Biography of Maxine Hong Kingston



The Woman Warrior

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Chapter 1
A Childhood Among “Ghosts” in Stockton (1940–1958)



汤亭亭回广东新会省亲时留影

On 27 October 1940, Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California. She was her parents' first child born in the United States and the third of eight siblings, as her mother had previously given birth to two children in China.

Her father, Tom Hong, came from Gujing, Xinhui County, Guangdong Province, and left his hometown for the United States in 1925. Originally a well-educated village teacher, he could find work only in a laundry after arriving in America, although he eventually established his own laundry business.

Her mother, Ying Lan Chew, was a midwife who had studied at a medical school in Guangzhou and was described as “the first doctor to bring Western medicine back to the village.” She was not able to reunite with her husband in the United States until 1939.

Her English name, “Maxine,” was taken from a blonde gambler of the time who was reputed to bring good fortune. Her parents hoped their daughter would bring similar luck to the family. Her Chinese name, “Tingting,” was chosen by her father to signify an independent spirit that did not rely upon others, rather than the delicate grace and submissiveness traditionally associated with the expression niaoniao tingting.

Kingston grew up in Stockton's Chinese community. Her parents initially earned a living operating a gambling establishment before turning to the laundry business, where she and her siblings worked long hours. Yet more profound than material hardship were the dual “ghosts” of language and culture. In her autobiography, she described growing up among “ghosts”: her white neighbours were “ghosts,” while the supernatural beings in the Cantonese stories she could not fully understand were also “ghosts.” At public school, she experienced prolonged years of silence, struggling to speak because of language barriers.

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Yet storytelling was an essential part of family life. After breakfast, her mother would tell the children about their dreams, and before bedtime, she would recount stories until they fell asleep. Kingston's maternal grandfather had been renowned for telling stories every day in the village square. Her mother's accounts of Hua Mulan, Yue Fei, Cai Wenji and tales from Strange Stories from a Chinese Studio became her earliest sources of intellectual and imaginative nourishment. Her father frequently recited classical poetry and introduced her to Romance of the Three Kingdoms and Dream of the Red Chamber.

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Chapter 2
From Engineering to Literature: A Turning Point at Berkeley (1958–1962)

In 1958, Maxine Hong Kingston received a scholarship to attend the University of California, Berkeley. She initially majored in Engineering but soon transferred to the Department of English Literature.

This change carried considerable significance. A Chinese-American girl who had grown up working in a laundry moved away from the supposedly practical field of engineering towards literature, a discipline often regarded as having little immediate economic value. The decision represented both a departure from parental expectations and a search for her own voice. She read William Carlos Williams, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, as well as Natsume Sōseki and Pearl S. Buck.

In 1962, she graduated from Berkeley with a bachelor's degree in English Literature. That same year, she married her classmate, the actor Earll Kingston. Two years later, their son, Joseph Lawrence Chung Mei, was born.

After graduation, she taught English at a school serving an impoverished neighbourhood in a small town not far from San Francisco. During the 1960s, Kingston and her husband

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became actively involved in the antiwar movement in Berkeley. In 1967, hoping to escape the increasing violence and drug use associated with the movement, they travelled to Japan before eventually settling in Hawaii.

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Chapter 3
Seventeen Years in Hawaii: From Teacher to Writer (1967–1984)

Maxine Hong Kingston spent seventeen years in Hawaii. She taught art and English at a private secondary school and was later appointed a Visiting Professor of English at the University of Hawaii. She also received a Guggenheim Fellowship.

One unexpected evening in the summer of 1973 changed her life. Kingston and her husband were holidaying on a small island near Honolulu. That evening, they went to see a film, but the projector unexpectedly malfunctioned, forcing them to return to their hotel. With little else to do, Kingston picked up a pen and casually wrote two pages. Those pages would eventually become the outline of The Woman Warrior.

Two years later, after repeated revisions and additions, she completed the manuscript of The Woman Warrior. Published by Alfred A. Knopf in 1976, the book immediately caused a sensation in American literary circles. At the age of thirty-six, Kingston became famous almost overnight.

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Chapter 4
The Woman Warrior: A Mulan Who Challenged Stereotypes (1976)

The full title of Kingston's book is The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts.

Its opening words, “You must not tell anyone what I am about to tell you,” became so widely recognised that they were reportedly adopted as a fashionable greeting on American university campuses, with young people repeating the phrase when meeting one another.

The book unfolds through the intertwined storytelling of mother and daughter, reimagining the figure of Hua Mulan from Chinese legend. The mother cuts the membrane beneath her daughter's tongue so that she can become articulate and outspoken. The daughter, in turn, once violently confronts a Chinese girl who cannot bring herself to speak in public, declaring: “Don't you know that if you don't talk, you're a plant? If you don't talk, you don't have a personality!” In Kingston's narrative, the courageous and optimistic characters are those willing and able to speak. Silence becomes a symbol of weakness.

Before Kingston's work appeared, Chinese women in mainstream American culture were frequently reduced to two

stereotypes: either powerless “beautiful dolls” or seductive and mysterious embodiments of evil. Through her reinterpretation of Mulan, Kingston challenged these representations and portrayed the courage, determination and sense of responsibility of Chinese-American women.

The Woman Warrior received the National Book Critics Circle Award for Nonfiction and was celebrated as a pioneering work that revitalised Chinese-American literature. It became required reading in university courses across the United States, including contemporary American literature, women's studies, ethnic studies and anthropology.

In 1998, Disney released the animated feature film Mulan, whose heroine was named Fa Mulan. The use of “Fa” rather than “Hua” reflected Kingston's rendering of the name as “Fa Mu Lan.” According to this interpretation, many American audiences first encountered Mulan through Kingston's The Woman Warrior, rather than through the opening lines of the classical Chinese Ballad of Mulan.

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Chapter 5
China Men: Restoring the Voices of Chinese-American Men (1980)

In 1980, Maxine Hong Kingston published her second major work, China Men, which can be regarded as a companion volume to The Woman Warrior.

Whereas The Woman Warrior concentrated on her mother and the women of her family, China Men turned its attention to her father and the men of earlier generations: her father, grandfather and great-grandfather, along with the countless Chinese men who spent their lives labouring on Hawaii's sugar plantations, constructing the transcontinental railroad and working in laundries.

The book's title was itself a declaration. During the era of Chinese exclusion in the United States, the term “Chinaman” was a deeply derogatory expression. By adopting the title China Men, Kingston directly confronted that history and brought an accusation against the American government's exploitation and discrimination against people of Chinese descent. She even reproduced lengthy passages from the original legislation, placing the cold language of discriminatory laws directly before her readers.

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China Men won the National Book Award in 1981 and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize. Together with The Woman Warrior, it established Kingston's position as a leading figure in Chinese-American literature.

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Chapter 6
From Tripmaster Monkey to the “Global Novel” (1989–1990s)

In 1989, Kingston published her third major work, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book. The novel shifted its focus from rewriting Chinese-American history towards constructing a distinct Chinese-American cultural identity. Its protagonist, Ah Sing, a Chinese-American hippie living in San Francisco during the 1960s, functioned in many respects as Kingston's literary representative. Through him, she conveyed the argument that Chinese Americans were an integral part of American society and that preserving their own ethnic traditions and cultural characteristics was essential if they were to resist being passively defined by others.

Combining reality and fantasy with Eastern and Western cultural traditions, the novel received a PEN West literary award.

In the late 1980s, Kingston proposed a remarkably forward-looking concept: the “Global Novel.” She questioned the traditional aspiration to write the “Great American Novel”: “Many young Americans have a goal of writing the Great American Novel. As a Chinese American, how could I write the kind of ‘American’ novel that people recognise as such?” Her answer was that the concept could be challenged only by

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introducing Chinese cultural traditions into it. “America thinks its history is four hundred years old. How can that be? The thousands of years of history and culture carried by its ethnic minorities are also part of its history.”

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Chapter 7
The 1990s: Fire, Peace and Poetry (1991–2004)

In 1991, Maxine Hong Kingston began writing a lengthy novel entitled The Fourth Book of Peace. However, in 1993, a devastating fire destroyed the manuscript at her home in Oakland, California. The loss caused severe emotional and material distress, leaving her unable to read or write for a considerable period.

Yet she did not surrender. In 2004, The Fifth Book of Peace was published. By then, the scope of her writing had expanded beyond gender, race, class and cultural identity to encompass opposition to war and the pursuit of peace.

In March 2003, Kingston was arrested in Washington, D.C., after participating in a demonstration against the American government's decision to wage war in Iraq and crossing a police barricade. A writer in her sixties had taken to the streets in opposition to war and was taken into police custody. The incident itself became a powerful illustration of the convictions she had upheld throughout her life.

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Chapter 8
Return and Recognition: From Berkeley to National Honours (1996–2025)

In 1996, Kingston and her husband returned to California. She became a Professor of English at the University of California, Berkeley, and later held the position of Senior Lecturer Emerita. Her office was at Berkeley, and her home was once again in California, the state where she had been born, from which she had departed and to which she eventually returned.

Her list of honours was remarkable. In 1992, she was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences. She received a literary award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters and the National Humanities Medal presented by President Bill Clinton. She was also honoured as a “Living Treasure of Hawaii” by the Honolulu Buddhist community. In 2008, she received the National Book Foundation's Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters. In 2014, she was awarded the National Medal of Arts.

In 2025, the traditional Chinese edition of The Woman Warrior was published in Taiwan for the first time. In a written interview conducted across the Pacific, Kingston reflected: “I feel that I have been reincarnated three times, and in every life I was a writer. Before I could write, I sang poetry and told stories.”

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Chapter 9
Concluding Reflections: The Storytelling Art of a Woman Warrior

Maxine Hong Kingston's life can be summarised through one enduring activity: storytelling.

Her maternal grandfather was a storyteller in his village, her mother was the storyteller of the family, and Kingston herself became one of the most important storytellers in American literary history. She grew up among “ghosts”: white Americans were “ghosts,” and the supernatural beings in her mother's stories were also “ghosts.” She devoted much of her life to transforming those ghosts into words, into stories and into presences that could be seen, heard and acknowledged.

She has never been a particularly prolific writer. Between the publication of The Woman Warrior in 1976 and The Fifth Book of Peace in 2004, she produced only five major works over nearly three decades. Yet each carried considerable force. As one assessment observed, every work challenged the historical dominance of white culture in America and sought to redefine the image and position of people of Chinese descent.

Her writing methods were themselves a declaration of artistic independence. She brought together fact and fiction, memory and legend, China and America. Some critics compared this

synthesis to the balance of yin and yang, while others criticised her treatment of Chinese culture as limited and confused. Confronted with such criticism, Kingston remained composed: “I feel that I have to do this.”

In 2014, Kingston received the National Medal of Arts in recognition of her writing, which had deepened American society's understanding of Asian Americans. From a Chinese-American girl working in her family's laundry in Stockton to an indispensable figure in American literary history, Maxine Hong Kingston used her pen to pursue a lifelong undertaking: finding a way for those who had been silenced to speak. Her legacy consists not only of her published works but also of an American literary landscape fundamentally transformed by the voices she brought into it.

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