

ANALYSIS

China Men (1980)

Maxine Hong Kingston

(1940-)

“In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston speaks for her female ancestors; in her next book, *China Men*, she provides a voice for her male relatives. Early in *China Men*, she addresses her father, asking why he was silent, why he refused to tell her his stories. Because of his reluctance to talk about the past, Kingston speaks for him and for her other male relatives, creating what she does not know.

Kingston relates the experiences of her father in two sections. The first of these, ‘The Father from China,’ is about his accomplishments as a scholar in his Chinese village and his early success in New York, when his laundry business was prospering. This father, lighthearted and popular, Kingston never knew. In ‘The American Father,’ Kingston presents a later period when her father’s life was burdened with the responsibility for a large family. He grew quiet, depressed, and stern. This was the father Kingston knew.

The stories of other male ancestors are told. In ‘The Great Grandfather of Sandlewood Mountains,’ Kingston tells of two of her great grandfathers who planted sugar cane in Hawaii. In ‘The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains,’ Kingston relates her father’s adventures in the United States. Three times he traveled to the United States. The first time he worked on the California railroad, but the last time he became a vagrant, returning to China only with the financial support of his relatives. It was, however, through him that his family was able to claim American citizenship. To the authorities, he had argued, convincingly but falsely, that the documents proving his citizenship were destroyed in the San Francisco earthquake. There is the story of an uncle who abruptly left a comfortable life in the United States in order to escort his mother’s ghost back to her grave in China and the story of Kingston’s brother, who served in Vietnam. Blended with these biographical sketches are historical records pertaining to the Chinese and tales of mythic Chinese figures. Like *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men* is a testament to survival; it is about forging an identity in an alien culture.”

Barbara Wiedemann
Cyclopedia of World Authors II, Vol. 3
ed. Frank N. Magill
(Salem 1989) 847

“As *The Woman Warrior*, with its focus on women, is informed by a difficult and ultimately rewarding mother/daughter relationship, Kingston’s second book, *China Men*, is focused on men and shaped by a rather uncommunicative father/daughter relationship. Thus, it depends heavily on family history, American laws, and imaginative projections based loosely on historical fact. Its purpose, as the author has stated, is to ‘claim America’ for Chinese-Americans by showing how indebted America is to the labor of China men, her great-grandfathers and the grandfathers, who cleared jungle for the sugar plantations in Hawaii, who split rock and hammered steel to build the railroads in the United States, who created fertile farm lands out of swamp and desert and yet faced fierce discrimination and persecution. In this text too, Kingston blends myth and fact, autobiography and fiction, so that the usual dividing lines are invisible.”

Amy Ling
The Heath Anthology of American Literature 2
(D.C. Heath 1990) 2095

“While *The Woman Warrior* is based on her mother and the talk-stories her mother told her, *China Men* is composed of stories of her father’s life in China and in the United States, and the lives of various male relatives and sojourners, including grandfathers, uncles, and brother. Kingston frequently emphasizes the organic unity of the two books. ‘At one time, *TWW* and *China Men* were supposed to be one book....’ Kingston explains that the women’s stories ‘have a convolution and the men’s stories have more of a linear passage through time.’ Because the Chinese American male experience was within history, ‘those men

were making history,' while the women were caught up in 'old myths.' Both books, however, 'are much more American than Chinese'; the characters are 'American people.'

A chapter, 'The Making of More Americans,' from *China Men* appeared as a prose piece in the *New Yorker* in February 1980. Kingston acknowledges her debt to Gertrude Stein's *Making of Americans* in the title. In this chapter, she especially constructs the Chinese American claim to the United States, as in the incident where aunts and uncles return to Stockton to visit her grandfather's farm: 'The relatives kept saying, "This is the ancestral ground," their eyes filling with tears over a vacant lot in Stockton.' In the reference to Stein, Kingston grounds her work in the American tradition. Of her 'artful combination of Chinese rhythms and American slang,' she says, 'I want to work more the way Gertrude Stein did in 'Melanctha,' where she doesn't fool around with spelling: she plays around with syntax and rhythm rather than weird spelling and apostrophes.' Referring directly to the influence of *The Making of Americans*, Kingston says, 'I am trying to write in American language that has Chinese accents.... I was creating something new, but at the same time, it's still the American language, pushed further.'

China Men tells the stories of Kingston's male ancestors, with the father as the central figure. Composed of eighteen chapters of varying length, it resembles *The Woman Warrior* in its collage of family stories, Chinese and Western legends and myths, Chinese and Chinese American history, fantasy, and memoirs. The chapters range chronologically from the legendary past of 'very great grandfathers' in China to the brother who returns safely from Vietnam.

As in *The Woman Warrior*, the boundary between memory and invention, history and myth is never clear. As Linda Ching Sledge points out, 'In some respects, *China Men* is so close to the "facts" of history that it can serve as a casebook for the evolution of a Chinese-American family life over the last century; in other respects, it is wildly inventive and poetic.' Sledge argues that *China Men* 'represents the transmutation of "oral history" into cultural literary epic.' Alfred S. Wang reads *China Men* more politically, as a portrayal of 'Men Warriors,' a 'synthesis of different generations of Chinese American males, who, defiant of being outlawed, emasculated, even silenced, were claiming forthright their shares of the American dream.' Pointing to the unreliability of memory and Kingston's 'lack of verifiable material,' Carol E. Neubauer argues that Kingston's purpose in writing *China Men* is 'to reveal, if not in fact to resolve, the uncertainty and ambiguity of the available information...to make sense of her family's history and perhaps more importantly, to place her family within the larger historical context of Chinese immigration and settlement in the United States.'

Neubauer analyzes Kingston's use of photographs from the family album as a heuristic device to 'provide information when other sources prove to be unreliable or incomplete,' as in the photograph of her brother in military uniform in Vietnam and of her father's first fifteen years as a bachelor sojourner in New York. While some American reviewers have criticized Kingston for the inauthenticity of her 'pieces of China lore,' Qing-yun Wu, a critic from the People's Republic of China, reads *China Men* as 'historical fiction,' arguing that 'the freedom of fictionalization enables Kingston to transcend the limits of historical events and individuals to reveal a reality truer in essence and spirit than biography and autobiography or any history book can reveal'."

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ed.
Approaches to Teaching The Woman Warrior
(MLA 1991) 5-6

"As an ethnic group, Chinese Americans were seen as undesirable aliens....mistakenly categorized as 'persons of the Mongolian race'.... Kingston provides a complementary rendition of the Chinese American experience in her second book, *China Men*. Her fictionalized accounts of men who came to Hawaii and the United States in the nineteenth century are historically accurate, as are her portrayals of Chinese life in the communities in northern California before and after World War II. In *China Men* Kingston also offers insights into the psychological consequences that ultimately beset a largely disenfranchised and misunderstood community in America....

In response both to the opening of the American West and to widespread poverty in China, the immigrants began arriving in the United States from the 1840s on in search of employment. Some of the

men found jobs as railroad builders, agricultural laborers, and miners; others became odd-job workers, shopkeepers, launderers, fishers, and domestics. These first Chinese Americans contributed substantially, through both their labor and the taxes they paid, to the growth of the American West—a fact that is still generally neglected in the history of this nation.... With the exception of the merchant class, the Chinese who came to America were also not permitted to bring their wives and womenfolk.... Even though they provided valuable services, the Chinese were stigmatized from the beginning by their skin color and their seemingly alien culture. Because of economic recession in the 1870s and 1890s, moreover, they were widely perceived as depriving bona fide Americans of their rightful employment. The combination of discrimination and competition for jobs fueled race riots, lynchings, and the onslaught of anti-Chinese legislation whose residual effects have persisted into this century.”

Patricia Lin

“Use of Media and Other Resources to Situate *The Woman Warrior*”
Approaches (1991) 37-38

“The work that eventually became *The Woman Warrior* originally contained stories of male characters, but finding that their presence mitigated the narrator’s feminist rebellion, Kingston published them separately as *China Men*. The historical context missing in *The Woman Warrior* became the main subject of *China Men*, which reconstructs the daily life and sensibilities of Chinese male immigrants through several generations. At the book’s center is a chapter titled ‘The Laws,’ which enumerates thirty-two acts of legislation, mostly discriminatory, affecting Chinese immigration from 1868 through 1978. This journalistic summary of Chinese American history is imaginatively fleshed out through stories of individual men, including the narrator’s grandfathers, uncles, cousins, father, and brother. Although this narrator is only partially identifiable as the narrator of *The Woman Warrior*, and although the question of narrative continuity is an important feature of *China Men*, the larger issue of Kingston’s autobiographical ‘I’ need not be raised here to make the point about different uses of ‘ghost’ in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*.

Both works reclaim ancestors from oblivion and misinterpretation, but they use ‘ghost’ differently to represent these unidentified ancestors. An episode from *China Men* called ‘The Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains’ provides an illustration. Although this grandfather was not financially successful and died in obscurity, the narrator writes: ‘They [his family] did not understand his accomplishments as an American ancestor, a holding, homing ancestor of this place.’ Recast as a home builder, this grandfather is ‘unghosted’ like the suicide aunt. He, too, has provided ‘ancestral help’ of the spiritual if not material kind. In one scene, moreover, the grandfather merges with Guan Goong, a Cantonese deity, in a manner recalling the suicide aunt’s transformation from ‘ghost’ into ‘god.’ The grandfather’s ‘unghosting,’ however, does not involve the same amount of labor, the untwisting and refashioning of ‘outlaw knots,’ that reclamation of No Name Woman requires. Although the narrator of *China Men* must reimagine forgotten personalities and lives, and although the narrative of Chinese American history is a ‘ghost text’ for uneducated readers, this narrative can be recovered with less effort and emotional stress than the ‘ghost text’ of Chinese American woman warriorhood, which must to a far greater extent be *created*.

The landscape of *China Men* is thus not ghost-ridden, like Kingston’s memories of childhood, but crowded instead with kinfolk caught in the acts of living—clearing cane fields, laying railroad ties, blasting tunnels, casting nets, smuggling stowaways, ironing laundry, planting gardens. *China Men* therefore furnishes a relatively stable reference point for navigating shifting ground in White Tigers mountain or other poetic terrain in *The Woman Warrior*. Equally important, the social history narrated in *China Men* implicitly anchors the narrator of *The Woman Warrior* as a Chinese American and accounts for her desire to be creative and self-empowered within her home culture: ‘The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them.’ The immigrants portrayed in *China Men*, in fact, become those ‘ghosts of neat little old men’ inhabiting the Hong residence and representing the narrator’s positive identification with Chinese American culture.

‘The Jolly Corner’ [by Henry James] combines into one compact drama the metaphoric and socio-historical constitutions of ‘ghost’ given separate emphasis in *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Both Kingston and Spencer Brydon react against polarized definitions of culture (America and Europe, American and China). They seek wholeness by returning physically and in memory to their childhood homes, where they recover ‘ghost’ identities formerly denied or unrecognized. Brydon repossesses

American habits and values he had once denigrated. Kingston's narrator likewise leaves home to 'get out of hating range' but returns to discover her life 'branching into' and empowered by all her legendary and real-life female kin.

But *China Men* reminds us that Brydon/James had the luxury of rejecting or embracing 'American' identity, while Kingston, as a Chinese American, claims America under different economic circumstances and cultural pressures.... James, in *The American Scene*, refers to immigrants as 'ghosts,' viewing them as insubstantial yet threatening others incapable of becoming 'American'.... The narrator of *The Woman Warrior* may share certain talents or aspects of her artistic predicament with Spencer Brydon, but in *China Men* she is clearly impatient with James's views of immigrant 'ghosts'."

Gayle K. Fujita Sato
"The Woman Warrior as a Search for Ghosts"
Approaches (1991) 142-44

"If, in 1976, Kingston's first book puzzled her readers, at least there was a recognizable autobiographical persona and a cluster of female characters linked to the author-protagonist. In Kingston's next two works—*China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey*—women no longer dominated the center stage, and the spotlight was cast on the men. The grandfathers, uncles, brothers of *China Men* constitute masculine collectivities that confound distinctions between one's individual blood relatives and the patriarchal heritage common to all Chinese Americans. Throughout the nineteenth century, Chinese sugarcane workers in Hawaii (Sandlewood Mountain) and railroad workers on the continent (Gold Mountain) dutifully sent money to their families in the homeland, sometimes returning themselves and sometimes not. Kingston reworks historical facts and popular legends into an ethnic epic in which heroes and crazy people intermingle and the enemy outsider is the white 'demon' rather than the 'Indian' or the 'Chinaman.'" The very title of the book, by deconstructing the derogatory 'Chinamen' epithet into its two parts, restores dignity to the men of China.

The primary representative of the masculine culture is Kingston's own father, familiarly known as BaBa. In what is perhaps a play on the popular notion that paternity is always uncertain, the prologue 'On Fathers' relates how children confuse one Chinese father with another. The narrator concedes that the man she and her siblings had mistaken for their father 'probably was not.' This anecdote points to the indeterminate tenor of the whole book, its iconoclastic openness to unexpected combinations and multiple interpretations. Born in '1891 or 1903 or 1915,' BaBa is remembered as a California gambler and laundry worker, a scholar in China, a dapper dancer in New York. His sometimes dubious history, interspersed with that of his ancestors and sons, is drawn into the piecemeal pattern associated with postmodernism; juxtapositions and subtle interrelationships replace more traditional linear modes of narration.

The last long chapter in *China Men*, 'The Brother in Vietnam,' is a subversive war saga, with Kingston's youngest sibling incarnating the universal brother, an Everyman in the face of institutionalized violence and racism. Instead of battle exploits, his heroics consist of surviving the Vietnam War without killing anyone. For all its playful ambiguity, *China Men* ends with an unequivocal condemnation of war and a sobering vision of what is morally possible for a man in the late twentieth century."

Marilyn Yalom
"The Woman Warrior as Postmodern Autobiography"
Approaches (1991) 113-14

Michael Hollister (2014)