

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE  
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## **Maxine Hong Kingston** (1940- )

*No Name Woman*

Maxine Hong was born in Stockton California, and graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1962. Her father, who had been a poet and calligrapher in China, had immigrated to New York in the 1920's and become part-owner of a laundry. He sent money back to his wife, who used some of it to study medicine and midwifery. In the late 1930's he sent for her and they were finally reunited, after twelve years.

*The Woman Warrior* (1976) goes way beyond such biographical data as this, however, for it fuses ancient Chinese legends, family history, and personal memory into a new kind of autobiography of consciousness. It fuses these materials as closely together as the growing daughter felt them, until the reader, too, cannot be sure where they meet.

The selection below, the first and shortest of the book's five chapters, is a good example. This chapter is entitled "No Name Woman": it is, as Kingston tells it, a story her mother, Brave Orchid, told about the author's father's sister, who has no name and must never be referred to because she had an illegitimate child. Both internal and external evidence, however, indicate that this is a proverbial story which Chinese mothers told to their daughters at puberty to warn them against having sex before or outside of marriage. So it isn't "true". Yet if the young Maxine thought it was true and believed in for so many years that it shaped her life, what are we to say?

The later chapters tell more combinations of myth and family memory, or "talk-stories," as the daughter heard them from her mother—stories of a legendary Chinese woman warrior, stories of Brave Orchid's encounters with ghosts while she was a medical student in China, stories of relatives, and stories of Maxine's childhood. In all, the over-arching theme is the power of speech itself—the power of the teller of the "talk-story" to create reality and so fashion an identity for herself.

Kingston's stories also make a fascinating comparison with other stories of first-and second-generation immigrants and all stories that question the nature of identity: whether identity is something immutable and transcendent, whether it is based on action and historical circumstance, or whether it is created in language, narrative, and "talk-story."

Kingston's second volume of autobiography, *China Men*, was published in 1980. For additional biographical information, see the entry in *Contemporary Authors: New Revision Series*, vol. 13 (1984), pp. 289-94. There is an excellent critical study of *The Woman Warrior* in Paul John Eakins's *Fictions in Autobiography* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1985)

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