

# Twentieth-Century Chinese and US History, Meet Postmodern Sensibility

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## History Can Be Such a Mystery

Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* has generated a great deal of discussion about its braiding of Chinese myths and legends into her account of growing up female and Chinese American in Stockton, California, in the mid-twentieth century (for investigations of Kingston's use of myths and legends, see Cynthia Sau-Ling Wong and, in this volume, articles by Martens, Westover, and Mok). Critics have also given attention to the coming-of-age dimensions woven into the text. Less attention has been paid to her similar weaving in of historical events and figures from both US and Chinese history. Just as she blends the genres of memoir, autobiography, myth, and fantasy, Kingston blends references to US and Chinese history into her text to highlight additional dimensions of the environment in which Maxine grows up. This essay pays attention to the history in the text both to provide an understanding of the historical background of author and text, and to argue that contrasting histories contend in Maxine's growing consciousness to create a filter that is distinctly postmodern. In turn, this postmodern sensibility contributes to the shaping of her perceptions and sense of self, and leads to the postmodern textual tendencies and philosophical assumptions of *The Woman Warrior*—such as genre-blending, the instability of events and their interpretation, the mixing of high and popular cultural products, and nonlinear chronologies.

Kingston's *China Men*, published three years after *The Woman Warrior* and originally conceived of as a diptych or even combined text with *The Woman Warrior*, consists of stories focusing on the men in Kingston's family. Importantly though, *China Men* also features sections presented as straightforward history. For instance, appearing about halfway through *China Men* is a section entitled

“The Laws.” It opens with a quotation from Article V of the Burlingame Treaty as epigraph:

The United States of America and the Emperor of China cordially recognize the inherent and inalienable right of man to change his home and allegiance, and also the mutual advantage of the free migration and emigration of their citizens and subjects respectively from the one country to the other for purposes of curiosity, of trade, or as permanent residents. (*China Men* 152)

The text does not stop here, however, in its excerpt and representation of laws, acts, treaties, and court cases connected to Chinese immigration to the US and to the lives and rights of Chinese people living in the US. “The Laws” offers eight pages of such entries, each beginning with a date ranging from 1868 to 1978. The narrator (arguably, there is very little distance in this section between Kingston’s voice and the voice of the narrator) comments throughout on these marks of the ‘legal’ relationship between the United States, China, and Chinese immigrants to the US. In one instance dated 1882, Kingston writes,

Encouraged by fanatical lobbying from California, the U.S. Congress passed the first Chinese Exclusion Act. It banned the entrance of Chinese laborers, both skilled and unskilled, for ten years. Anyone unqualified for citizenship could not come in—and by the terms of the Nationality Act of 1870, Chinese were not qualified for citizenship. (154)

While one might argue that the narrator’s voice is not objective in the use of adjectives such as “fanatical,” the representation of the Chinese Exclusion Act is factual and a crucially significant part of Chinese American history. Another example, from 1924, describes the congressional immigration act that indicated ““Chinese women, wives, and prostitutes”” were specifically banned from entry to the US. The act goes on to state that “any American who married a Chinese woman lost his citizenship; any Chinese man who married an American woman caused her to lose her citizenship” (156).

Kingston does not explicitly point out the implications of this act, but they are quite clear: to allow women as well as men entry is to encourage the formation of families and communities. To forbid Chinese women is to discourage permanent settlement in the US. “The Laws” also points to several of the myriad instances in which US policy is clearly more prejudicial against people from China than those from Japan (until World War II), Korea, or other Asian countries, and is particularly so compared to policies toward those of European ancestry.

*The Woman Warrior* contains no such straightforward recounting of legal, political, or social history. However, the text is rife with carefully woven references to Chinese and American history, references that help illuminate the lives of Kingston’s characters and her own motivations for presenting them as she does. The following section highlights the presence of social and political histories that served as the backdrop for Kingston’s (and by extension, her narrator’s) life as she was growing up. This essay then argues that being immersed in the social, cultural, and political histories of this period in China, the US, and immigrant Chinese experience creates a distinctly postmodern sensibility in Kingston. Responding to (as well as helping to create) the literary history of the period, Kingston filters her memoirs of the development of her psyche through a postmodern structure and sensibility.

### **The *Woman Warrior* and Twentieth-Century China and the US**

While *The Woman Warrior* does not feature the direct reportorial-style history found in “The Laws” in *China Men*, throughout Kingston weaves dates, events, and references significant to Chinese and Chinese American lives. The first such date and reference appears on the first page of text and is delivered through Brave Orchid’s voice:

In 1924 just a few days after our village celebrated seventeen hurry-up weddings—to make sure that every young man who went ‘out on the road’ would responsibly come home—your father and his

brothers and your grandfather and his brothers and your aunt's new husband sailed for America, the Gold Mountain. (*WW* 3)

Chinese people first began referring to San Francisco and other western parts of the US as “Gold Mountain” in the mid-1800s, when gold was discovered in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. The term eventually came to refer to the US and parts of Canada in general; as it was for Europeans emigrating across the Atlantic, the US was seen by the Chinese, coming across the Pacific, as a land of opportunity.

Perhaps less well known to US readers is the significance of 1924 in Chinese and Chinese American history. As noted above in the passage from “The Laws,” 1924 was the year of the immigration act that forbade almost all Chinese women from entering the US. In other words, the new wives described by *Brave Orchid* could not have legally accompanied their husbands. The year 1924 has additional historical significance: while the Nationalist Revolution in China is typically dated from 1925, Arthur Waldron, in *From War to Nationalism: China's Turning Point, 1924–1925*, describes the early and mid-1920s as a “dark age of chaos” in China (11), with several factions struggling to achieve power and the imposition of contrasting ideologies. Being conscripted into battle was a very real possibility for Chinese men, providing another impetus for making the voyage to the US. In “No Name Woman,” Kingston's scene of the village attacking one of its own due to an unexplained pregnancy takes on added resonance, serving as a metonymy for and a microcosm of the growing civil war in many regions of the country.

The first reference to US popular culture history comes just a few pages later, with narrator Maxine listing two of the American movies her family saw as a New Year's Day tradition, and one of the few, or perhaps only, opportunities to watch American movies in a year: *Oh, You Beautiful Doll* (1949), starring June Haver, and a John Ford western, *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (also 1949), with John Wayne in the lead. The John Wayne film may be most relevant to ideas in *The Woman Warrior*, as he plays a cavalry captain on the verge of retirement who, on a mission to stop a possible attack

by the Cheyenne and Arapaho, finds himself “encumbered by women who must be evacuated” from the fort in his charge. To be “encumbered by women” may have resonated with a young girl hearing ““There’s no profit in raising girls. Better to raise geese than girls”” (46). The young girl struggling with whether to be “Chinese-feminine” or “American-feminine” may well have also noted, even if subconsciously, the trope of white women and the necessity that they be protected “against the horde” in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon* (IMDb).

Also in “No Name Woman,” Kingston refers to Chinese pride in “the ideal of five generations under one roof” (11). This contrasts with the 1950s emergent ideal in the US of the single family home; the first Levittown, a large suburban housing development marketed toward and affordable for returning WWII veterans, was begun in 1947, when Kingston was seven years old. In addition to contrasting living arrangements, Kingston examines as well the differing customs of politeness and manners and gender-role expectations and the dilemma this created for her growing up, whether to strive to be “American-feminine” or “Chinese-feminine.” We can surmise that the several struggles she dramatizes later in the book regarding her difficulties with speech arise at least in part from a paralysis created by trying to choose between Chinese loud voices (“I have not been able to stop my mother’s screams in public libraries or over telephones”) and “speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine” (11). Just as she asks explicitly about her various cultures, “What is [ . . . ] tradition and what is the movies?” (6), she implicitly asks which offers better roles for women—and finds more confusion. In “White Tigers,” she hears from the chants about Fa Mu Lan that she can grow up to be a warrior, but the everyday comments from her family imply she will grow up to be the equivalent of a servant to her future husband’s family. In “At the Western Palace,” she notes that her Americanized uncle sees little wrong with deserting his Chinese wife and daughter (except for continuing financial support) and marrying a younger Chinese American woman. Startling to most readers are the misogynistic proverbs about females the narrator recounts hearing from Chinese