



# BILL MOYERS' WORLD OF IDEAS

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**Maxine Hong Kingston: Part II**

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**Producer: Leslie Clark**

**Executive Producers: Judith Davidson Moyers and Bill Moyers**

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 II

**BILL MOYERS:** [voice-over] By 1989, Maxine Hong Kingston was already celebrated for her memoirs, *Woman Warrior* and *China Men*. Then she turned to fiction, with *Tripmaster Monkey*, her first novel, and so was born Whitman Ah Sing, liberal arts major, theater director and inventive social deviant. Through her bad-boy hero, a young Chinese-American, Kingston wrote of the search for meaning in her own life.

At her home in Oakland, California, she talked with me about how we can use our imagination to grow and change.

*Interviewing!* I've liked something you said about growing up. You said, "Growing up means gaining the ability to carry ideas forth into the world." I like that idea of maturity, of being able to carry ideas into the world. And you're not talking just artistically there, you're talking about in our lives, of being able to carry our thoughts into the world of action.

**MAXINE HONG KINGSTON:** Mm-hmm, mm-hmm, mm-hmm. And this is—this is what I'm thinking that I—this is what I'm working with in *Tripmaster Monkey*, actually. Because this is a book about a reader. This is a person—**MOYERS:** About a reader?

**KINGSTON:** Oh, yeah. Whitman Ah Sing is a reader. Yeah. See, his mind is made up on being an English major. I mean, all of those books that we read in college. You know who he's like? He's like Emma Bovary, and he's like Don Quixote. Both those people were readers. Don Quixote read the chivalric romances. This is what made him go out on his quest. And the reason that Emma Bovary had her affair was, she was reading those harlequin romances. And then she decided this was the way she was going to live.

Well, Whitman Ah Sing is the same way. He's a liberal arts major, and he's finished that amazing education, and now what? Now there's no job that he's fit for. I mean, all people want to know is if he can type. And there's—so what is he going to do? And his idea is that he has to go out in the world and find a way, and—so throughout this book, first, his solution is to find sort of a literary, artistic way, which is the theater. But I think in the next book, he's got to sustain this. And this is what growing up means—to sustain, carrying out your values into the real world.

**MOYERS:** Whitman Ah Sing is 23 in this book. Can you envision him at 40?

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah. In the sense that I can envision myself at 40. I mean, I've been 40, so I know — [laughter]

**MOYERS:** I have, too, let's see, [laughter] it was a long time ago.

**KINGSTON:** —yes, yeah, yeah.

**MOYERS:** I hope he's more likable when he grows up. I have to tell you, that I had to struggle to — not to read the book, it's a fascinating story — but to like him. He was so garrulous. He talks all the time, and he just won't shut up.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Many people have told me they don't like him, and I—maybe what's happening there is that maybe something—he is responding to racism. This is why he's not likable. He means to be offensive. I think somewhere in there he says, "We ought to offend them." And what he's reacting to is—maybe he knows how to be charming. Minority people in America

know—we know how to be charming, because there's very charming stereotypes out there.

**MOYERS:** So, by making him offensive, making him his own man, so to speak, irrespective of what the prevailing majority think about him, he's breaking that stereotype of the, "Oh, yes, please, sir," Chinese.

**KINGSTON:** Oh, yes. Yes. You know, and what a dilemma he's in, because if—because if he acts, puts on a style of somebody that's likable, then he's playing into the hands of an America that wants to emasculate him. And what's sad is that when many people tell me that they don't like Whitman and his personality, what they're also telling me is that they don't like the personalities of a lot of actual Asian-American men who are out there. There's a lot of them who act like Whitman Ah Sing.

**MOYERS:** I don't want to be unfair to him, because while I found him offensive at times, I also found him absolutely intriguing. The way he looks at the world, I mean, his fantasy of—the way he looks at the world—he gets fired from his job in the department store because he stages a pornographic scene between a Barbie doll and a battery-operated monkey. And then he imagines himself going to the loudspeaker system and announcing in a crowded holiday season, "We have found an unconscious, bleeding child, probably dead, in the toy department."

And then he sees himself as a nuclear martyr. He has an atomic detonator in his body, so that the president of the United States will have to kill him before he declares war. And this, to me, is what makes him an American, among other things. The moment he sees the world with that sardonic—

**MOYERS:** American surrealism, that is a part of it.

**KINGSTON:** —yeah, right. Then he becomes an American to me.

**MOYERS:** Oh, I see, I see.

**MOYERS:** And also when he's offensive, because I find a lot of Americans, when they truly are finally American, are offensive.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah.

**MOYERS:** [Crosstalk]

**KINGSTON:** You know, now that I think about it, a lot of offensive guys that I know [laughter] have told me that they are Whitman Ah Sing, and they say that—they say how—"You must have been following me around, that's my life." And so what seems to have happened, maybe, is that I've written an archetype. If I—

**MOYERS:** Discovered an archetype.

**KINGSTON:** —yes. I kind of can do this with a man. When I write about a man, it seems easier, but it just occurs to me, what if I wrote about a woman who breaks Chinese-American stereotypes? Because there is sort of a pleasant stereotype about Chinese-American women, that there's a sort of a geisha girl, feminine, beautiful—and in that sense, acceptable, and not scary. But what if I was to break the—that stereotype, then what would happen?

**MOYERS:** Well, some critics—Chinese-American critics of Chinese-American and Asian-American women writers, say that they are reinforcing the stereotype by making the characters in their novels exotic.

**KINGSTON:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** And that by appealing to the interest of Americans in exotic characters, they are making forever foreigners these women. Maybe it's that criticism.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. And you know, all of this puts the writer into a terrible bind, because how do I work with mystery if I'm

denied the exotic? You know, exoticism is just sort of a cheap way of denying a—something that's true mystery. In life there is—there is deep mystery. But what people in the West have done is to say, "No, mystery belongs to the Orient; we don't have mystery." What happens is that we deny what's truly exotic and mysterious in ourselves. And a lot of it is—and also there, we do have things in our lives that are foreign. There are certain statues that we keep in the house, or there's—there's incense and altars in a lot of houses, and this is so common to us, but when you look from outside eyes, it's exotic.

From the beginning, I've had a very hard time figuring out what is in the common knowledge, and what has to be explained. And how do you write a short story that has all the tensions of a narration if I have to stop very often and do expository work? How do I give people all the history which they really ought to know? I can't easily refer to a myth that's not in our common culture, which ought to be in our common culture. How do I slip this knowledge in and give people background, and yet be able to play with references, and with history, and with a figurine that—all that he is, is a common thing in my life, but it has deep roots and background, how do I give the reader that sense.

**MOYERS:** But until I read *China Men*, I never thought about the fact that when the railroads met, the East and West railroads, when the golden spike was driven, that the Chinese workmen might have stopped and cheered that triumph, as you in fact have them doing in your book.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah.

**MOYERS:** I learned something from that, while enjoying the story.

**KINGSTON:** Yes. I also wanted to remind people that the golden spike was symbolic, that—we had one of the white bosses—or it might have been Crocker himself, I don't know—symbolically drive in the golden spike, then they took it out, and then they put in a real steel spike, and a Chinese drove that one in.

**MOYERS:** There's a wonderful line in *Tripmaster Monkey* that stayed with me, and I'm wondering both why is it in there and how is it Maxine carried it around with her? It's just this simple line, "In the cremations along the Ganges, the mourners stay with the burning body until its head pops." Where did you get that?

**KINGSTON:** I don't know. I don't know how I got that. I—but I know that. I must have heard it somewhere. But I also know that—I have a lot of knowledge that seems to have come from some kind of racial memory, I don't—I don't know how I know that. In the end of *The Woman Warrior* I have the warriors going into battle with whistles on the backs of their arrows, so that when—the arrows can make a whistling sound. And then they take the arrow whistles and make them into flutes. And now, I knew that then, but then later I went to a museum, and then I found those arrows in a museum, and so I often think that—actually, sometimes I think I create this stuff, that I make it up, and then the world manufactures it for me.

**MOYERS:** It conforms itself to your vision.

**KINGSTON:** Or I can see it, and—

**MOYERS:** That's magic.

**KINGSTON:** —I—maybe it has to do with, I imagine it, therefore I can find it. This is part of my research method, too. I have an idea—like in *Tripmaster Monkey*, I had an idea that I wanted Chinese-Americans to have a wonderful reason for coming to America, like I love it that the Pilgrims came for religious freedom and political freedom. And then I think, well what is—the stereotype is

that we came here to—for gold.

**MOYERS:** Yes.

**KINGSTON:** And that—

**MOYERS:** To run laundries.

**KINGSTON:** —yeah, and well, that we came here, made money and went away. That we came and ripped it off and went back. And I thought, "No, I want to—a wonderful reason, like the Pilgrims." And so I thought the best reason would be to come here for the fun of it. We came here to put on shows, the theater, and bring the monkey spirit. And then I went to look for my—then I went to find the evidence. And I found that one of the first groups of immigrants was a troupe of 100 opera players that started a theater in San Francisco. And I found that the first theater in Sacramento was a puppet man who brought 1,000 puppet bodies and 100 heads, and so Chinese do do this. They go out all over the world to—with the spirit of the monkey, and they put on shows.

**MOYERS:** And if they came here for fun, and I take your word for it, that's certainly not why the Puritans came. So that's another stream—

**KINGSTON:** Oh, they didn't come here for—

**MOYERS:** —but that's another stream in the America—

**KINGSTON:** —oh, that's wonderful, I love it.

**MOYERS:** —that's another stream in the American complexion that is emerging.

**KINGSTON:** Oh, that's terrific. I like it. See, from this one came the Puritan, non-fun spirit, and from here came the monkey spirit, and we're all together now, and we're going to see what happens.

**MOYERS:** Finally we can be fun. We can follow the Protestant ethic, but we can also have fun.

**KINGSTON:** Yes,—so there's this integrating of all this stuff. Because the archetype behind the archetype of Whitman Ah Sing is the monkey spirit, the king of the monkeys. That, I've discovered, but what I've written, is the new one, the modern one, that exists in America. And this is why so many people can say, "Why, that's me, you've written my diary," or, "How did you know?"

**MOYERS:** Well, that's why I have mixed feelings about your growing him up in the sequel. I'm not sure that I would remember Huck Finn if Huck Finn were 40 in a later Twain novel, or Holden Caulfield. I mean, there are some characters in literature who live only because they are forever young. And Whitman Ah Sing has this modern, irreverent, sardonic—

**KINGSTON:** Bad. He wants to be bad.

**MOYERS:** —yeah. In fact, there's a line where he says, "I want to be the first bad jazz bluesman in America." Now, that's a rhythm and a tempo that's right out of Newark, and the rap group.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah. That's because his role models up to that time where he's talking are blacks. I mean, it's the blacks at the time that he's talking about are doing heroic things in civil rights, and they've already written this—they've already gotten a great literature. They—and they have so obviously transformed American life with their music, that this is their way of changing America. And they—it's—when a person—when you see a black person, you never ask them, "Are you an American or an African?" You just know. But you do with a Chinese person. So he wants to be like the blacks.

**MOYERS:** He cries out, he says: "Where are our blues? Where is our jazz?"

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah.

**MOYERS:** What's the answer to that? Where are your blues, where is your

jazz?

**KINGSTON:** Oh, well, I'm creating it. I think this is— mine is— I— this is— in order to create it, we have to do some kind of fusion with the— what's come to us from China. We need to take this Chinese-American accent that we have and make it part of mainstream America. Change the American language in order to be— to make a language, to make the English language have our accent and words.

**MOYERS:** One of the questions I have about Whitman, if you grow him up—

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah.

**MOYERS:** —is, what will you have to do to satisfy the mother who created him, that he's a good man?

**KINGSTON:** Now, he is going to grow up. It's not if. He has to. He has to. Because that's our hope for the world. There have to be authors who can picture—who can create characters growing up. I mean for the mother, me, to give him lots of help growing up. And in the next book, I mean to be— her to be more present, and she's going to help. That's me—I'm going to help and push this young man, and guide him, and interact with him, give him suggestions, and see whether he can do it. And then, in real life, in real life, I do push him, suggest, to my son, how to grow up.

**MOYERS:** What's the—that old Jewish prayer? "Lord, teach me when to let go." And that's for the mother and the father.

**KINGSTON:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** And a writer has to do—I mean, sooner or later, you have to let not only your real son, but Whitman Ah Sing, you have to let him go.

**KINGSTON:** I'll let him go after he grows up. I'm going to—I have to—I'm not ready to let him go yet.

**MOYERS:** Spoken like a real mother.

**KINGSTON:** Not ready yet. Yeah, you're—you're asking, what does this— yeah, I'm not going to let go until— until I see that they are good men, and it's not yet. There's—

**MOYERS:** Well, what is a good man?

**KINGSTON:** —yeah. A good man is one who does not die tragically, yet. Who does not die before he's fulfilled his service to the world. I would like— maybe a good man is a Confucian man, and I think of a Confucian man as one who comes into maybe a chaotic scene, a chaotic home, or a chaotic country, and brings order, finds a way to bring order, community, peace, harmony. Who is able to establish peace among people in a family, to set up a relationship between people, between countries, within a society.

**MOYERS:** That's a familiar story to me, having watched a lot of Westerns when I grew up, of the good man, Shane, he rides into town, a town under house arrest, so to speak, from violence and coercion, and—

**KINGSTON:** Yeah.

**MOYERS:** —creates peace. Sometimes with the aid of a gun.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, except that I want to figure out a way for those heroes not to use the means of the gun. I mean, we know lots of ways of solving, bringing peace with guns and with stockpiles of weapons. And those means we've figured out. I think it's the task of the writer, the thinker, the visionary, to find more means, like the ones that Martin Luther King and Gandhi figured out. They were such pioneers, and yet they only figured out a few. I think of those as Zen gestures of peace.

**MOYERS:** But Maxine, Americans are so addicted to excitement and crisis.

**KINGSTON:** Yes.

**MOYERS:** Would we read a novel in which characters dealt nonviolently with each other?

**KINGSTON:** You know, I have to figure that out. I— that's a job for me, because we are addicted to violence in life and in our reading. The form of the novel and the short story is— we set up confrontations between enemies. It—we— there are problems. And then there's this climax that's very violent.

**MOYERS:** There's an old adage in creative writing that the loaded gun in an early chapter has to go off later on.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah.

**MOYERS:** You've got to find a different way to unload it.

**KINGSTON:** That's right. That's right. I need to figure that out. Yeah, yeah.

**MOYERS:** Do you think it's your job as the writer to imagine a healthy world?

**KINGSTON:** Yeah. Yeah, yeah. I have to imagine it, because how are we going to build it if we don't imagine it? And writers and artists, we have to—we free ourselves in order to imagine it. And we need to imagine the humane being so that we can put that archetype out there, so that we can become it.

**MOYERS:** One of the questions I have about Whitman Ah Sing, who at 23, student at Berkeley, believes he can change the world by theater and fun and laughter. I wonder, at 40, if the world will have treated— treated brutally with him, if he still will believe that? Did you believe that in the '60s?

**KINGSTON:** That we could change the world?

**MOYERS:** Mm-hmm.

**KINGSTON:** Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah.

**MOYERS:** Do you believe it now?

**KINGSTON:** Yeah. I still believe we can change the world. Oh, I want to— yeah—and we do it word by word, just one word at a time. An example is—I wrote *China Men* about 10 years ago, and then I traveled around the country promoting my book and giving interviews, and people would introduce me to an audience and say, "This is Maxine Hong Kingston, the writer of *Chinamen Fall One Word*." And I— and then I'm in a dilemma, you know. Do I rudely interrupt and say: "Don't say *Chinamen*, that's a slur, I need to educate you people, and it's *China Men*, it's two words. It replicates the way the Chinese language is, one word, one—you know, spondee." And—but now, as I go around and people— people say "*China Men*." And I— yeah, I've changed the language. During these 10 years, I've changed people's mouths. They no longer slur that word. They say it the way I wrote it, and they don't slur the word and they don't slur me. And they say it right, and they read better, and so I've changed the world. One — in this case, two — words at a time.

**MOYERS:** [voice-over] From her home in Oakland, California, this has been a conversation with Maxine Hong Kingston. I'm Bill Moyers.

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