

## ANALYSIS

*Tripmaster Monkey* (1989)

Maxine Hong Kingston

(1940- )

“In her most recent book, her first novel *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston again blends Chinese myth with American reality. She combines allusions to a Chinese classic, *Monkey* or *Journey to the West*, the story of a magical mischievous monkey who accompanies a monk to India for the sacred books of Buddhism, with the life of a 1960s Berkeley beatnik playwright.”

Amy Ling

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

“Kingston claims that *Tripmaster Monkey*, unlike the first two books, is completely fiction. The narrative, set in San Francisco in the 1960s, focuses on the character of a Chinese American would-be playwright, Wittman Ah Sing, and on his attempts to produce a Chinese American epic drama. Using the classical Chinese mythical trickster figure of Monkey, the novel introduces a number of finely imagined Chinese American characters, ranging from showgirls of the 1940s to eccentric elders. *Tripmaster Monkey* portrays the hip, psychedelic 1960s culture centered in Berkeley of the Free Speech Movement. Modeling itself on Joyce’s *Ulysses*, the novel uses strategies of realism, following a few days in the life of its hero to off, self-consciously, an epic body of materials on Chinese American history and culture.

Some scholars have read the novel as a roman a clef that attacks Kingston’s most vocal critic, Frank Chin (Solberg). Kingston herself sees the novel as a celebration of a Chinese American man—‘I sing the Chinese American from top to toe’...and as a successful evolution from the ‘I’ perspective of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to the omniscient narrator. Although fiction, *Tripmaster Monkey*—like her first two books—is a reservoir of information on Chinese American history and culture, including the cultural significance of the Gwang Goong figure (god of war and literature) for the Say Yup (Cantonese) branch of the Chinese American diaspora to which Kingston belongs.”

Shirley Geok-lin Lim, ed.

*Approaches to Teaching Kingston’s The Woman Warrior*  
(MLA 1991) 6-7

“As written down in Wu Ch’eng-en’s Ming dynasty classic *Monkey* (or *Journey to the West*), this West, the repository and origin of sacred Buddhist wisdom, is the goal of a quest for completion in enlightenment and fame (hence identity) undertaken by Wu’s protagonist Tripitaka and his companion Monkey. (That Kingston is familiar with this myth is amply born out by her highly allusive 1989 novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*.)”

Cheng Lok Chua

“Mythopoesis East and West in *The Woman Warrior*”  
*Approaches* (1991) 146

“A decade after *China Men*, Kingston returned to the Vietnam period with a book that dazzles and disconcerts. The protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey*, a twenty-three-year-old Chinese American English major from the University of California, is male and weird, a 1960s hippie tripping out on drugs and enacting the courting ritual of a monkey in an unsuccessful effort to seduce his Berkeley dream girl. Whereas the reader could sympathetically identify with the narrator and many of the characters in Kingston’s two (auto)biographical works, a series of distancing devices over and above his peculiar character traits renders identification with Wittman Ah Sing unlikely. For one thing, the narrator of *Tripmaster Monkey* (a woman?) is situated beyond the sphere of action, like an omniscient seer, and treats the protagonist with irony and mistrust. We are not asked to identify with Wittman or even to like him, though he does entertain us, tease us, goad us into nonconventional possibilities....

Like *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey* draws heavily from popular Chinese literature...as well as from Western sources. Its Whitmanesque hero combines the exuberance of his American namesake (Ah Sing is clearly a pun on the 'I sing' verses of *Leaves of Grass*), the angst of the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke, and the mischief of the Chinese Monkey King, from Wu Ch'eng-en's seventeenth-century *Monkey* (or *Journey to the West*). The play Wittman is writing is a modern version of Kuan-Chung Lo's *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. Allusions to several other Chinese novels add to the multileveled parodic effect of the entire book. Story behind story, mask behind mask, the reader is continuously jolted into...estrangement from characters and plot...a far cry from the lyrical directness of Walt Whitman a century earlier.... A postmodern sensibility suffuses her writing. Her innovative autobiography, *The Woman Warrior*, helped to distend and define that genre. *China Men* created a model of collective biography drawn from personal experience, historical facts, and the imaginary. With *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston has entered the predominantly male arena of postmodern fiction and, in just one novel, secured an enviable position among its leading practitioners."

Marilyn Yalom  
"The Woman Warrior as Postmodern Autobiography"  
*Approaches* (1991) 114-15

Michael Hollister (2015)