

INTERWEAVING IDENTITIES: EXPLORING CHINESE-AMERICAN FEMINISM IN THE WORKS OF MAXINE HONG KINGSTON AND AMY TAN

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Abstract. *This research article explores the contributions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan to the discourse on Asian-American identity through an analysis of their respective literary works. Beginning with Maxine Hong Kingston's groundbreaking novel "The Woman Warrior," the article continues through Kingston's subsequent work, "China Men," further delves into the history of Chinese settlement in the United States, offering a multifaceted narrative genealogy of her family's experiences. In parallel, the article examines the impact of Amy Tan's novels, particularly "The Joy Luck Club" and "The Kitchen God's Wife," which illuminate the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, intergenerational conflicts, and cultural assimilation within Chinese-American families. Through Tan's exceptional works the article highlights her exploration of themes such as heritage, feminism, and the search for identity. Kingston and Tan have left a lasting legacy on contemporary literature, inspiring subsequent generations of Asian-American writers. Their novels continue to resonate with readers of all backgrounds, offering valuable perspectives on the immigrant experience and the evolving landscape of multiculturalism in America.*

Keywords: *cultural assimilation, Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Asian-American identity, Chinese-American literature.*

Introduction

It's undoubtedly obvious that both Maxine and Amy have contributed to the discourse on Asian-American identity by showing how the perennial American immigrant issues the first generation had to encounter and the following generation's distinctive features [1]. Maxine Hong Kingston, who astonished the literary world with her several novels. Chinese scholar Zhao Yiheng said, "The sudden rise of Chinese American novels started from Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* (1976). It is cited as an autobiographical feminist work and a model work of Chinese American women's writing, specifically focusing on the history of Chinese women itself."

This paper underlines the literary work of *Maxine Hong Kingston* and *Amy Tan* with an aim of comparing the prime discourse on Asian-American identity through a careful consideration of their respective well-read literature works. At the onset the author intend to begin the study Maxine Hong Kingston's groundbreaking novel "The Woman Warrior," In parallel, the article examines the impact of Amy Tan's novels, particularly "The Joy Luck Club" and "The Kitchen God's Wife," which explain the complexities of mother-daughter relationships, intergenerational conflicts, and cultural assimilation within Chinese-American families. Through Tan's outstanding portrayal of characters viewing between Chinese tradition and American society, the article highlights her exploration of themes such as heritage, feminism, and the search for identity. Despite criticisms and controversies surrounding their works, Kingston and Tan have left a lasting

legacy on contemporary literature, inspiring subsequent generations of Asian-American writers. Their novels continue to resonate with readers of all backgrounds, offering valuable perspectives on the immigrant experience and the evolving landscape of multiculturalism in America.

Woman Warrior is divided into five distinct parts: No Name Woman, White Tigers, Shaman, At the Western Palace, and A Song for a Barbarian Reed Pipe [2]. The stories are loosely woven together in what she calls a “mother book - a book that eventually reconciles mother and daughter. The book blends autobiography with old Chinese folktales. It describes several women in the family: an anonymous aunt, mother, and aunt, and a legendary Chinese heroine Hua Mulan [3]. In this novel, Kingston explores the issue of women's “identity” in Chinese tradition. The tragedies of the anonymous woman and the Moon Orchid are due to being deprived of their family-recognized identities. At the end of "No-Name Woman", Kingston reflects on the importance of her mother's story. She concludes that the real lesson is not how No-Name Woman died but why she was forgotten [4]. *“The specific genre of The Woman Warrior has been disputed due to Kingston’s blend of perspectives, specifically traditional Chinese folktale and memoir. With this mixture, Kingston tries to provide her audience with the cultural, familial, and personal context needed to understand her unique position as a first-generation Chinese-American woman [5].*

China Men (1980) is a collection of “stories” as a sequel to *The Woman Warrior*, focusing on the history of the men in Kingston's family [6]. The collection becomes what A. Robert Lee calls a “narrative genealogy” of Chinese settlement in the United States. *“She mixes the known history of her family with hypothetical imaginings and with the legal history of Chinese America. Her book presents a picture of the United States still changing in its reciprocal influence with China [7].* The main characters in the book include Kingston's great-grandfather Bak Goong, who worked on the sugar plantations in Hawaii; her grandfather Ah Goong, who worked for the railroad construction companies [8]; her father BaBa, a gambling house owner and laundryman; and her unnamed brother, who receives no honor for fighting for the US in Vietnam [9]. Under the name “LoBunsun”. these four generations of men are integrated, each of whom has a similar experience of finding their true cultural selves between China and the United States [10].

Tripmaster Monkey, Maxine Hong Kingston portrays a Chinese American youth named Wittman Ah Sing. This young man lived in the most confused era of American society - the 1960s, when the Vietnam War occurred. He was cynical and conflicted with the people around him. The author specifically linked this character to the indulgent character of a monkey king, Sun Wukong from the Chinese epic novel *Journey to the West*. This character is fundamentally different from the typical Chinese image in the eyes of Americans. He is neither dedicated to hard work nor indifferent and devoid of emotions. He seems to be in an emotional turmoil of confrontation, rebellion, doubt, and anger. His personality is extremely consistent with the rhythm of American society at that time. He goes to a party mainly attended by followers of the Beatnik movement. *“On the closing night of the play, Wittman gives a monologue that establishes he has accepted his ancestry and culture [11].”* Through this character, Kingston calmly gave a small satire to the stereotype of Chinese people in traditional American culture.

Key features:

There is an important feature in Maxine Hong Kingston’s novels, that is, the combination of novels, autobiographies, and myths. The main material of the two works, "Chinese Man" and "Woman Warrior", comes from the stories the author heard from her mother during her childhood. In these two autobiographical novels, the author takes the life and destiny of her family and other

Chinese people as the main theme and integrates many Chinese cultural traditions, folk traditions, customs, myths, and legends through storytelling [12].

Although Kingston is fond of the Chinese mythological system, she does not consider it a cultural identity symbol. Kingston enjoys purposefully reconstructing various Chinese legends [13]. In other words, in Kingston's view, the Chinese text she used in her writing originally lacked fixed and forever elements, so it was completely interchangeable with Western texts. She thinks that as long as it is helpful for the writing itself, the meaning of the text can be disregarded because she does not require the certainty of these Chinese stories. She has her purpose and approach to identity building. In her works, Chinese stories are explained with great flexibility, which She considers a natural phenomenon of story drift.

Playwright and novelist Frank Chin has severely criticized Kingston's *Woman Warrior*, stating that Kingston deliberately tarnished the authenticity of Chinese tradition by altering traditional stories and myths to appeal to white sensitivities [14]. Chin has accused Kingston of “*liberally adapting traditional stories to collude with white racist stereotypes and to invent a ‘fake’ Chinese-American culture that is more palatable to the mainstream*” [15]. Several female Asian scholars have also criticized Kingston's work. Shirley Geok-lin Lim, stated that Kingston’s “representations of patriarchal, abusive Chinese history were playing to a desire to look at Asians as an inferior spectacle” [16].

Despite all these controversial comments and remarks on Maxine Hong Kingston and her works, she undeniably influences later female writers, including Gish Jen, Bette Bao Lord, Pick Shirley Geok-lin Lim, Jean Kwok and Amy Tan.

Amy Tan,

is one of the most outstanding female writers in contemporary America, is an influential author of Chinese heritage. Up to now, she has published six novels [17], including *The Joy Luck Club* (1989), *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991), *The Hundred Secret Senses* (1995), *The Bonesetter's Daughter* (2001), *Saving Fish From Drowning* (2005), *The Valley of Amazement* (2013), two children’s literature works, namely, *The Moon Lady* (1992) and *The Chinese Samese Cat* (1994), and two collections of prose essays, *The Opposite of Fate: A Book of Musings* (2003) and *Where The Past Begins: A Writer’s Memoir* (2017).

The Joy Luck Club describes a small group of American-Chinese women who have been getting together regularly to play traditional Chinese mahjong games for decades while sharing their decades-long stories [18]. In this storytelling way, the novel demonstrates the typical generation gaps and cultural conflicts between mother and daughter, which come to reconciliation by mothers’ sharing their experiences and their mothers’ stories to pass on life wisdom to daughters, and by daughters’ seeking root and link in Chinese traditions. Both the stories and the narrative strategies are astonishing, and that is why it hit great success at its debut publication.

The Kitchen God’s Wife, her second novel which is also about the relationship of daughter and mother [18]. Still, its substantial part is Winnie’s unfortunate childhood and torture by a devilish husband with the background of the Japanese aggression against China, together with her mother’s stories and her romantic love episodes. The daughter Pearl suffers from multiple sclerosis and bad communication with her mum [19]. After the mother told her daughter about her past, naturally the daughter told her mum about her disease. Together they have the hope of conquering the disease. Besides the mother and daughter relationship, the relationship between Winnie and Helen, with her Auntie Du, and even with other females are worth studying [20]. In some sense, it

is a feminist novel, depicting their awakening of feminism along with their question about fate and hope [21].

The Bonesetter's Daughter her third novel, begins with Ruth as a stepmother to her boyfriend Art Kamen's two teenage daughters, Dory and Fia [22]. Ruth confronts challenges to understand her mother and her strange behavior [23]. She loves her mother but she resents her mother for denouncing her at her young age. Her mother has forced her to obey the strict rules of Chinese society and she does not want to follow her mother's traditional Chinese values, which leads to cultural clashes in their relationship. With the help of Art, Ruth knows about what her mother and grandmother experienced by reading her mother's manuscript. Eventually, Ruth accepted her mother Luling's apology and forgave her mother [24]. She also knew her grandmother's name on her mother's last day alive. By repairing the memory of her maternal family history, Ruth gets relieved and completes confirmation of her cultural identity.

Tan in *The Hundred Secret Senses*, spins out the theme of sisterly bond [25]. It can also be regarded as a novel of contrast about two sisters, two cultures, two lives, and two centuries linked by loyalties and betrayals, love and loss, and life and death. At the heart, the novel illustrates the complex and uneasy relationship between American-born Olivia and her much older Chinese-born half-sister Kwan, who comes to America at twelve. In a sense, they are variants of the mother-daughter relationship. The clashes and conflicts between them, just like the mother-daughter relationship in Amy Tan's other novels, resulted from cultural differences and growing-up experiences. Despite these clashes, Kwan always keeps true and faithful love and hope for Olivia. Finally, Olivia's misunderstanding and dislike of Kwan led to trust, love, and gratitude in their trip to China and Kwan's stories [26]. At the same time, she got a clearer cognition of her cultural identity.

Amy Tan and Kingston:

Both of them are the second generation of American Chinese born in the 1940s and 1950s respectively and grew up in the United States [27]. They share the common experiences of the second generation of Chinese American women, but in reality, their shared experiences can still be more finely divided into urban Chinese communities and rural Chinese communities, as well as Chinese living in the eastern United States and Chinese living in the western United States. In an interview, Kingston pointed out that Amy Tan describes young intellectuals in the city, while she writes about people in the countryside. Their personal life experiences are also different. Amy Tan's family was originally in Shanghai, while Kingston's family was in the rural Province of Guangdong province [28].

Amy Tan has a special interest in the subtle relationship between women. She describes the interaction between mother and daughter, sisters, and female members of the family and close friends, and shows women's feelings and destiny through these relationships [29]. Unlike Kingston, Amy Tan rarely touches on the social situation of Chinese Americans and women in white society [30]. The narrative strategies in Amy Tan's novels are diverse. To a certain extent, these narrative strategies strengthen the literariness of her works and enrich their connotation. Most of Amy Tan's novels employ the first-person retrospective narration [31]. This technique enables readers to indulge deeply into the text and feel the same with the protagonist.

Conclusion:

The works of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan have significantly contributed to the discourse on Asian-American identity, shedding light on the complexities of immigrant

experiences, intergenerational conflicts, and cultural assimilation. Through their novels, both authors have explored themes of family, heritage, and the quest for identity, offering nuanced portrayals of the Chinese-American experience.

Maxine Hong Kingston, with her groundbreaking works such as "The Woman Warrior" and "China Men," has skillfully blended autobiography, mythology, and fiction to create compelling narratives that resonate with readers. By weaving together personal anecdotes with Chinese folklore, Kingston has illuminated the struggles and triumphs of Chinese immigrants and their descendants, challenging conventional notions of cultural identity and representation.

Amy Tan, on the other hand, has captivated audiences with her richly textured stories of family dynamics and cultural heritage in novels like "The Joy Luck Club" and "The Kitchen God's Wife." Through her exploration of mother-daughter relationships and the interplay between Chinese tradition and American society, Tan has offered profound insights into the complexities of cultural assimilation and the search for belonging.

Despite criticisms and controversies surrounding their works, both Kingston and Tan have undeniably left a lasting impact on contemporary literature and have paved the way for subsequent generations of Asian-American writers. Their novels continue to resonate with readers of all backgrounds, offering valuable perspectives on the immigrant experience and the evolving landscape of multiculturalism in America.

As we reflect on the contributions of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan to the literary canon, it is clear that their works serve as a testament to the richness and diversity of the Asian-American experience. Through their storytelling prowess and keen observations of human nature, Kingston and Tan have opened doors for dialogue and understanding, bridging cultures and fostering empathy across boundaries.

In essence, the enduring legacy of Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan lies not only in their literary achievements but also in their ability to inspire readers to explore the complexities of identity, heritage, and belonging in an ever-changing world.

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