

# The Woman Warrior

by  
Maxine Hong Kingston

## StoryLines California Discussion Guide No. 11

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### About the author

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California in 1940. She studied engineering, and later English at the University of California, Berkeley. After teaching school in Hawaii for 17 years, she returned to Berkeley as a Professor of English.

### Discussion questions

Some male Chinese-American critics have faulted Kingston for perpetuating American stereotypes of the Chinese. Are American writers from nonwestern traditions under any special obligation to present positive images of their cultures, for fear of encouraging the prejudices of whites?

What is the significance of the story of Fa Mu Lan, the "woman warrior," to the story of Maxine, the laundryman's daughter? Why might earlier Chinese cultures have held females, especially female children, in such low regard? How do you react to Chinese sayings like, "Girls are maggots in the rice"?

### Additional readings

Jessica Hagedorn, ed. *Charlie Chan is Dead: An Anthology of Contemporary Asian American Fiction*, 1993.

Maxine Hong Kingston. *China Men*, 1981.

Lisa See. *On Gold Mountain: The One-Hundred Year Odyssey of My Chinese-American Family*, 1996.

Amy Tan. *The Joy Luck Club*, 1989.

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In *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, Maxine Hong Kingston, a first generation Chinese-American, recounts memories of her childhood struggle to reconcile her Chinese and American identities. The challenge of a dual identity is a common focus of novels and memoirs written by first generation Americans whose parents emigrated to the U.S. “Those of us in the first American generations,” Kingston writes, “have had to figure out how the invisible world the emigrants built around our childhoods fits in solid America.”

Her father and mother, who work long hours in their laundry in Stockton, Calif., cling to the traditions and values of their homeland and expect their daughter to do the same. But she is American-born. To her, China seems unreal—a mythical place of characters and events that existed before she was born. Complying with her parents’ expectations becomes increasingly difficult for Maxine as day by day she becomes more Americanized.

In her parents’ view, “ghosts” are anyone who is not Chinese. Thus Maxine spends her girlhood among ghosts—her teachers, classmates, and neighbors—and her mother criticizes her for “acting like the ghosts.” But there are other ghosts in Maxine’s life; she is haunted by the ghosts of her ancestors and the mythological heroines in bedtime tales told by her mother.

“Night after night,” she writes, “my mother would talk-story until we fell asleep. I couldn’t tell where the stories left off and the dreams began, her voice the voice of the heroines in my sleep.” The stories are powerful lessons in proper Chinese values and behaviors, but they are confounding to Maxine because they are appropriate to her parents’ lives in China, a world she has never known first-hand.

At the other extreme, Maxine must puzzle out for herself the details of her parents’ lives and the particulars of Chinese customs because “. . . adults get mad, evasive, and shut you up if you ask.” Furthermore, she writes:

*You get no warning that you shouldn’t wear a white ribbon in your hair until they hit you and give you the sideways glare for the rest of the day. They hit you if you wave brooms around or drop chopsticks or drum them. They hit you if you wash your hair on certain days, or tap somebody with a ruler, or step over a brother whether it’s during your menses or not. You figure out what you got hit for and don’t do it again if you figured correctly. . . . I don’t see how they kept up a continuous culture for five thousand years. Maybe they didn’t; maybe everyone makes it up as they go along. If we had to depend on being told, we’d have no religion, no babies, no menstruation (sex, of course, unspeakable), no death.”*

In recounting the lives of her ancestors in China, Kingston relies heavily on her mother’s tales, but she must fictionalize many details—imaginatively reconstruct the lives of her ancestors—in order to make sense of all she has not been told. Thus *The Woman Warrior* is not purely memoir; it weaves together fact and fiction, real lives and mythological lives. Henry Allen, in *The Washington Post*, described Kingston’s work as “a wild mix of myth, memory, history, and a lucidity which verges on the eerie.”

Chapters 1, 3 and 4 focus on three women: Maxine’s father’s sister (No-Name Woman), Maxine’s mother (Brave Orchid), and Maxine’s mother’s sister (Moon Orchid), respectively. Chapters 2 and 5 are mythological tales of Chinese heroines, the women warriors with whom Maxine identifies.

Brave Orchid is an intimidating, tradition-bound mother who in many ways displays the fierce determination, energy and power of the women warriors she so often speaks of. Indeed, her own life has been heroic. Her husband (Maxine’s father) emigrated to the U.S. 15 years before her, leaving her alone in China. During that time, the couple’s two young children die. The tenacious Brave Orchid lies about her age, gains admission to a Chinese medical college, and in two years of intensive study earns a diploma in “Midwifery, Pediatrics, Gynecology, [Medecine], [Surgery], Therapeutics, Opthamology, Bacteriology, Dermatology, Nursing, and Bandage.” She becomes a revered doctor in her village, a heroine in a culture that insisted women could be only wives or slaves.

*My mother wore a silk robe and western shoes with big heels, and she rode home carried in a sedan chair. She had gone away ordinary and come back miraculous, like the ancient magician who came down from the mountains.*

In the United States, Brave Orchid’s life takes a sharp down-turn. She cannot practice medicine, instead working at her husband’s side in a laundry, or laboring as a field hand harvesting tomatoes. At the age of 45 she gives birth to Maxine, the first of six American-born children.

Chapter 2, “White Tigers,” is a new telling of the traditional Chinese folktale of Fa Mu Lan, the young girl who took her father’s place in battle. (Disney Studios’ “Mulan” is another version of this folktale.) As a role model, Fa Mu Lan set impossible standards to which Maxine aspired. If she were to be more than a wife or slave, she must become a warrior woman, but the days of magic and mythological opportunities had vanished.

Or had they? Maxine’s own struggle to bridge the chasm between her parents’ culture and her own American childhood is an heroic act in a modern age. In Chapter 5, “A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe,” we read of Ts’ai Yen, a poet of the 1st century A.D. who is sold to barbarians and carried off to a far land. She suffers greatly from loneliness and is misunderstood in her new surroundings. At night she hears the barbarians play such a high-pitched and disturbing noise on their flutes that she moves her tent farther away:

*She hid in her tent but could not sleep through the sound. Then, out of Ts’ai Yen’s tent . . . the barbarians heard a woman’s voice singing, as if to her babies, a song so high and clear, it matched the flutes. Ts’ai sang about China and her family there. Her words seemed to be Chinese, but the barbarians understood their sadness and anger.*

Like the heroine Ts’ai Yen’s song, Maxine Hong Kingston’s book is a women’s song about China and her family and the struggles of living in an unfamiliar land.