Maxine Hong Kingston is an internationally-recognized contemporary Chinese-American writer, academic and activist whose writing has received critical acclaim for its original style of fusing fiction with non-fiction, and truth with imagination.

Born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, Maxine Ting Ting Hong was the first of her parents' six children born in America; two older siblings had died earlier in China. Her father, Tom Hong, was a Cantonese poet and calligrapher who emigrated to China alone in 1924, working for 15 years as manager of a gambling business in order to put her mother, Ying Lan, through midwifery school. She eventually left her family's village in China to join him at his New York City laundry (they later opened another business in California). They worked long and hard, and Kingston's mother often had to pick up a second job as an agricultural worker in order to put her children through school. Raised on her mother's "talk-stories" of Chinese ancestors and ancient heroes, Kingston, a bright but shy child who suffered from her parents' expectations, developed a rich imagination hidden behind her silence at school and at home. She rebelled against tradition, whether refusing to cook (an important domestic skill for Chinese women), show modesty or properly honor her dead relatives as she struggled to escape the confines of Stockton's Chinese immigrant community and fit into American society.

Kingston captures many of her childhood memories—some startling and original, others seemingly stereotypical—of her Chinese-American childhood in her first critically-acclaimed book, The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among the Ghosts (1976), a hybrid of autobiography, myth and magical realism. A haunting memoir of her conflicted Chinese-American childhood, it became an instant classic, winning the National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction. In it, Kingston creates her own versions of Chinese myth and autobiographical history, weaving fiction and non-fiction as she describes her domineering mother, Brave Orchid. The book is essentially Brave Orchid's story of how a socially powerful female physician, or "shaman," establishes her career and identity in China, and then must adjust to her new status as mother, laborer and laundry woman when she emigrates. Her mother's fantastic tales of mischievous ghosts and brave, freedom-fighting Chinese heroines, or "woman warriors," are contrasted with China's strict Communist society and the soulless, Caucasian "ghosts" of an alien Western culture. Passed on to Kingston and her five siblings, who would rather worship American movies, Brave Orchid's tales document the histories of her immediate and extended family and illustrate the divisions and similarities between Chinese identity in Old World China, under Communist rule, and in U.S. immigrant communities.

In 1962, Kingston married actor Earl Kingston and earned a bachelor's degree from the University of California, Berkeley. The couple moved to Hawai'i and had a son, Joseph. Kingston first worked as an educator in California, Michigan and Hawai'i, teaching English, Mathematics and Language Arts before publishing The Woman Warrior. She always considered the book to be the first part of a larger work, and published the second part, China Men, in 1980. Loosely based on her father's life, China Men won the American Book Award in 1981, the...
same year she became a Guggenheim fellow. Kingston also has written two fictional novels: *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book* (1989), about a Chinese-American playwright. *Hawaii One Summer* (1998) is Kingston’s collection of stories about the island she called home for 17 years. Her most recent return to autobiography is *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2003), the story of how she rebuilt her life following a devastating fire that destroyed her California home, including the first manuscript of the book. In 2006, she edited *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace*, a collection of nonfiction pieces taken from some of her own writing workshops and written by survivors of war.

Among Kingston’s literary heroes are American poets Walt Whitman and William Carlos Williams, and the British author Virginia Woolf. Through their influence, she formed her theories on gender and culture that helped express her childhood feelings of being a social outsider and, later in her career, defend her place within a Western writing tradition. Kingston said of Walt Whitman’s work, “I like the rhythm of his language and the freedom and the wildness of it. It’s so American. And also his vision of a new kind of human being that was going to be formed in this country—although he never specifically said Chinese—ethnic Chinese also—I’d like to think he meant all kinds of people.” Williams and Woolf were known for switching a narrator’s gender, and Kingston’s stories also subvert traditional roles of males or females. As she writes in *The Woman Warrior*, “Brave Orchid’s daughters decided fiercely that they would never let men be unfaithful to them. All her children made up their minds to major in science and mathematics.”

Kingston has always stood by her beliefs, weathering criticism for her portrayal of Chinese-American culture and her advocacy for women’s rights, and risking arrest for her anti-war views. Several of her literary contemporaries have attacked her writing as perpetuating ethnic stereotypes of Chinese culture familiar to Western readers, and accusing her of altering details and storylines of such beloved myths as the story of Fa Mu-Lan, the heroine who joins an all-male army. Kingston maintains that her unique position as a Chinese-American woman empowers her to turn this patriarchal tale on its head. “I gave a man’s myth to a woman because it’s part of the feminist war that’s going on in *The Woman Warrior*; to take the men’s stories away from them and give the strength of that story to a woman,” she has said. “I see this as an aggressive storytelling act, and its part of my own freedom to play with myth, and I do feel that the myths have to be changed and played with all the time, or they die.” By exorcising her personal and professional demons through Chinese oral traditions in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston claims her ethnic birthright and continues Brave Orchid’s storytelling legacy, albeit in her own voice. “I am writing in the peasant talk-story Cantonese tradition… which is the heritage of Chinese Americans,” she once wrote. Against her mother’s wishes, she traveled to China for the first time in 1984, with a group of American writers who were guests of the Chinese Writers’ Association.

Kingston has received many U.S. literary and cultural honors, including being named Hawai‘i’s “Living Treasure” in 1980, the National Humanities Medal in 1997, the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature in 1998, and in 2008, the honorary Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters by the National Book Foundation. She is an emeritus Senior Lecturer for Creative Writing at the University of California, Berkeley.
Many ethnic Chinese in America today can trace their heritage back to the days in which Maxine Hong Kingston’s parents lived apart—one on the American West Coast trying to create a better life for his family, and the other in mainland China enjoying her status as a healer among peasants. The Hong’s split lives—like those of millions of other Chinese Americans—were the result of international politics, family obligations and the history of immigration in the United States, which has had lasting effects on how Chinese Americans still regard the family unit and their ancestral homeland.

During the 19th century, first-generation Chinese Americans were a plentiful source of cheap labor, and therefore often discriminated against and exploited. Arriving in the early 1800s to find fortune in “Gold Mountain,” as North America was called, they instead found economic hardships and a resentful white population. By the time Tom Hong arrived in 1924, Asian immigration had been reduced to a trickle in the United States and the “Yellow Peril”—as the Chinese had been labeled a few decades before—were barred from owning land, marrying whites or becoming citizens (although their domestic-born children were automatically naturalized). Illiterate but hard-working, the Chinese first found work as laborers on the transcontinental railroads and in mines, and later in the cities as domestic servants and laundry workers. By the turn the century, one in four Chinese men spent long, grueling days in urban laundries, creating a stereotype that persisted for decades.

Many of the males depicted in Kingston’s China Men also arrived in the United States alone; the passage was more affordable if they left their wives and children behind. As a result, prostitution and gambling flourished in West Coast cities like San Francisco. (Tom’s job as manager of a Stockton gambling house perhaps stemmed from this trend.) In China, women used their husbands’ money to build comfortable lives. When they arrived to the United States—sometimes decades later—they often found their spouses in other relationships or with entirely new families, creating more waves of pain and separation. In The Woman Warrior, Kingston plays out this reunion scenario through Brave Orchid’s sister, Moon Orchid, and the tragic-comical scene of their trip to Los Angeles to confront Moon Orchid’s husband, whose full conversion to American culture contrasts sharply with the sisters’ quaint traditionalism. To combat their loneliness and loss of status, women created tight communities—sometimes around gambling and other leisure games, like the Mahjong tables Kingston encounters with her mother in Stockton.

Life in China was changing rapidly, too; in 1949, Mao Zedong created the People’s Republic of China, which included the world’s largest Communist political party. During Kingston’s childhood in the 1950s, Zedong began separating classes of people by occupation, persecuting dissenters and calling for the rapid industrialization of China’s agricultural economy (the so-called “Great Leap Forward,” which led to one of the world’s worst famines). The Woman Warrior alludes to that first Communist takeover and then, later, to the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, when scholars like Kingston’s father were forced into manual labor in the “People’s Communes.” Private farms are seized, aunts and uncles disappear, overseas letters arrive censored, and her family’s ties to their native village slowly fade. Brave Orchid’s education, she assumes, saved her from the responsibilities of traditional family life, where daughters must obey and slaves wait on their rich mistresses. At midwifery school in Canton, she becomes a “modern” woman—although one defined by Communism. “The Revolution put an end to prostitution by giving women what they want: a job and a room of their own,” Kingston writes. But that is her speaking, not her mother, who still trusts ancient Chinese remedies.
and realizes that she has simply traded one type of “servitude” for another—the bribes needed to run China’s corrupt, state-run institutions.

Brave Orchid does eventually leave Canton and join her husband in the Bronx, where capitalism continued this illusion of freedom. Later on, Kingston flashes forward to one of her first jobs working for the “blue-eyed ghosts,” after her father loses the Stockton laundry business to developers, and she feels the generations of betrayal on both sides of the Pacific. “You have no idea how much I have fallen,” Brave Orchid tells her daughter, and young Maxine understands, having once been Fa Mu-Lan, the female avenger. The woman warrior who was trained to “storm across China to take back our farm from the Communists” was also ready to “rage across the United States to take back the laundry in New York and the one in California.” Born from Brave Orchid’s talk-stories, these dual histories define Kingston’s Chinese identity, and her American dreams.
Study Questions for *The Woman Warrior*

1. Why is Kingston's aunt considered a “No Name Woman?” What does her status say about the villagers and her family?

2. Why does Kingston feel she is partially to blame for her aunt's punishment?

3. Who are the ghosts Kingston refers to in the subtitle of her book? Give some examples of how they are mentioned throughout the book. How is Kingston's definition of “ghost” different from her mother’s?

4. Describe Kingston's relationship with her Brave Orchid. What are some examples of lessons Kingston learns from her?

5. “Talk-story” is a key practice Brave Orchid teaches her, and it appears throughout the book. What is “talk-story,” and why is it such an important part of Kingston's childhood?

6. How does the emphasis on community over individuals in Chinese culture affect the Chinese characters in the book—both in China and in America? How does this culture affect how Kingston's parents raise their children, and how is it especially relevant to a female Chinese American?

7. What does the chapter title, “White Tigers,” refer to? What significance does this chapter have regarding Kingston's memories of her childhood?

8. What kinds of training does Ha Mu-Lan, the warrior woman, go through? Why do you think Kingston's mother tells her this story?

9. Why does the woman warrior change after she gives birth? What does her character say about the role of women in Chinese society? What are some other examples in the book of how women are regarded in China? Compare them to how Chinese-American women are portrayed.

10. What role does language—especially written language—play for the characters in “White Tigers?” For Kingston herself?

11. What purpose do slaves serve in traditional Chinese culture? Why does Kingston's sister tell her parents she wants to be a slave?

12. Why is food—the collecting, preparing, eating and sharing of it—mentioned throughout the book? What specific role does food play in Chinese life?

13. What lessons do Kingston and her siblings learn from the episode between Brave Orchid and her sister, Moon Orchid? What do the differences between the sisters illustrate?

14. Why do you think Kingston terrorizes the Chinese girl in the school lavatory? Why do you think Kingston is so upset with the girl's behavior? Why does she grow upset with herself?

15. The state of being silent in *The Woman Warrior* is mentioned in every chapter, and Kingston equates it to being a Chinese girl. What are some examples? Why is silence such an important part of storytelling in this book? What is being suggested about silence and Chinese female identity?

16. When Brave Orchid demands that Kingston ask for free candy from the druggist, why do you think Kingston reacts the way she does? Why is this scene so important in the book?

17. In the final chapter, Kingston is confined to bed with a mysterious sickness. She describes it as “the best year and a half of my life. Nothing happened.” What do you think she means?

18. What is the significance of the final story about the barbarian reed pipe?
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