



**Culture, Ethnicity, and the Female Personality in Maxine Hong Kingston's
*The Woman Warrior***

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Abstract

This present critique of Maxine Hong Kingston's memoir falls under the rubric of multi-ethnic study of the literature of the United States. In this essay, close attention has been paid to the manner in which the Chinese-American writer has interwoven the elements of myth, folklore, and personal history to gain an insight into her ethnic and cultural origins. Kingston draws upon the memory of her own childhood and youth to supplement the information provided by her mother. "Talk-story" by the mother fuels the imaginative recreation of the immediate past, and personal and autobiographical portions of the memoir are intertwined with mythopoeic recreation of the distant past in Kingston's "re-telling" of the mother's stories. Scrutiny of the formal artifice employed in the construction of *The Woman Warrior* reveals it to be a hybrid "auto-fictography" in which techniques of the novel are used to modify the reader's reaction to potent socio-cultural and historical traditions and taboos. Kingston's awareness of her ambiguous status as a Chinese-American generates the impulse to analyze and comprehend the psychologically complex motivation of the narrator-girl.

Keywords: Chinese-American, Talk-story, Old Country, Narrator-girl, No Name Woman.

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In the 1980s, a decade of significant interest in the burgeoning multi-ethnic literature of the United States, Maxine Hong Kingston emerged as a strong contender for serious critical attention in academia as well as among Asian-American immigrant communities in the United States. Well before the systemic research into and study of ethnicity, identity, dispersion and displacement under the rubric of "Diaspora Studies", Kingston became a potent voice for the Chinese-American female experience. While encompassing and exploring the intimate knowledge of her own particular ethnic community or group, Kingston at the same time placed that group within the larger mainstream society. In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1975), she sought to examine and evaluate the quality and variety of life within a sub-culture that is often at odds with the controlling main-culture.

Kingston deals particularly with the intersectional themes of culture, ethnicity, and gender. This is an area fraught with the conflicting subjectivity of different individuals. Kingston allows voices of women of different ethnicities, historical backgrounds and social classes to be heard. She is thus a pioneer in enforcing greater visibility for Asian-American women and creating a space to tell their new stories of immigrant life in the United States. Furthermore, Kingston reveals how the specificities of female identity among her own people

are circumscribed by ancient patriarchal customs and proscribed historical traditions of Chinese culture.

It is no accident that *The Woman Warrior* had an impressive impact upon the reading public when it was first published. In the essay “Heterogeneity Within: Chinese American Women’s Writing”, the Chinese academic and critic Yun-hua Hsiao (2012) traces the curve of Kingston’s writing and its reception, and explains that “the reasons for Kingston’s popularity in the United States lies in her concern with ethnicity and gender. Her works involve Chinese-American identity, feminist and nationalist points of view, the artistic creation of multi-generic texts, and the linguistic mixing of English, Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese. Soon after *The Woman Warrior* was published and received massive acclaim, its content in relation to ethnicity and gender provoked a ‘pen war’, a Chinese term to describe an exchange of combative articles, between critics. ...[T]he famous Chinese American male critic and playwright Frank Chin was the first to voice disapproval of Kingston’s work by refusing to endorse Kingston’s book before its publication. ...Many Chinese American female critics, however, took Kingston’s side and refuted the idea that Kingston was an assimilationist who eulogizes American-ness and despises Chinese-ness. Elaine H. Kim suggests that those male critics clung to an anti-female stance since they themselves had created Chinese American male heroes and female heroines very different from those constructed by the female writers. ...Responding to this ‘pen war’, Kingston, as a living author who is concerned about how her works are perceived, defended herself by asserting her aesthetic freedom in her writing. She implied that she should not be ‘denied an individual artistic vision’. (p.163-184).

In the decade in which Maxine Hong Kingston published *The Woman Warrior*, “Asian American literature blossomed” (Yun-hua Hsiao, p. 173). In her essay “On the Overdue Evolution of Immigrant Narratives”, the author and editor Irina Reyn (2019) writes, “[In the 1980s] American population demographics were changing and those with the privilege to tell the story were coming of age (often children of immigrants who came as children or young adults), and more and more readers saw their own experiences reflected on the page. In 1980, immigrants accounted for 6.2 percent of the U.S. population... ‘multicultural literature’ was ‘building bridges’”.

The Woman Warrior consists of a series of vignettes and self-contained stories, many of which originally appeared separately in magazines as varied as *The New Yorker*, *Viva*, *Hawaii Review*, and *Seattle Weekly*. Compiled and published in book form, these memoirs of the Americanized daughter of immigrant Chinese parents were universally acclaimed. Widespread appreciation and subsequent critical assessment highlighted the structural and contextual originality manifested in the works of the then relatively unknown and budding writer. Many readers were deeply moved by the fascinating narrative pieces, and women readers especially identified sympathetically with the subjective point of view of the female memoirist.

Nevertheless, readers were unable to reach a consensus regarding the formal structure of these works. Several critics commented on the problematic issue of ‘form’ in these books; some noted this problem in passing, while others made it the focus of their argument. All assented, however, in their own fashion and in various degrees to Patricia Lin Blinde’s (1979) conclusion that, although Kingston’s work “capitalizes on the conventions and expectations of various genres, it also evades the limitations of any one genre” (p.52). Blinde has in fact directed our attention to the fluidity of the form and structure of Kingston’s memoirs, and in doing so, has pinpointed the difficulty faced by critic and reader alike when attempting to

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accurately classify or define the formal nature of *The Woman Warrior*. Certainly, there is a dissolution of boundaries between genres within the narrative framework of this book: as a work of the creative imagination, it constantly moves beyond the confines of 'fiction', and as 'memoir', it is equally difficult to contain within the spatial and formal territory reserved for the 'non-fiction' genre. We must therefore acknowledge that this memoir is deliberately designed to be a 'literary hybrid'. *The Woman Warrior* amalgamates separate and often disparate narrative forms: skeins of biography, autobiography, fable, folklore, myth and legend, history and social documentary merge and emerge in a skillfully woven and richly patterned screen.

While the formal status of *The Woman Warrior* remains somewhat problematic, it gains distinction by its lack of straightforward chronological, sequential and other conventional arrangement. In a strategic ploy to heighten the drama and personal symbolism of the factual passages, Hong Kingston has avoided a strictly chronological rendition of her life. Frequent narrative overlapping gives depth and credence to the purely biographical chapters, but sequential ordering of chapters is dispensed with in the memoir.

In the absence of linear or chronological arrangement of chapters, the internal unity of *The Woman Warrior* therefore depends to a large extent on the personality of the narrator. In other words, the reader is made to identify the narrator-character with the author herself, and it is the selecting mind and strong voice of Kingston herself which become the focus of our attention. It is her point of view that is filtered to the reader through the peculiar and distinctive appreciation of her heritage and her past. In one important interview with Phyllis Hoge Thompson in 1983, Kingston ruminates upon the moral dilemma faced by her in the handling of the raw materials of "story" and "fact". Interestingly, verbal analysis of the creative process reveals the type of narrative strategy Kingston employs in imaginative recreation:

The reason people are confused about whether my books are fiction or non-fiction is that I keep asking this question. The readers pick up on my asking and they ask that because I have planted this question. But the truth is I answer the question. I'm always very honest with the reader. If I experience something for myself, I say I saw this.... I guess it's all right to call it non-fiction if you tell the reader what you know and give standard ways to substantiate it. Documentation. Then if you announce ahead of time when you invent, I suppose that's being honest. You say, this part is really true, this part I invent- I keep honest in the book by having such a strong point of view, in the narrator. It's from that girl's point of view. (p.4-6).

When Thompson directs Kingston's attention to the "immense importance" of the narrator in the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston agrees that "this narrator girl is so coherent and intense always, throughout. There's an intensity of emotion that makes the book come together" (Thompson, 1983, p.6). In this conversation with Phyllis Thompson, Kingston speaks of the "narrator-girl" in the third-person singular mode, but we are aware by now that she is really speaking about herself. Kingston is the narrator-girl who bewitches us with her ability to "talk-story", an ability she has inherited from her mother. Kingston uses the vivid transliteration of the Chinese word for "telling a story" because she clearly wishes to emphasize a crucial point in her narrative: the primary source for some of the biographical and many of the Chinese folklore elements in the books is *oral history* in the form of Kingston's mother "talking-story". Margaret Miller (1983) has perceptively noted that the author-narrator has "to make it all up,... to embroider the stories she hears from her mother, darning the holes in the fabric and making out of the fragments a crazy quilt whole"(p.25).

Fortunately for both the reader and formal critic, Miller has also provided us with a way out of our quandary in finding a convenient label for the form of *Woman Warrior*. She declares that “on the basis of this embroidering and piecing”, we can tentatively classify the memoir “under ‘autofictography’, autobiography in which techniques of the novel play a prominent part” (Miller, 1983, p.25). The architecture and the meaning, and the resultant lyricism and emotive power of Kingston’s prose, thus depend entirely upon the shaping skill of the artistic consciousness. This creative imagination is active and operative in the manner Kingston draws upon the memory of her own childhood and youth to supplement the information provided by her mother. Imaginative recreation of the immediate past in personal and autobiographical portions of the books is intertwined with mythopoeic recreation of the distant past in the *retelling* of the stories told to Kingston by the mother.

It is Kingston’s awareness of her present ambiguous status as an Asian-American which generates the impulse to gain an insight into her racial and cultural origins. Mythicizing the China of her ancestors helps her to objectify and examine certain social customs and communal codes that were accepted and upheld by the Chinese mother, but which seem so bewildering and fraught with pain to the Chinese-American daughter. Retrospective vision as well as imaginative recreation are consciously employed by Kingston for evaluating and comprehending those patriarchal laws and familial relationships which had at various times baffled, angered, or intrigued her, but had nevertheless remained inexplicable and inviolate.

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Maxine Hong Kingston is the eldest child of immigrant Chinese parents. Apart from herself, these parents figure prominently as chief protagonists in the dramatic retelling of her family’s history. In addition, there are sundry idiosyncratic relatives who moved in and out of Kingston’s life throughout her impressionable adolescence. Kingston tries to understand what seems to her the essentially quizzical and mystifying nature of the Chinese legacy:

Chinese-American, when you try to understand what things in you are Chinese, how do you separate what is peculiar to childhood, to puberty, insanities, or family, your mother who marked your growing with stories from what is Chinese? What is Chinese tradition and what is the movie?. (Kingston, 1981)

In this ruminative passage with its significant rhetorical query, the mature Kingston’s recollection of the past is hardly tranquil; the intensity of emotion gains force and poignancy from the level of felt experience contained in it. The narrator-girl equates “Chinese tradition” with the unreal, illusory world of the movies, and we understand –from episodes which depict the emigrant older generation’s valorous attempts to uphold some of the more significant Chinese rituals and celebrate the Chinese New Year and other Chinese holidays-that some things remained peculiarly alien and different for the American-born generation of perplexed and befuddled children. They found it progressively difficult to reconcile the contradictory cultural values of their own community and the society-at-large, and thus were forced to admit to strongly ambivalent feelings. For the elders, life in America is a temporary “sojourn; their real “home” unquestionably is the Old Country of the China of their ancestors. For the American-born children, this equation is far from simple or unequivocal. No place can become “home” until they have consciously struggled with the ghosts of the past and have painfully wrested meaning and identity from the two worlds they so bewilderingly straddle.

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On one level, in passages such as the one quoted above, and in others where Kingston expresses the adolescent girl's emotional yet seemingly futile opposition to the values of the parent's world- "Whenever my parents said 'home', they suspended America. They suspended enjoyment, but I did not want to go to China" (Kingston, 1981, p.92)- the memoir serves to illustrate poignantly the dilemma of an individual trapped between trying to assimilate into the mainstream culture and the subsequent feelings of guilt associated with the rejection of one's racial history.¹ On another level- the communal as opposed to the personal - Kingston's book emphasizes the urgent need felt by any single individual of a minor ethnic group to search for and locate his/her cultural roots and consequently preserve as well as disseminate ethnic systems, whether linguistic, anthropological, religious, or geopolitical. Born in America, nurtured by the American concept of womanhood,

Normal Chinese women's voices are strong and bossy. We American Chinese girls had to whisper to make ourselves American-feminine. Apparently we whispered even more softly than the Americans. We invented an American-feminine speaking personality. (Kingston, 1981, p.155)

Kingston found it especially difficult to resolve the conflict between her sense of an autonomous, viable, and worthwhile Chinese-American identity and the historically traditional devaluation of their women-folk by the Chinese patriarchy.

Resolution, reconciliation, and comprehension can be achieved after total immersion in the culture in its native space and place of origin. For this reason, an actual physical journey back to the Old Country is necessary. But since this is impossible for an American citizen after the Communist take-over of China, Kingston has to content herself with making a spiritual journey. The desire to explore, and resolve the ambiguities, is deep-rooted. Barred from travelling to China, Kingston makes us participate in an emotional journey into the country she 'made up' by weaving together fragments of tales, some real, some legendary told to her by her mother. As a young girl these tales had peopled Kingston's dreams and, as she grew to womanhood, she found her imagination kindled by the lure of the unknown. The unknown beckoned from afar until she discovered in herself and through her art the courage to undertake a journey into the China of her mother and father.

The narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, then, is a woman who is trapped between two opposing cultures; the American one which has given her the motivation to be successful and forge her own identity, and the Chinese one which has traditionally and historically equated the female folk of their race with worms and maggots. Therefore, the burden of trying to come to terms with the repressions and humiliations suffered by the Chinese womenfolk is a burden that cannot be shed lightly, but must be borne until justice is done where justice is due. The strongly-defined narrator-girl accurately portrays the Chinese culture of the early twentieth century as a predominantly male hierarchy of superior and sometimes tyrannical powers, with women relegated to the inferior position of subjugated chattels. In comparison with the opportunities available to the Chinese-American women, the life of the womenfolk in the Old Country is painfully harsh and constricting. Much of *The Woman Warrior* pulsates

¹ The Chinese-American problem is, of course, not unlike the more widely known and much more historically complex African-American experience of "double consciousness". Discrimination and segregation with its roots in slavery and life in the slave plantations of the Deep South add another violent dimension to the identity-crises of Black-Americans. The term "double consciousness" was coined by W.E.D. DuBois in his seminal autoethnographic work *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). The term originally referred to the psychological challenge of always looking at one's self through the eyes of a racist society.

with a keen sense of female bonding generated by the narrator's sympathy for her less fortunate forebearers.

It is the voice of Kingston's mother which we first hear as *The Woman Warrior* opens with the daughter's retelling of one of the powerful stories, a "story to grow up on", a story meant to warn an adolescent girl about the need to protect her body after the attainment of puberty. It is a cautionary tale, a story of sexual transgression and betrayal, of silence and shame:

'You must not tell anyone', my mother said, 'what I am about to tell you. In China your father had a sister who killed herself. She jumped into the family well. We say that your father has all brothers because it is as if she had never been born. ...On the night the baby was to be born the villagers raided our house... Your aunt gave birth in the pigsty that night. The next morning when I went for the water, I found her and the baby plugging up the family well. ...Don't let your father know that I told you. He denies her. Now that you have started to menstruate, what happened to her could happen to you. Don't humiliate us. You wouldn't like to be forgotten as if you had never been born. The villagers are watchful. (Kingston, 1981, p.11-13).

The mother justifies breaking the code of silence enforced by her kinfolk by the anxiety she feels for her own daughter, but her tone and language betray the terror she still feels at the total erasure of the existence of her husband's sister.

From this starkly narrated story, the adult Kingston begins to recreate and mythicize the figure and personality of her dead aunt, the "No Name Woman". The very act of retelling the story is a deliberate feminist act of rebellion in the form of breaking silence, of speaking up against the fierce grip of communal taboo. With intense empathy, the narrator-girl recreates the horror and tragedy of the solitary birth and violent death. Thus, Kingston gives back to her dead aunt a name, an identity, and a tangibly visible lived existence. At the same time, she subverts the patriarchal order which had created and perpetuated the taboo. In the passage quoted below, imaginative empathy unites the forgotten female ancestor and the Chinese-American narrator. The passage reverberates with passionate rage against the unnamed, faceless man responsible for the aunt's pregnancy. It is also alive with anger directed at the villagers who protected and harboured the coward. Family history and suppressed past transgression are re-enacted in this poetic first chapter to create a story of haunting beauty and sorrow. It is at once a dirge and a paean; a prayer for pity and forgiveness, a supplication for redemption:

To be a woman, to have a daughter in starvation time was waste enough. My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the Old China did not choose. Some man had commanded her to lie with him and be his secret evil. I wonder whether he masked himself when he joined the raid on her family. ...She was the only daughter; her four brothers went with her father, husband, and uncles 'out on the road' and for some years became Western men. ...They expected her alone to keep the traditional ways, which her brother, now among the barbarians, could fumble without detection. The heavy, deep-rooted women were to maintain the past against the flood, safe for returning. But the rare urge West had fixed upon our family, and so my aunt crossed boundaries not delineated in space. ...She kept the man's name to herself throughout her labor and dying, she did not accuse him that he be punished with her. To save her inseminator's name she gave silent birth ... If my aunt had betrayed the family at a time of large grain yields and

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peace, when many boys were born, and wings were being built on many houses, perhaps she might have escaped such severe punishment. But the men- hungry, greedy, tired of planting in dry soil- had been forced to leave the village in order to send food-money home. There were ghost plagues, bandit plagues, wars with the Japanese, floods. ...Adultery, perhaps only a mistake during good times, became a crime when the village needed food. (Kingston, 1981, p.6-14).

Opposed to the image of the 'no name woman'- the symbol of the 'wife and slave' of the traditional and historical past- is the image of the legendary Fa Mu Lan, the 'Woman Warrior' of Chinese fable and myth. While the story of the nameless aunt had painted a dark and ruthless picture of obedience and submission, the heroic exploits of Fa Mu Lan in the chapter titled "White Tigers" offer other more glorious possibilities for the girl-child: "After I grew up I heard the chant of Fa Mu Lan, the girl who took her father's place in battle... fought gloriously and returned alive from war to settle in the village." (Kingston, 1981, p.25-26). This martial song of the Warrior Woman, first sung by the mother in Kingston's childhood, is remembered years later after experience and maturity have worked upon the Chinese-American personality and psychology to transform the song into a powerful feminist epic of autonomy and courageous survival. In the narrator-girl's half-defiant and half-hopeful proclamation- "I would have to grow up a warrior woman" (Kingston, 1981, p.26) -we discover Kingston's conscious rejection of identification with the existential condition and ultimate fate of the 'no name woman'. There is a willful desire to take up the challenge of forging her own separate, distinct Chinese-American identity.

Kingston's retelling of the legend of Fa Mu Lan closely follows the pattern of archetypal 'hero-myths'. Since the mythical story of Fa Mu Lan is counterpoised in the same "White Tigers" chapter with incidents which reveal the narrator-girl's desperate attempts at Americanization at various periods of her adolescence and youth, it is appropriate for us to apply Jungian psychological theory to understand the significance of the hero-myth in the context of *The Woman Warrior*. The overall pattern of the archetypal hero-myth- the humble birth, the early proof of superhuman strength and courage, the rapid rise to power and prominence, the triumphant struggle against the forces of evil- has "psychological meaning ...for the individual who is endeavouring to discover and assert his personality" (Henderson, 1968, p. 101). Seen in this light, Fa Mu Lan's act of climbing the mountain "seems to suggest a trial of strength: it is the will to achieve ego-consciousness in the heroic phase of adolescent development" (Henderson, 1968, p.25). Structurally, as well as symbolically, the Fa Mu Lan myth is crucial to the narrative in *The Woman Warrior*; it makes us participate emotionally and intellectually to the separate quasi-Jungian stages of the narrator-girl's quest for selfhood. In addition, it prepares us for Kingston's imaginative reconstruction of her mother's life as a physician in the Old Country.

Seen by her daughter from the modern American perspective, the mother, Brave Orchid, is the "slave and wife" and can therefore hardly serve as a worthwhile role-model. However, in the Old Country, before joining her husband in America, Brave Orchid had spent years studying to be a doctor and had later successfully practiced medicine in remote rural areas. From scraps of stories of Brave Orchid's eventful past, from old photographs, and from Chinese scrolls which testify to Brave Orchid's actually has graduated from medical school, Kingston recreates the heroic figure of the dynamic young woman she can barely see in the hard-working grey-haired mother of her growing years. In the chapter titled "Shaman", Brave Orchid is idealized as a legend in her own right, but despite this idealization, and despite the 'Tribal-Elder role' identification with pagan ritual and healing implicit in the chapter heading, Kingston's sensitive personal point of view creates a credible figure

endowed with the qualities of simple humanity and fallibility. In the eyes of the narrator-girl, both Fa Mu Lan and Brave Orchid become strong role-models to be imaginatively revived to become ‘spirit-guides’ in a world that had few normative guidelines and fewer clear-sighted guides.

Aspects of the mythical Fa Mu Lan, the heroic Brave Orchid, and the dead aunt, blend conscious as well as subliminal aspirations of the narrator-girl. Gender identification supersedes temporal and cultural barriers and makes possible a strong, comprehensive imaginative connection. This empathetic bond gives a palpable lyrical resonance to descriptive and narrative passages in *The Woman Warrior*. Of course, the poetic resonances emanate from the retrospective vision of Maxine Hong Kingston herself, and this vision is not unlike the gift of Ts’ai Yen, a female poet born in AD 175. *The Woman Warrior* ends with the story of Ts’ai Yen. Captured by barbarians at the age of twenty, she lived among them for twelve years as the wife of the barbarian chieftain, bearing his children and fighting alongside him in his battles. Kingston tells us in the concluding chapter, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe”, that one clear moonlit night, Ts’ai Yen heard the barbarians produce enchanting music from flutes made from river reeds, the same reeds from which they also fashioned the whistling arrows to kill enemies in battle. Ts’ai Yen had only heard death sounds produced by the reed pipes: “... one night she heard music tremble and rise like desert wind. She walked out of her tent and saw hundreds of the barbarians sitting upon the sand, the sand gold under the moon. Their elbows were raised, and they were blowing on flutes. They reached again and again for a high note, yearning toward a high note, which they found at last and held- an icicle in the desert.” (Kingston, 1981, p. 208). This surprising discovery of beauty and musical harmony so moved and touched Ts’ai Yen’s soul that she, alone in her tent, spontaneously responded with “a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes:

...out of Ts’ai Yen’s tent, which was apart from the others, the barbarians heard a woman’s voice singing, as if to her babies...Ts’ai sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger. Sometimes they thought they could catch barbarian phrases about forever wandering. Her children did not laugh, but eventually sang along when she left her tent to sit by the winter campfires, ringed by barbarians. (Kingston, 1981, p.209).

In this final story, Kingston, the writer and story-teller, imagines herself reborn as the spiritual inheritor of Ts’ai Yen, and the bearer of the gift of legendary epic songs of the Old Country and its ghosts:

After twelve years among the Southern Hsiung-nu, Ts’ai Yen was ransomed and married to Tung Su so that her father would have Han descendants. She brought her songs back from the savage lands, and one of the three that has been passed down to us is ‘Eighteen Stanzas for a Barbarian Reed Pipe’, a song that the Chinese sing to their own instruments. It translated well. (Kingston, 1981, p.209).

In *The Woman Warrior*, Maxine Hong Kingston skillfully merges the disparate forms of omniscient narration, legend, and fable to create her unique ‘autofictography’. With her powerful retrospective vision, which gains force and meaning from her poetic and mythopoeic imagination, she is able to revive the “ghosts” of the past. She thus is able to embroider the “crazy quilt whole” of her Chinese past and present Chinese-American identity and culture. Subsequent to the publication of Kingston’s memoir in 1980, many other Chinese-American writers, as well as playwrights, published creative works which further probed and inquired into the lives of ethnic Chinese in the United States. For instance, David

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Hwang's Off-Broadway play *F.Q.B.* won the Obie Award for best new play of 1980-81 takes a light-hearted look at how newly-arrived Chinese immigrants strive to assimilate in the U.S. More importantly, almost a decade after Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, Amy Tan gains international fame with her debut novel *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) by depicting Chinese-American mother-daughter relationships. In her book *Between Worlds: Women Writers of Chinese-American Ancestry* (1990), the critic Amy Ling categorically states: "[In the] literature written in English by ethnic Chinese and Chinese Eurasians and published in the United States, the women not only outnumber the men, but the women's books are more authentic, more numerous, quite simply- better" (Hsiao, 2012, p.209).

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