

INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

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That Garrett Hongo should dedicate *Under Western Eyes* (1995), a collection of personal essays by Asian American writers, “to Maxine Hong Kingston, Gold Mountain hero[ine],” indicates how much of a turning point the narrative work of this woman was in the Asian American literary tradition.

Maxine Hong Kingston was born in Stockton, California, in 1940. She was the eldest daughter in an immigrant family who had brought with them very few belongings and plenty of ancient Chinese myths and good stories. Throughout her two first autobiographical accounts, *The Woman Warrior* (1975) and *China Men* (1980), and her novel *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989), Maxine Hong Kingston has chronicled both her need to “claim America” and to recover the Chinese roots hidden in her mother’s, “talk-story”.

[During a research stay at the University of California at Berkeley, I had the honour to be granted an interview with Maxine Hóng Kingston, who has since then remained a great help and a constant encouragement to me in my doctoral research on contemporary narrative writings by Chinese American women writers].

BEGOÑA SIMAL GONZÁLEZ [BSG]: So much has been written by Asian Americans in the last few years that critics have attempted to trace some sort of tradition of Chinese American women writers. I’d like to ask you if somehow you intend to deconstruct consciously or unconsciously the concepts of race/ethnicity and gender in your work....

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON [MHK]: Yes, I think that I consciously place those topics in the foreground. The question “who are my people” can be found throughout human history. I think that our very physical differences affect our way of understanding one another. Some people, for instance, feel very attracted to those who look completely different...

BSG: Some people have written that some “ethnic” writers pander to the tastes of the market. Amy Tan, for example, was famous because her book sold extremely well. People would say she is just pandering to the Western need of “exotic” stereotypes, the “Orientalism” that critics like Edward Said talk about. Is it difficult for you to be yourself and still, at the same time, be viewed by others as a representative of your ethnic minority?

MHK: I am aware there has been this criticism and I am also aware of the use and fascination of “exotica”. I may be exoticizing through the use of peculiar magic and myth, but I also think that you cannot dismiss the essential and the mysterious by calling it exotic, not yours. There are some wonderful mysteries about being alive, and I can’t deny myself writing about them out of fear about being seen as exotic.

BSG: You may have heard of “magic realism”, as a popular “narrative mode” among Hispanic American writers. I regard part of your work as participating in that tradition. There is, for instance, that seamless transition, especially in *The Woman Warrior*, between dreams or myths and reality. It was so obviously there that I could not but call attention to it in an article. It is curious that almost no critic has dealt with this topic. Maybe because it is not so strong and acknowledged a tradition as it is in the Hispanic countries. What is your opinion about this?

MHK: When I travelled in China with Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko - this was ten or twelve years ago - we discussed our books as magical realism. All of us felt part of

that Latin American tradition, where there are cultural layers - the Mayan, Aztec and Incan deep past, the European and Catholic recent past, and the modern. Americans writing with a mythic Chinese background or mythic African background naturally write a kind of magical realism.

BSG: So it mainly has to do with being in contact with those cultures, Silko with Native American culture, Morrison with African American culture and you with the Chinese tradition.

MHK: Yes, the mythic past influences, impacts on life right now, in this modern time, and we get surreal juxtaposition.

BSG: Like your American mosaic...

MHK: Yes, our American "melting pot" does not melt. It is pieces, a mosaic, a kaleidoscope.

BSG: It is true that the variety of cultures here (at Berkeley) is not yet present in Spain. Maybe Europe will soon be changing because of all the immigration from outside, but, up to now, it is much more "mono-racial", you would say, although I am a bit afraid of this question of "race", because it is such an intangible concept, so hard to define. This issue reminds me of some writers I am also working on, Sigrid Nunez and Aimee Liu. Both are half-Chinese, half-Caucasian. Or at least they talk as if they have first-hand knowledge of how it feels to be, let's say, half-Chinese and half-German (in the case of Nunez). But both, having been born in America, feel American.

MHK: Actually, I don't think it's possible for us to feel neatly divided. To grow up American means existentially integrating the self. It is a matter of synthesizing many things, integrating things that could be very different, making connections between the past and the present, and also connections with others. One of the most fascinating things to me is whenever I find a connection between people and cultures that would seem to me completely different. I went to Stockton, my hometown, to a Mexican restaurant. There, on a calendar, there was a woman dressed in ancient costume; she looked exactly like a woman in a Chinese opera - the same colors, the same head-dress and motifs... When I go to the Grand Canyon and see the Indian tribes, and learn their myths, it is just wonderful. You know, the Hopi have a myth that they came across the Pacific Ocean, from Asia.

BSG: For instance, the trickster figure. Gerald Vizenor has written about the Native American trickster, connecting it to the Chinese counterpart, Monkey, which is one of the main elements in your last book...

I presume you have been asked this repeatedly but I would like to know which kind of feminism - I know you consider yourself a feminist writer - would you ascribe yourself to?

MHK: I just believe in a world where men and women live in peace and harmony together.

BSG: That seems very simple. There are many feminist theorists now that are building a theory of female "genre": female autobiography, novel... Do you include yourself in a female tradition? I've read you thought twice about publishing the stories of *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* together in one book and felt you had to keep them separate. Is that so?

MHK: As to the first question, it was not a matter of trying to fit in any genre. The problem is how to write the truth about people. Categorizing - fiction/non-fiction and so on - always comes later, after everything has been produced. The publishers and critics want to label it. But when I am working by myself, I try to be as free as possible from categories, constraints, traditions... I do not want any tradition to hamper me, in what I want to say.

BSG: But do you think you have more things in common with female writers you have known than with male writers, or is it the same, it just depends on each person?

MHK: It really depends on each person. There are times when I am in the mood to read just

women writers, women writers only from one period. There is some kind of feeling. I am not sure what it is, but it is there, even though I cannot put a finger in it, but there is just some ... understanding I feel in women writers at certain times. However, at other times, for instance in my course, Reading for Writers, most of the books we read are by men, and it is because there were certain things that I was interested in that men were writing on. For example, they have written so well about the artist's responsibility in society. I am interested in an idea, and the person writing about it happens to be a man or a woman.

BSG: What about the title of your first book? How did you feel about choosing *The Woman Warrior*, which sounds so military and martial, whereas I know you are a convinced pacifist?

MHK: Actually I did not name it, I did not know how to name it, and the publisher thought up this title. I had thought of *Gold Mountain Stories* or something like that. However, there were several other books that came out with that title, Mountain, in that year. I find that the title *The Woman Warrior* is very interesting to work with, because it is martial, yes, but, on the other hand, if "warrior" is modified by the word "woman", does it change the idea of how to fight? I think that is a very good question and I actually looked up some linguistic roots for the word "warrior". In some languages "warrior" has to do with struggling through confusion. It does not always have to do with killing and maiming.

BSG: Right. And, in fact, the woman warrior's army, I thought, proved to be quite "a model" in that it tried not to rape women, loot villages, etc.

MHK: How to have a not-too-destructive war is an interesting question that not many people have studied. So many writers write about the "honor" and the "bravery" of war. Not many people have just faced this question of what about looting and rape in war. Does it always have to happen?

I have just reread *Henry V*: there's a scene where he threatens a town with terrible ideas about raping and pillage, and it surrenders. There's another which is always cut out when the play is presented: Henry V orders the knights to kill all prisoners - which was against the Geneva Convention of that time.... I stated in *The Woman Warrior*, "this army does not rape and pillage". I hope I have a little tone in there of doubt, so that readers may be able to think "really?".

BSG: What about the Amazon army? It is quite strong and cruel sometimes, because it actually wants to eradicate boys and do the reversal of what the Chinese sometimes did to girls. When you went to China, did you still feel that there was something going on, for example, that in families they did not want to have a female child, was it still there?

MHK: Yes, yes. You know, a group of children would be playing in the street or schoolyard and they would be all boys; and the artwork *The one hundred children* shows all boys. But I know a PhD student from China who says she does not like the feminist readings of my work nor the way I write about China being patriarchal. She says it is not so.

BSG: What about those videos that have been publicised about last year showing pitiful conditions in the orphanages and sexism in choosing which child to keep and which to abandon or kill?

MHK: Yes, the orphanages and the infanticide. But, you know, there are people who are disputing those figures and those reports. I think that those people are the same kind who say there were no death camps in Europe.

BSG: But one just cannot deny reality. How did you feel when you first went to China after writing the book, did you actually think that you had portrayed it accurately or not?

MHK: Yes, I think I did. I went to my father's and mother's villages and they were just as they and I had described them. I could hear it and imagine it and see it very well. My

mother herself said: "It is very accurate, what you write". I did feel that there were some details that I was not precise about. I did not imagine how small the living quarters were, how many people fit in them and how they are so close. A Chinese village looks like the way American Indians live, like the adobe pueblos.

I was on the Hopi reservation and saw the way their houses conjoin. One family here and the other family just on the other side of the wall. They have little lanes between the buildings. The closeness makes me realize how everything that happens to me affects everything everybody else feels.

BSG: Which may have been the reason why in "No-Name Woman" the villagers react the way they do, when she "broke the rules".

MHK: Yes, everyone was affected. They could not ignore it.

BSG: Maybe it would also set a precedent for other women.

One of the main issues I am focusing on in my dissertation is the deconstruction of gender, as I told you. What do you think of the essentialist critics who maintain that "woman", is a different being. "woman" has an "essence". So there is "woman's nature", women's specific things, that is, "femininity". Maxine, the character in your first book, tried to break with that stereotype, just acting "unwomanly". Did you try to do this consciously?

MHK: I wonder whether it will ever be possible to answer such a question, and I do think about that question. So many studies try to find this out. For instance, to cover up the author's name in stories and see if readers can identify whether the writer is a man or a woman, whether it has this sensibility or that one. Usually, we cannot tell. And yet... it is just so very hard to answer. I do not know whether it can be answered at all, with tests or surveys.

BSG: Maybe it all comes down to personal opinion: "well, I think or feel this way. This is not the "typical" or "feminine" way, or yes, it is".

MHK: And again, sometimes I enjoy just being with women and then we will have a party, and it does feel wonderful to be with women. It feels very different to be with all men. Is it just because of the way we are socialized or is it because we are born that way? I do not know the answer, but there is a difference.

I have been teaching war veterans. Only men came to the workshop. I enjoyed talking to them and felt their power. A year later, the women veterans came and the new group of men and women felt very different. Everything changed. The energy of the group felt more balanced. I felt less alone, although when I was teaching the men, I did not feel alone. I was only conscious of the imbalance when I taught the second class. There is a different energy. I mean, the women were soldiers, nurses, police... They were very strong. Still, There is a difference.

BSG: It has been argued that among women there is a feeling of connection with the world, especially with the child, that carries over and spills over the rest of our life, because women feel community-oriented, whereas men would be more ambitious, individualistic,... Do you agree with this position?

MHK: Women do think about how to take care of the baby, how to protect it, how to protect everyone. But men are this way too - medics fervently looking after their platoon.

BSG: Women who have not been mothers may sometimes feel they lack something. It is as if when you become a mother, you see things differently. Maybe then, it is all about mothering...

MHK: But then, there are some fathers who are like that too. People who have children seem to be different from people who do not have children. The ones who have children, it seems, are less self-centered, they care about other people. Teachers too. Especially high-school teachers. Teachers really care about the success of students. When one of them

succeeds, they are so happy, they are not envious. Men are like that and women are like that.

BSG: Then, maybe Simone de Beauvoir was right when she said one is not born a woman, one becomes one.

MHK: The existentialist view, yes. Do you know the crime rate among girls has risen like one hundred times more than the boys? And then you see women who kill their children... It is so hard to tell whether there is the essential feminine. It seems to me it is much easier to think that all of us participate in both, masculinity and femininity.

BSG: The yin-yang?

MHK: Yes. Sometimes one is more powerful than the other. You know, I thought a lot about the way men are versus the way women are when I was writing *China Men* and *Tripmaster Monkey*, because those books are about men and from the point of view of men. Quite often I would think: "Am I doing it right?" I cannot know from experience. I will never know. But if I can use my imagination strongly enough or if I can observe accurately, if I can have the ability to project myself to their point of view, I can "write men".

I quite often question whether I have a very strong ability to empathize, to imagine, or am I fooling myself and all I'm knowing is just myself? A writer has to break out of solipsism and narcissism and see from one gender to another, one race to another, one generation to another, from one self to any other human being. And even if I project myself into one other woman, that is already a great feat. If it is possible that I can understand one human being, then it is an artistic miracle. It is a great feat of the imagination to do any of that. And I do feel that it is possible. I think I was about thirty-five years old when I could write from a third person's perspective, instead of only from the "I" point-of-view. And after that... I have to just assume that it is possible. I now feel comfortable writing both in first and third person.

I am still thinking about your question whether people are essentially different...

BSG: It also makes me think twice when I or another woman state(s): "All men are the same". Maybe we are not being fair, because we are just projecting a stereotype, as many men do *with us*.

MHK: I agree. There is a section, I think in *The Woman Warrior*, or maybe in *China Men*, where I want to know whether boys feel pain. They never cry. So, I decide I am going to experiment. I am going to hit that one. This is just an experiment to see whether they are essentially different. I did find that they cried. But this is only observation, I do not really "know", because I cannot feel the pain. What we do is a leap of empathy and faith that others are human like oneself. We will never know, but we make a human assumption, and we say other people, they also have pain, they also have fears... Humanity is something you ascribe to other people.

BSG: Also regarding the gender and race issue, the critic Gloria Anzaldúa affirms that "no artist can leave race or gender at the door of his/her study", it is such a determinant factor, especially when talking about women of colour, as she is doing. Do you then feel you have to portray your ethnicity? Would you be able to focus your writing on a non-Asian American protagonist? Would you like to?

MHK: Yes. In the book I am working on now, there are people of all different backgrounds. I just finished writing about two black men. I find it very natural and normal to do it. I feel that, in my evolution as a writer, I began by writing the first person, but as time went by, I looked further and further out, at all of us, not just me. I find I now go in explorations further and further away, and people who are most unlike me I find most interesting. I do still announce my ethnicity somewhere at the beginning of the book. I don't think I announce my gender; it would seem to be self-evident.

BSG: And you have to exert your powers of leaping in your imagination, don't you?

MHK: Yes, it is so much fun, you know, exploring a completely different territory. People whose assumptions and whose cultural background and upbringing are very different from mine. I have also learned that, when I look at the most different people for awhile, I find they are like me. You study two very different cultures and, all of a sudden, you realize there is something that people in those cultures do in the same way; for instance they cut the tongue so that the little girl can speak better.

BSG: When you write, then, do you feel that you write a universal work of art, something that is going to be understood or felt by everybody or something which is ethnically based, something which people from other cultures will not completely get or understand? *Tripmaster Monkey*, for example, seems to me quite demanding for someone who does not know the Chinese culture and literary tradition.

MHK: Yes, I think I would like to write in a way that everyone can appreciate and understand. I have thought that if I cannot get published in this lifetime in this country, then I will be published after I am gone, and those people of the future could read it, so it should not be bound culturally or temporally. I believe that anything that is very specific is also interesting universally. Any peculiarity would be interesting to people. I hope that my books can be read on many levels. People who don't know Chinese allusions can still enjoy the story. People who do know Chinese will get some jokes.

BSG: But there are things which we do not get or maybe there are some family-specific features we do not share.

MHK: Remember that question I posed at the beginning of *The Woman Warrior*: "Is it peculiar to just my family or is it Chinese?"

BSG: And also "What is Chinese tradition and what is the movies?" (WW 130).

MHK: Maybe something is just peculiar to me. I really like working with those questions. What is universal? There could be some peculiarity that you have in your self, but if you can make it an art, make it part of a story, then when another person reads it, it becomes part of his or her life. And so one's odd self and ideas become part of the human universal story. I turn my peculiarity and a craziness into something beautiful that we can all participate in. I put my imagining into the center of attention and it becomes everyone's "large", life.

BSG: It is true we all entertain our own ideas or what Don Quixote is, or Shakespeare's heroes, like Romeo and Juliet, Othello, ... They have all become part of our life and imagination. It is true, even though it was- in origin - specifically from one culture.

MHK: Yes, and from one mind. The stories become ours. Leslie Marmon Silko wrote once about an Indian tradition in which all the people come together to tell versions of a story. She said each one has to endure the contradictions of conflicting versions. Some of the stories are completely off-the-wall, but they put them in the middle of the circle. When all the stories have come out, we know what the collective communal story is. The peculiar is also universal.

BSG: You also seem to like to give several versions in your books, for instance the multiple hypotheses about No-Name Woman in *The Woman Warrior*. You never say, this is the right one. Maybe that is also part of your having come by these stories orally and then having had to write the different versions you had heard. You have, then, something in common with the Native Americans and other oral cultures.

MHK: Yes. There is a question: what do you do when you are of an oral tradition and want to tell the stories orally, but also in text? I have to write a story in many versions. In *China Men*, there are also at least four versions of how my father came to America. That is the way text can replicate the changeability and variety and richness of talk-story. Also, in our

history, a lot of people have a story of how they came to America, and another story that they told the immigration authorities.

BSG: Would you say it is a special tradition, a matrilineal tradition, whereby you get the stories mainly from your mother, grandmother...?

MHK: From my mother, yes, but my mother's father was also a storyteller, so it was not always the women.

BSG: Also in *The Woman Warrior*, I felt that the actual protagonist in the novel or whatever we want to call it, was the female network that gave Maxine ancestral help, more than Maxine herself. Would you agree with that?

MHK: Yes, I do. I have thought that there is not really a little girl as the central character. We see her outlined by Mother and Auntie and Sisters... She takes shape because of all of the people around her.

BSG: I was actually thinking that this kind of "collective" autobiography has also been over and over ascribed to either a feminine point of view or to a very postmodern, fragmented point of view, would you consider yourself in any of these trends, or is it just your own personal style?

MHK: I think it is my personal style and it is also my belief that I am influenced by the art and culture of my times.

BSG: At one point in *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan writes: "Once born Chinese, you cannot help but feel and think Chinese." Some friends of mine here, in Berkeley, are second or third generation Asian Americans, who just do not know China, or Korea, or Vietnam... They just know the United States, or, in some cases, California. To me they have nothing Asian about them but their physical features. That is so strange. The first time you come to the UCB campus, it looks like Asia to someone like me, since we are not used to it in Spain. But then, when you get to talk to them, for me they were "plain Americans" who did not even have a strong tradition that could make them different. Maybe only the first generation would have those ties. Have you felt this too when you encounter Asian American students? Do you find they have no longer anything in common with Chinese from China, Vietnamese from Vietnam and so on?

MHK: Culture and tradition and art are not born. We make them up. We learn them. I tend to believe in existential creation of being.

Walking around campus, it is true you can see the many different Chinese clubs: there is a Hong Kong club, there is a Taiwan club, a Chinese from Vietnam club, the Chinese American club; and they do not mix. They do not look like each other that is, they do not *sound* like one another... Of course, the big difference is in language and culture. There are many people here who have a story that they were born in a little town in the Midwest or even in Central California, where they never saw any other Chinese person save for their own family until they came here.

BSG: Which looks like a magnet for Asian Americans, maybe California in general, too.

MHK: Yes, but Cal sometimes seems very strange to me now, because when I graduated from here, thirty years ago, there were not very many Asian people. I came from Stockton, a town near here, where there were many people from all different backgrounds, so for me Berkeley felt less "multi-cultural" and "diverse" than Stockton. It is different now. But in Stockton there is a better mixture of Blacks and Latinos and Filipinos.

BSG: I have done my MA thesis on *Bone*, a book published by a Chinese American woman, Fae Ng. Ng's bare style was very different from your "exuberant" and rich style. Maybe Ng's style had something to do with the Asian valorisation of silence, modestly and demureness in women. I do not know if it is actually a good thing, that she is formally reflecting how she was brought up, in a family full of secrets, which you also mention in

The Woman Warrior and *China Men.*, or whether she should be outspoken and rebel with words, as you did. Could this “Asian American” style become somehow “fixed” as being historically and socially determined - for instance, because of all the ordeals Chinese immigrants had to go through? Is there anything specific about Asian American writers or does it just depend on the personal style and hence varies from person to person?.

MHK: I wonder what Asian American writers have in common. I am trying to think whether there is something in the style that comes from having a bilingual background. I think most of the writers that we have mentioned, like Fae Ng and Amy Tan, one thing we do have in common is that we all had some Chinese language as children and that affects the rhythms of the English sentence. There is that in common and also there is, if there are some psychological similarities in the family, a remembrance of the myths and ancient stories. I think some common history shapes what we are doing. We are all alive at around the same time, some in the same generation. There are probably some common threads that go through. But again, these common threads are hard to identify...

For instance, what about Belle Yang, a painter and a writer? She is Chinese American and writing about China, not about here: that is a theme present in Amy Tan's writing too. Some people go back to the old country for the stories. There is a young writer, Evelyn Lau, from Canada, who writes about people without surnames; we do not know what race they are. Her love stories are emotional, with no cultural context.

I was just talking to a graduate student in Arizona, who is very “mixed race”, Mexican, Spanish, Chinese, Indian, everything. His last name was Torres. He said that among the Latino writers there is a party line, a political line which says they were descendants from the Aztecs, who did not have human sacrifice. And when a writer writes a character who comes, let us say, from Apache Indians, who may have come down from the North and did not have their roots in South America, this story would be criticized for not fitting the correct political and historical model. Among the Asians, the writing is not so “fixed”, as you say. We're actually difficult to classify: there is a lot of looseness.

BSG: Yes, there are many differences. And also among the Chinese, because you come from a Cantonese background, Tan comes from a Mandarin Northern background, etc.

There may also be some writers from Asian descent who are now slightly tired of being classified as such and are trying not to dwell too much on the fact of being Asian, because it does not allow them to be so free as writers. On the other hand, some critics would say you as a writer have some kind of responsibility towards your community. Especially when you started writing there were so very few of you that it really mattered what you wrote. In fact, you got reviews by Chinese Americans saying, you know, “be careful with those myths you are using”. How do you feel about it now? Have you changed your mind? Do you still think you did the right thing, changing the whole legend of Fa Mu Lan?

MHK: Yes, although the ignorance of readers is quite a problem. Since most readers do not have any historical information, and no knowledge of Eastern myths and folktales, I would always think, “how much expository writing should I do? How much factual background do I give?”.

BSG: Like , “The Laws” in *China Men*, which you felt you had to put in there.

MHK: Yes, because nobody had that information. And I did not trust that the reader would do the research. So I had to write the background and the stories. I have had a few critics who have said that I am so educational. But I feel that it is my duty to teach. I will find a form so that I will do the educating and the entertaining, and I will give the background, then I will show the characters in drama. I have just been in New York, where the editors and publishers are saying they want books that are two hundred pages or less; brevity and speed are what our culture wants. Fast food is what sells, but I have made up my mind that I

am a teacher, I am educational and I will write long books. That is what I have decided to do. I have written over a thousand pages of first draft of my next book.

BSG: But most people just want something easy to read, short, because we are in our modern TV-surfing culture now. You shift channels and radio stations all the time, change books, change everything, especially in America, although this phenomenon has been “exported” everywhere: I can feel the influence in Spain.

MHK: This summer I am reading Henry James. I have read one book after another and I think: “He could never get published today”.

BSG: Yes, even small books like *What Maisie Knew* are hard to get in.

When you talked about rituals and myths, I remembered that Leslie Marmon Silko voices through Old Betonie in *Ceremony* the belief that ritual has to be changed in order to keep it alive. Do you agree with this view?

MHK: Yes, myths have to keep evolving and growing to be useful, or they die. But secrecy is a very strong tradition in certain cultures. And there is a belief that, if you tell a secret, then it becomes weak and you and your people and tribe become weak. Now, this is so opposite to our modern belief that the more knowledge, and the more open air and sunshine, the healthier and stronger we are.

An Indian person when I was at the Grand Canyon told me: “Don’t tell anybody who said so, but this book has all the wisdom of my people.” Isn’t it odd: here at the University, the more something is documented, the more truthful it’s supposed to be.

BSG: I have read in a dissertation on *The Woman Warrior* that this book would prove that “an autobiography is not a static description of an integrated and self, but a dynamic presentation of constant deconstruction and construction of a forever undecidable self” (Chang). It is a bit complicated in the actual phrasing, but it boils down to the question whether we can have once and for all an identity or it we are dealing with an ongoing process. Do you agree with any of these positions?

MHK: By the end of that book the heroine still does not have a name. She is still evolving. But I don’t think we change thoroughly. Somewhere in my books, maybe in *Tripmaster Monkey*, I have written a sentence that reads “They are so young, they can change their entire lives over the weekend”. You find somebody, your true love, on Saturday night, and then your whole life is different. But I now feel there is a core self that is at last formed, or maybe it was always there but there comes a time when you become conscious that there is a true core self, which is very stable. There is no need to be changing all the time.

For me those regressions to some kind of adolescence of childhood are more and more rare, as I become older and stronger. Fluctuations do not happen as much. I look at my mother, who is now ninety-three, and she is the same, essential person.

BSG: So maybe we could even recognise her from the portrayal you made of her in *The Woman Warrior*. Just to finish with, could you tell me anything about your literary projects. I would also be interested to know which writers you especially respect and like, who you think has influenced your work. What about the younger generation of writers in the US? Is there anyone in particular you consider very good? There are so many books coming out these days.

MHK: Yes, it is true. Books are constantly coming out.

Lately I have been reading Henry James and a James biography. I am so amazed at the long sentences, the complex phrases within the sentence, which means that the mind is always thinking all of the possibilities, a thought plus its exceptions plus its consequences plus its contradictions. Every sentence takes you through a long thinking process. Every turn of consciousness matters.

I think reading James is a good exercise for the mind. I love the way he is able to name and

describe subtle states of mind, states of feeling and relationships between people. The way one person glances at another person; you catch that and write it down. I am aware that I am a person writing in 1996, when the publishers have said "two-hundred pages". Right now I am writing a book which is sixteen hundred pages long. James is an inspiration to me; I owe it to human consciousness that we be able to make a very long thought and be able to follow a train of consciousness into all kinds of far spaces and into deep spaces and feelings, and to make thought that connects one mind to another mind. In a way, I am combating soundbytes and the short attention span. As I read James, I feel I am taking a stand, a side, and I have decided I am not going to cut sixteen hundred pages down to two hundred.

The work I am working on is called *The Fifth Book of Peace*. It is again based on a Chinese idea, that a long time ago there were three Books of Peace and they have been lost. I want to imagine these books for our time, figure out how to stop war. It takes a long thought to write about peace, because people do not know about it, they do not think about it. I have to convince people to know and want peace and try to stop war. I was working on this book, and it was destroyed in the fire. The book in the fire was *The Fourth Book of Peace*, so the one that I am working on now is *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In the book I write about the whole concept of book and text creating mind and how mind can effect relationships among people and the creation of a human community.

BSG: You seem to be really concerned with human solidarity. Do you think that we contribute, as critics or writers, to some kind of education? Do you think literature has this kind of social value and role?

MHK: Yes, that is our responsibility. I do feel there are writers who try to escape that responsibility so that they can be free and so on. But those are my values and my wisdom. Whatever abilities I have have to go toward building community.

BSG: That reminds me of the parable of the talents, in the Christian tradition.

MHK: Yes, do not bury your talents and do not put your light under the bushel. You have to take them out and use them for human good. The way Art is, though, it cannot just be useful, it has to be entertaining and beautiful. So that pleasure and happiness and delight, those are also part of this book that has to be created.

MHK: Sometimes readers like you ask me about cultural elements (like the "spelling bee", for instance) that I would never have thought that it would be a question for anyone, it is so common in America. I suppose every American child has been in one of these. I love it whenever we find something that is a peculiar cultural thing. I find working with translators of *Tripmaster Monkey*, how Californian it is, not just American. And I think, "oh my, I do not know how much of a universal appeal Berkeley has."

BSG: Actually, when I first came here and saw some cafes and other spots you mention in the book, I enjoyed it. What was it like to live here in the sixties, with all the civil rights and pacifist movements.

MHK: They were crazy times when we were full of hope, but also full of despair over the unending war in Viet Nam. People were having love-ins and be-ins and concerts and a happy, gay life, and, over there were the people warring in Vietnam. Here are the people who want peace, the doves, the flower children, and here are other people who are at war. They made each other possible. A war is not a good price to pay for the fun and the "high" of peace demonstrations.

The hippie movement has never really ended - being punk, being cool are continuous.

Do you think the neo-hippie wave is fake, just a mask of fashionable clothes and music? What about their philosophy of life, the Eastern philosophies and religions like Buddhism, concepts such as "holistic harmony", etc.? I do not know if it is a trend that will pass soon

or a real rebirth.

Probably throughout all of human history there have always been those people who are mystics, religious, who have a cult religion, some side-stream religion, who are marginal, bohemian... And there are those people who are very practical. I like to think that we can be Buddhist *and* down-to-earth.