderous forces such as war. A war is nothing like a storm. Killing in war is a moral/immoral act. A storm is amoral; death in a storm is by accident.

Wasn't it about two weeks after the planes smashed into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon that we bombed Afghanistan? Then on to Iraq. But I don't think it's the newspapers that psyched people up. People are always ready to be afraid, and to act quickly out of fear and anger. Retaliation seems to be instinctual, and forgiveness a hard-learned response. Forgiveness is "unreasonable." The people's sense of patriotism is easily manipulated. The Bush team, which had long-made plans to invade Iraq, chose which countries to retaliate against. Americans have a violent culture – movies, video games, stories, historical narratives, personal guns. The peaceful ones are laughed at and dismissed – Pollyannas, unrealistic optimists. Peace education has to go on constantly, possibly preventing future wars.

It's almost Mother's Day, and I'm thinking like a woman. Under stress, men have a "flight or fright" response; women "mend and befriend." Now, we know that women can learn to be soldiers. I hope men can learn "mend and befriend."

Stoltz: As the oldest of six children in the Hong family, are you the designated keeper and recorder of stories?

Kingston: The keeper of family stories is not "designated," not elected, not chosen. One just takes on the role, and she remembers and tells those stories whether the family likes it or not. Your question is the same as the question 'why are you the writer in the family?' I don't understand it. But I suppose understanding is not the point.

Stoltz: It seems in some families that some members are indeed "designated." Do any of your other siblings tell stories?

Kingston: All my siblings talk about themselves and about family members. They enjoy comparing memories of the past. But none of them makes the stories public, as I do. My mother's father told stories in the plaza. I have a sense that it was in the evenings, after work, and not in the marketplace. But he told myths and fables and epics and serials, not stories about our family.

Stoltz: What other books and authors are you reading these days?

Kingston: Alas, Lori, when one becomes a famous author, her name becomes valuable for the jackets of other authors' books. Lately, I have not been reading already-published works. I'm choosing to give deserving young writers a boost. I am reading the following three sets of page proofs: *Buffalo Boy* and *Geronimo* by James Janko; *One Tribe* by M. Evelina Galang; and *Perfume Dreams* by Andrew Lam. These writers have global visions; they're able to understand our country and other countries. I'm hoping that their books will have readers everywhere. We have a chance for a better world with writers like these.