



BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

Maxine Hong Kingston: Part I

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A production of Public Affairs Television, Inc., 356 West 58th Street, New York, NY 10019. Presented by WNET/New York and WTTW/Chicago. Funding provided by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation.

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Maxine Hong Kingston: Part I

BILL MOYERS: [*voice-over*] When Maxine Hong Kingston was growing up in Stockton, California, she listened to her parents' stories and memories of China, and they became part of her story. *Woman Warrior* and *China Men* are part childhood memoir, part meditation, part magic. They blend the traditional stories her mother told her with her family history. She linked the legendary women of China to herself as a young American student at Berkeley in the '60s. She linked the Chinese laborers who built the Union Pacific to her brother, fighting in Vietnam. In her first work of fiction, *Tripmaster Monkey*, she created Whitman Ah Sing, a young Chinese-American man looking for a calling and a community.

At her home in Oakland, I talked to Maxine Hong Kingston about being a stranger, being an American, being a human being.

[*Interviewing*] I read the other day that your books are the most widely taught on college campuses today, of any American author.

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON: Yes. Any living American author.

MOYERS: So much of what you write about, your own childhood, your ancestors, sounds so exotic to mainstream Americans that it's another world, and I wonder what they take away from that world.

KINGSTON: I should hope that at some point they would not think "exotic" anymore, that they will see that I write about Americans, that I am writing about this country, and that—I would hope that they would take away what it means to be a human being. I think I teach people how to find meaning. I put in the most chaotic, tragic, hard-to-deal-with events, and these events are sometimes so violent and so horrible that it bursts through bounds of form and preconceptions. And I'm hoping that the readers, or the students, will find that—they will find how to get meaning out of those events. How do you find beauty and order when we've had this bloody, horrible past?

MOYERS: How do you do it?

KINGSTON: Well, one way is to take a raw human event and put it through the process of art. Maybe as an example—at the beginning of *No Name Woman*, at the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*, I write about my aunt, who died a seemingly senseless death, a suicide with a baby, an entire village rising up against her, forcing her to kill herself and her illegitimate child, a community that's broken by a woman who breaks taboos. And I heard this story, and it—it just tore me up inside. You know, when I wrote that, I thought, "I'm not going to publish this, the—I'm telling family secrets, I'm not going to publish this." But I told myself that, because then it gave me the freedom to write it. But when I got through writing it, maybe 10, 12 drafts, in pushing it toward form, then I knew I had a—I had resolution. I had a beautiful story. And most important of all, I gave this woman—this woman's life a meaning. And then I felt, "Okay, now I can publish it."

There's a moral goodness that comes out of that story. There's a redemption of that woman, when she was a person whose—whom the villagers wanted to wipe out, out of the book of life. They wanted to take a person who was born into this world, who existed, and they just wanted to wipe her out in memory and in history. That's a horrible, terrible thing to do to a living creature. And—

but by writing it, I bring her back to life. I give her life and I give her immortality. That's part of—

MOYERS: She lives forever, doesn't she?

KINGSTON: —yes, and that's part of the beauty. This is part of the beauty. And the beauty includes all of that.

MOYERS: When I think about your life, I think often of the invisible violence at work in the world, and I think of your mother, who was trained to be a doctor, who came to this country and had to work in the fields, as a fieldhand.

KINGSTON: Mm-hmm.

MOYERS: I think of your father, a scholar and a poet as a young man in China, who came to this country and spent the rest of his life working in a gambling house and in a laundry.

KINGSTON: Mm-hmm.

MOYERS: And how they coped with that, and what they must see in you, fulfilling their own lifelong yearning.

KINGSTON: Well, my parents have immense lives, and in that sense they—I think they have immense souls. And you know, they don't seem to think in a way—they don't seem to be careerists. I mean, I don't sense a bitterness that, "I was once a doctor and now I'm a fieldhand." That doesn't seem to be in them. There was that artistic yearning in my father, and I think what has happened is that that died, because I think his poetry came out of the land of China. He came here, and he couldn't hear the poetry anymore.

However, my father has—after my books had been published, he has also said, "You're leading the life that I wanted." And I know that that's been an immense satisfaction to him.

MOYERS: Does he comment on the books?

KINGSTON: Oh, well, see, he's—the poetry has come back to him, because when—in *China Men*, I put out a challenge to him, actually. This is an old Chinese kung fu challenge, and I said, "Father, I'm going to write your stories, and you'll just have to speak up if I've got you wrong." And then, in the Chinese translation, there's a large margin for *China Men*. And maybe that's why they put in the large margins. And my father wrote commentary.

MOYERS: On the side.

KINGSTON: All throughout it.

MOYERS: Well, that's traditional in ancient Chinese writings—

KINGSTON: Yes.

MOYERS: —that after the author would finish, or in the great scriptures of the monks and others—

KINGSTON: Confucius.

MOYERS: —the scholars would come in, Confucius, yes, was writing in the margin of ancient scriptures. And your father did that with *China Men*.

KINGSTON: My father did that.

MOYERS: With *China Men*, with your book?

KINGSTON: Yes, with *China Men*.

MOYERS: What did he—what did you think when you read them, the commentary?

KINGSTON: Well, you know, a lot of the commentary is so reconciling, you know, and I write a lot about sexism, and a lot of angry stuff. He did a commentary for *Woman Warrior*, too, and everywhere that I had that kind of angry feminist accusation, then he would put something wonderful, like "Women hold up half the sky," that kind of stuff. And I wanted his poetry to live somewhere, to be honored somewhere, so I gave his books to the Bancroft Library and then

they had a reception where they put my work and galleys and everything on display. I wanted to surprise my father. I took him there without telling him what he was going to see, and I took him right up to the display case, and I showed him—and he looked, and this wonderful smile came to his face, and he looked around at all the people, and he said in English, “My writing.” You know, so he didn’t just live through me, he had—the words came to him here, they did.

MOYERS: What a wonderful conversation between daughter and father, on the margins of a book.

KINGSTON: Yeah, and—

MOYERS: How old is he?

KINGSTON: —oh, I don’t know, 87, 85, something like that.

MOYERS: And your mother is still living, too?

KINGSTON: Yeah, yeah, she’s also about 86, I guess.

MOYERS: Did she respond to your writing? Did she ever tell you, “You’ve got it right,” or, “No, Maxine.”

KINGSTON: Oh, yeah. She says: “How did you do it so accurately? How did you describe China so accurately?” is what she asked me.

MOYERS: Because you’ve never been there.

KINGSTON: Yeah, I’ve never been there. Yeah, yeah.

MOYERS: But so many of the stories that you tell in *Woman Warrior*, *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey* are stories you reconstructed.

KINGSTON: Mm-hmm.

MOYERS: And yet somehow you reconstructed it in a way, you invented it—or reinvented it, in a way that rang true to them. Now, what does that say about the imagination, and about art?

KINGSTON: Oh. Well, for one thing, it says that I have a very strong imagination. And I now understand that the strong imagination imagines the truth, sees a vision of the truth. Imagination doesn’t—a good strong imagination doesn’t go off into some wild fantasy of nowhere. It goes to the truth. It also tells a lot about the talk-story tradition, thousands of years of people who passed on history, genealogy, skills by speaking it. And they managed to take this across the ocean and to give it to me, and see, what—I don’t reconstruct it, and in the sense that I don’t invent what was before, I invent the next stage, I go on. Because—

MOYERS: You make up the story as it continues—you continue the story.

KINGSTON: —yeah, because, yeah, yeah, so what it means is the human being carries on the next stage, the next evolution of the story. So what happens when the immigrants bring those stories, see, what I’ve told are the new American stories.

MOYERS: With the root, with an antecedent that is in your mother’s stories, and the stories of your grandmother and the stories of your great-great-grandmother.

KINGSTON: Yeah. It goes back forever.

MOYERS: When I told some Asian-Americans back in New York that I was going to come out and interview you, they said: “That’s wonderful. She’s a wonderful storyteller, and she describes her own life so vividly and so marvelously. But we just wish she were more political. We wish she were more active in the political—

KINGSTON: Have they—

MOYERS: —in the political struggle for equal rights.

KINGSTON: They must not have read *Tripmaster Monkey*. I think it’s very political. And I’m out—I’m out on the streets. I am.

MOYERS: Well, yes—it comes out of the bookstores into the streets. But I think what they say is, “Well, he’s so American.” Your chief protagonist, your hero, Whimian Ah Sing is a very American figure.

KINGSTON: Yes, he is a very American—he is. And I mean him to be a fourth- and fifth-generation American. In *Tripmaster Monkey* I think he’s very political in the sense of carrying out his vision, which is that to carry out something that Chinese people have always had a genius for, which is community. And Whimian Ah Sing decides that, well, being a real American he’s very alienated, he’s very individual. And then he says, where’s my community? And this is his politics, to find a way that people can have a harmonious relationship.

This carries out a theme that I realize I’ve had from the very beginning, how do you have a communal village, like in *The Woman Warrior*? How—what’s going to keep that village together? And then I take that idea through *China Men*, where they establish Chinatowns. And then now, in America, there’s no families, there’s no community.

MOYERS: No neighborhoods anymore.

KINGSTON: No neighborhoods.

MOYERS: Few neighborhoods.

KINGSTON: Yeah. What are we going to do?

MOYERS: He does it through the theater.

KINGSTON: Yes.

MOYERS: He creates a play that brings an audience to it, and they all share in that experience.

KINGSTON: Yeah, yes.

MOYERS: Such a transient community, such a fugitive community.

KINGSTON: Right.

MOYERS: But I guess that’s all we can hope for today.

KINGSTON: No, no, we can hope for—we have to do more. And this is my idea for the next novel, is to figure out how to make community in America that includes all kinds of people. Not a ghetto Chinatown community, but that includes all kinds of people.

What I will have to do, first, is my research. And—or some lab work, or field work. I want to gather a group of about six Vietnam veterans that I know, some of them Asian-American veterans, and take them to a Vietnamese commune in France. And there’s a commune there that’s run by a Vietnamese monk—I haven’t asked him yet—but I would like him to lead my veterans in some meditation, and for us to stay there for a while. And as a writer, I want to observe this. I want to watch what happens. I want to watch what happens in this community, this sanctuary, this coming together of Vietnamese and war veterans. I want to bring a peace veteran, too, and that’s me. And in a nonfiction, journalistic way—

MOYERS: I started to say you’re thinking journalism here.

KINGSTON: Yeah. I want to watch what happens. I’m going to put this lab experiment together and watch what happens. But then, as a fiction writer, I already know what I want to happen. Then I will have to figure out a form of this book where I write down the nonfiction of what happened, and it’s very important I also write down the fiction of what happens. And I’m going to put that side by side in my book. Now, I’m going to have to stretch my form in order to do this.

MOYERS: Isn’t there a danger that your reader doesn’t know if your stories are true or not, that we are required to decide whether the story you’re telling about the Vietnam veterans is fact or fiction.

KINGSTON: Of course, I should put burdens to readers, and I should give them challenges, and—because readers and people already have this burden. I mean, say they're not even readers. All human beings have this burden of life to consciously figure out what's true, what's authentic, what's meaningful and what's dross. And what's a—hallucination, and what's a figment and what's madness.

MOYERS: Why the Vietnam war? Why the—what do you want to accomplish by taking these veterans to this meditation?

KINGSTON: Well, maybe it's because Vietnam was my war, and I now see this as a theme that's gone through my life and in my writing. I've often regretted calling *The Woman Warrior The Woman Warrior*, because as the decades go by, I've become more and more of a pacifist, and I think, why did I put a war title in that first book? And in *China Men* I wrote about my brother in Vietnam, and that was a—such a troublesome, scary time. And I still haven't figured it out, how we are going to take that experience, this war that covered so much of my life—I actually saw those years as a darkness that covered the world—and I need to—I need to end it. I need to find the light that comes out of that war.

MOYERS: I tell you, though, you know what you're up against. What you're up against comes out of your own tradition. There were—in the tradition of China there were the peace—

KINGSTON: Yeah.

MOYERS:—what do they call them, the peace books?

KINGSTON: The three books of peace.

MOYERS: The three books of peace. And you know what happened to them.

KINGSTON: Yes, there's—some historians or some politician burned them.

MOYERS: They were burned, and the people who remembered them and tried to recite them had their tongues torn out.

KINGSTON: Yeah, they were tortured, and killed and they had to sometimes burn their own books.

MOYERS: And that's what you're up against, in trying to find a novel and an experience that go beyond healing.

KINGSTON: Yeah. Maybe we can retrieve those peace books by trying to write them. By—by trying to figure out what was in them. And I think of that as one of my tasks as a writer. I must write at least one of them. And this *Woman Warrior* story, I—again, I—one of the mistakes, or now with my being older, I look back and I think, there are parts of that story that I left out on purpose, and maybe I shouldn't have left them out, because Fa Mu Lan came back from the battles against the Mongols, and when she returned, she brought her army with her. And she asked them to wait outside. She came home. She went inside the house, she got out of her armor and, I guess, took a bath, and put on her feminine clothes. And she did her hair, and she put flowers in it. And then she presented herself to her army, and she was a beautiful woman. And she said, "I was the general that was leading you." And they were just flabbergasted, that it's a woman. When I wrote that story, I left that out.

MOYERS: Why?

KINGSTON: Because I didn't want to—as a feminist, I want to get rid of that—high-heeled shoes and the makeup and that kind of stuff. And I wanted to show us women as being just as powerful as men. And so I was thinking, "Oh, you know, forget this, shaving under the arms and that stuff." So I left it out. But now I'm thinking, no, don't leave it out, because the reason that the ancient storytellers put it in there, maybe two reasons. One is to let women have the credit for being able to have those powers, and the second reason, more important maybe, is to say that this woman went away to war and came back and was

not brutalized.

She came back and she could be whole, and she could still be a woman in the sense of a family person and a community person. She—the reason she went to war was to take her father's place. And so she came back, and now she took another place in this community, as a woman, as a person who brings the community together, and to have children and all that. And not be—and not be dehumanized by the war, and not be broken by it. Not become depressed or alcoholic or all of those things.

And so it's important to figure out how do you do that? How do you come back from a war and then turn back into a beautiful woman?

MOYERS: So you sometimes wish you could rewrite what you have written?

KINGSTON: Yeah, yeah. I have decided that part of this book—that that this new form that I'm going to create will have to include going back and finishing the story of Fa Mu Lan as a beautiful communal woman, and then taking, in *China Men*, which ends with my brother coming back depressed from Vietnam, and so I mean for this book to, in a sense, find—I know what I want to do, I want to—

MOYERS: It's coming to you now.

KINGSTON:—yes, it's coming to me, I've got it, I know what I'm going to say.

MOYERS: Do you want to write this down?

KINGSTON: Yes, let me—

MOYERS: What do you want to do?

KINGSTON:—the—you know, we can change the past by figuring out the meanings, new meanings of events that took place. And now, so I want to redo some of those events, and say, "These are the meanings." Such as the meaning of *The Woman Warrior*. The earlier meaning was, we feminists have masculine powers, too. We can go into battle and lead armies. But now this new meaning I'm finding from that myth is war does not have to brutalize us. See, in that sense I want to rewrite, for these new meanings that I've discovered in my life.

MOYERS: If we were only artists with our lives, we could do in our histories, our own personal pasts, what you're doing with your mythical figures. We're not allowed that privilege, living literally, are we?

KINGSTON: Oh, yes we are. Of course we are. We are allowed it. We—but you're right, that we are all artists in our lives, and then the books teach us how to do it.

MOYERS: You think that you can look back at your life and either redo it or find a meaning in it that was hidden to you at the time?

KINGSTON: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. I mean, I can't actually redo it, I mean—

MOYERS: No.

KINGSTON:—and so I think people live with a lot of regrets, because there's some choice they made that they think is wrong, or there's some part of life that they think they missed. A lot of regrets like that. You can't redo it in the sense of being young again and jumping in a fountain of youth, but you can redo it by having—I mean we have a bank of memories, and you—and you work with your memories and the feelings of that time, and think about them, use your head, and find meanings and values that come out of it. And that's how you change the past.

MOYERS: [voice-over] We'll continue this conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston next time on a World of Ideas. I'm Bill Moyers.