

**FROM WAR TO PEACE: MAXINE HONG KINGSTON'S  
TRIPMASTER MONKEY, THE FIFTH BOOK OF PEACE AND  
I LOVE A BROAD MARGIN TO MY LIFE**

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In our contemporary world full of violence and agitated by warfare, numerous writers have addressed the influence of war and the importance of peace, and the famed Chinese American writer Maxine Hong Kingston is foremost amongst these. Kingston's four major works, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts*, *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, *The Fifth Book of Peace* and *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, contain Kingston's ideas about the formation of Chinese American identity and represent her transformation from a warrior to a pacifist. In these five works, Kingston has demonstrated how she extended her interest from Chinese American women and men to all human beings. Kingston's altered perspectives are visible in the titles of her books. Her first book, *The Woman Warrior*, aims to give an account of growing up as a female Chinese American in the 1950s and tries to clarify the meaning of being a Chinese American; the narrator identifies herself with Fa Mu Lan,<sup>1</sup> a well-known Chinese woman warrior, and throws herself into a war about both ethnicity and gender. At this stage of her writing, Kingston is concerned with a more personal issue, that is, how to survive and live as a Chinese American female in the United States. Chinese American history and current experience are explored in Kingston's second book, *China Men*, where Kingston fantasizes about her ancestors' lives and records the history of her family from their emigration to the United States to her brother's participation in the Vietnam War. In *China Men*, the battlefield is Chinese American history and the warriors are a group of Chinese men, instead of Chinese or Chinese American women as in *The Woman Warrior*. The purpose of this war is to claim America and a Chinese American history.

Kingston's first novel, *Tripmaster Monkey*, differs from these two works in its thoroughly fictitious nature, as Kingston invents a Chinese American hippie, Wittman Ah Sing, to voice views about Chinese American identity. In this novel Kingston shifts her attention from war to peace; Wittman, the main protagonist in *Tripmaster Monkey*, who delivers his warlike 'manic monologues' on ethnic issues at the beginning of the novel, becomes a pacifist protesting against the

Vietnam War at the end. Kingston published *The Fifth Book of Peace* in 2003, documenting her organization of a veteran writing workshop, and how she lost her home and manuscripts in the 1991 Californian wildfire after coming back from her father's funeral service. Refusing to be confined to one genre, Kingston inserts a fictional text about Wittman Ah Sing, who first appears in *Tripmaster Monkey*, in the middle part of this book, where he, as a pacifist, migrates to Hawaii to avoid being drafted into American military service. Though her first three books are primarily concerned with the issue of Chinese American identity, in *The Fifth Book of Peace* she writes mainly about war and peace. The author's latest work *I Love a Broad Margin to My Life* was written in free verse and published in 2011. In this work, she reflects on her life as Chinese American, writer and peace activist; Wittman emerges again and leaves his wife Taña for China, embarking on a journey of meditation. Kingston's works correspond to the historical events taking place around her; writing down her transformation from a warrior to a pacifist, she has also recorded changes in her view of the world.

Since *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* have been comprehensively studied, this paper will focus on *Tripmaster Monkey*, *The Fifth Book of Peace* and *Broad Margin* to search for Kingston's idea of war and peace. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, Kingston's first novel to be recognized as such by her publishers, the leading man warrior is Wittman Ah Sing, a Chinese–American hippie, who fights against racial stereotypes about Chinese people. Kingston attempts to overturn the image of Chinese Americans as a 'model minority' and immigrants as servile labourers. Wittman's parents are neither laundry workers nor restaurant runners—his mother is a showgirl, his father a street organ performer and then a newsletter writer, the women he addresses as aunts are glamorous dancers and professional beauties, and Wittman himself dresses like a hippie, does not attend graduate school, and goes on unemployment benefit. The 'model minority' thesis, referring to notions of Asian Americans as a modest and well-behaved ethnic minority who endeavour to pursue high education, emerged in the 1960s to 'tell Black and Chicano activists they should follow the example set by Asian Americans', according to Sucheng Chan (167). Kingston's Wittman is obviously not a member of this 'model minority'.

The 'combat-ready' and soldier-like Wittman identifies himself with a samurai at the beginning of the novel (12). The cynic Wittman laughs at F.O.B.s or new Chinese American immigrants because of their incongruity with American society, and mocks racists for their false and prejudiced concepts of Chinese people. The angry and radical Wittman is sensitive to phrases relating to ethnicity, and he reacts with strong verbal

violence if someone accidentally mentions racial stereotypes. Nevertheless, Isabella Furth proposes that the negotiation is made possible on the site of ‘wounded bodies’ caused by war against other nations: an American unity between the mainstream and ethnic groups is achieved since war creates a community to bind together Americans of different ethnicities. The Asian American soldiers’ contribution of their bodies implies their aspiration to acquire American national identity. Through thinking about ‘war’, Wittman recognizes that the universe is not limited to Chinese Americans but all human beings; he, who does not fit into American society and has considered suicide every day, learns that the universe contains a multitude of different positions and comes to encourage people to love one another in the end.

According to E.D. Huntley, *Tripmaster Monkey* is located in ‘a third space...where cultures, aesthetics, and ethnicities intersect, collaborate, collide, fuse, and morph together into hybrids, mongrel identities’ (72). Kingston applauds multiculturalism and the mixture of races. She comments on the Eurasian writers the Eaton sisters, Sui Sin Far and Onoto Watanna: ‘their father was an English painter, and their mother was a Chinese tightrope dancer; such a miscegenation produces American children’ (292). In *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Kingston expands her attention from Chinese Americans to universal humankind—‘There is no telling indigenous to where, whether human life originated Asia or Africa or the Americas or Australia. All is connected to all’ (92). By viewing human beings as a whole unit, everyone can define his or her identity as international and universal, instead of hyphenated or hybrid. The identity evolution of the main narrators in Kingston’s books moves from confusion in her first work *The Woman Warrior*, to history–tracing in her second book *China Men*, to self–examination in *Tripmaster Monkey*, finally reaching redefinition in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The identities of the protagonists shift under the influence of their views towards war and peace as a warrior is more inclined to encourage ethnic differences than a pacifist, who seeks harmony. After violently resisting ethnic inequality, a more peaceful mind allows for the reconciliation of identity.

### **‘Bee–e–en!’: Transition from War to Peace**

To recognize a deep bond between the people of the world is to undo the binary opposition between friends and enemies, to acknowledge the ultimately self–defeating outcome of any war. The brother’s nightmare is a far cry from Maxine’s thrilling fantasy of the

woman warrior. The narrator obsessed with revenge in the first book has become a pacifist in the second. (Cheung 120)

The first obvious transformation from war to peace in Kingston's books appears in the final chapter of *China Men*, 'The Brother in Vietnam'. During the Vietnam War, the narrator's brother is sent to Asia, where he senses a strong attachment between him and the people there; the brother then deepens his resolution to be a pacifist. The transition from war to peace in Kingston's writing mainly takes place in *Tripmaster Monkey*. In this book, the protagonist Wittman is both a warrior and a pacifist. Although labelling himself a pacifist, Wittman unceasingly talks about war and his transformation into a warrior: two characters which he identifies with are the Monkey King and Gwan Goong.

Yan Gao indicates that Kingston 'Americanizes the new monkey [Wittman] or monkeyizes the American' (140). The Monkey King, also known as Sun Wu-kong, is taken from a Chinese epic *Journey to the West*, written by Wu Cheng-en in the sixteenth century. This epic tale describes how the Monkey King rebels against the celestial power, is defeated by Buddha, imprisoned under the Five-Finger Mountain for five-hundred years, rescued by the monk Tripitaka, and then escorts him to the west to fetch the sutras. Wittman claims himself to be 'the present-day USA incarnation of the King of the Monkeys' (33). The identification of Wittman and the Monkey King can be found by tracing their similarities. The Monkey King is born from a stone, and Wittman has no certain familial root to identify with: he is not clear if his grandmother is truly his biological grandmother—both the Monkey and Wittman are self-created. The Monkey King is powerful, rebellious and belligerent—Wittman is cynical, defiant, and verbally violent; his weapon is his words, and what he resists are racism and the inhumanity of war. The Monkey King revolts against the celestial armies and gods to prove his powerfulness, and against monsters and spirits to protect his mentor Tripitaka; Wittman fights the American government for its policy of warring against other countries and racists for their stereotypes of other people. The Monkey King possesses the power to transform into seventy-two shapes, and Wittman is able to play different roles in his fantasy: by calling 'Bee-e-en', meaning 'change' in Chinese, the Monkey King can copy another person to deceive his enemy, transform into a bee to hide himself from danger, or turn into an insect to lurk in an enemy's body to beat him or her from within. In Wittman's stories, he changes into the warrior Gwan Goong but his utmost wish is to change the military state of America into a peaceful one. The Monkey King

defeats all the evil forces in the end and is named as Winning Warrior Buddha; Wittman, although unable to eradicate racism and prevent a war taking place, performs and disseminates his concerns on stage through his play. Wittman's story unfolds in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, where he moves to Hawaii with his wife Tāna and his son Mario. Both the Monkey King and Wittman eventually become less rebellious. In the Powells' author interview, Kingston states that she would like to have her main protagonists, who are adolescents in her first three books, grow up in *The Fifth Book of Peace*: Wittman becomes a father and instead of performing his manic monologues all the time as in *Tripmaster Monkey*, he is more socialized and stays a pacifist—his concern for humanity does not focus on the hyphenate or personal issues any more: 'He could keep on talking, outtalk her, but marriage had changed him. Fatherhood had changed him. He was not so much a talker anymore. No more tripping out. And he had something to write—the poem, the play that would stop war' (72).

In addition, Gwan Goong, the god of war and literature, represents both justice and art. Wittman's identification with him expresses the wish to eliminate racism through art; in this novel, the art is the theatre, with Wittman as the playwright, and other Americans, either of European or other ancestry, as actors, actresses and improvisers. One of Kingston's purposes in writing is to declare war; in this way, she also links war with literature. Answering Kingston's call for ancestral help, great warriors, men or women, from different periods of Chinese history and legends leap into her *Tripmaster Monkey*: 'Everybody has come from eras and places to unite together on the same stage. War has bust through time' (138). Nevertheless, even though Wittman announces that he wishes to produce a theatre without war, his play is indeed about war; his intention is that through the performance of war, his audience will learn about the inhumanity of war itself. In A. Noelle William's interpretation of the 'pacifist transformations' in *Tripmaster Monkey*, he suggests that Lance, a Japanese American, symbolizes a hope for peace: Wittman asks his friend Lance if he remembers bullying a Chinese American, who turns out to be Wittman, when they were in grammar school, but Lance has no memory of it. Lance's claim of Wittman being his best friend disarms this Chinese American nationalist radical. Furthermore, in role-playing the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, Lance acts as the warrior Liu Pei, but instead of playing a combatant, he improvises and offers alternatives for war. Plays about war in *Tripmaster Monkey* convey an anti-war message, and it is Wittman's hope to stop war through art: 'Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war' (306).

In this novel, *Journey to the West*, *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, and *Tale of the Water Margins*, three of ‘the Four Great Classical Novels’ in Chinese literature are adapted and included in the text.<sup>2</sup> Kingston has deliberated, from *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* to *Tripmaster Monkey*, on integrating Chineseness with Americanness. A common theme of these three Chinese novels is war: battles with the celestial armies or monsters and spirits in *Journey to the West*, civil wars in *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, and fights between the outlaws and the corrupted bureaucracy or struggles with another nation in *Tale of the Water Margins*. It is tricky or at least ironic that while defining himself as a pacifist, Wittman never stops talking about war. *Tale of the Water Margins* narrates a story of how 108 warriors, including both men and women, are driven into exile and inhabit the Liang Mountain; their common wish is to fight against injustice for the civilians by punishing villains and resisting the corrupted government. However, they give up the protests to help battle against an outside invasion threatening their own country. *Tripmaster Monkey* is set in the 1960s, when the Asian American political movements were at their height; just like those warriors in *Tale of the Water Margins*, Chinese Americans are not conformists. From another point of view Chinese Americans are similar to those warriors, for many Chinese Americans are in exile and excluded from American society but are willing to contribute their efforts to the making of this nation. When the Japanese air force bombed Pearl Harbour and thus endangered the safety of Americans, numerous Chinese Americans undertook military service and defended their country. Sadly, almost every warrior in *The Water Margins* ends his life tragically. Does Kingston try to tell her readers that war always finishes with a catastrophic outcome? No one wins in a war since every party which participates in it loses to an extent.

A tragic ending occurs in *Romance of Three Kingdoms* as well. This novel tells how in the second and third centuries, China was divided into three kingdoms, Shu, Wei and Wu, their leaders separately being Liu Pei, Cho Cho and Sun Ch’uan. Liu Pei, Gwan Yu (renamed Gwan Goong by the Chinese people after his death) and Chang Fei swore brotherhood and to fight together in a peach orchard, and their story is the main plotline of the *Romance of Three Kingdoms*. However, all of the above mentioned characters died during war—not one leading character lives to see his kingdom unite China or be united. They may be masters of war, but they all lose in the end. Kingston concludes, ‘Studying the mightiest war epic of all time, Wittman changed—been!—into a pacifist’ (340). In Wittman’s play, almost all the characters appearing in earlier parts of *Tripmaster Monkey* attend the

show. This reunion implies Kingston's wish to make peace reign over the world. Wittman's peace plan is to promote mutual understanding through culture, to intermarry warring nations and miscegenate different races. Wittman states that refusal to make war does not imply a failure to be masculine, and Kingston's peace plan is to replace the martial with the marital. Wittman who alienates himself from the F.O.B.s in the beginning of the novel, finally accepts the diversity of his community by staging a play with actors and actresses from various backgrounds. Working towards community instead of fostering individualism creates a peaceful condition for Kingston who, in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, physically works with a community, a veteran writing group. In relating one's self to a community, one's mind is broadened and becomes more compassionate. Before being filmed in a BBC documentary, Kingston announced, 'I wanted the BBC to show the world a multicultural, multiracial America. Every time we go to war, we're in schizophrenic agony. Whoever the enemy is, they're related to us' (361).

### War within War

The theme of 'war' is a thread connecting Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*, *China Men*, *Tripmaster Monkey*, *The Fifth Book of Peace* to *Broad Margin*. Kingston's concerns with war and the world are either indirectly or straightforwardly represented in her narratives. In *The Woman Warrior*, the war is mainly about ethnic and gender inequality for Chinese Americans. Kingston has demonstrated the extension of her interests from the more personal to the worldly from *China Men*: in the beginning of this book, several hints about the Second World War (1939–1945) can be perceived; the protagonist's narrative about her long-disappeared Japanese neighbours alludes to the internment of Japanese Americans as a result of America's war against Japan after the Pearl Harbour bombing. Kingston's narratives, intentionally or not, have touched on war throughout. For example, when she is describing the scenery around Chinaman's Hat in Hawaii in *China Men*, she abruptly inserts one sentence accusing the American Navy and Army of destroying Hawaiian land (90). The narrators also describe the effects of war on their lives: for instance, during the Korean War (1950–1953), the narrator in *China Men* has to practice 'Preparedness Drill in the school basement' (276). Monica Chiu points out that '[f]or each new war, a new narrative articulated the differences between "good" Asians and "the enemy"' (202). In the Second World War, the enemy for the Americans was Japan and people of Japanese origin; Chinese Americans are regarded as 'good Asians'. However, after the communists defeated the

Nationalists and reigned over China, America was at first on the Nationalists' side—Chinese Americans at that time were afraid of being associated with the communists and viewed as the enemy. Moreover, in these wars where Asian Americans were drafted to fight against Asians, Asian American soldiers had to face greater inner struggles than American soldiers of other ancestries.

Of the wars in Kingston's texts, the Vietnam War (1955–1975) has the most influence on her writing.<sup>3</sup> From *China Men*, *Tripmaster Money* to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, the Vietnam War has played an important role. The narrator's brother goes to Asia with the American Navy in *China Men*, confronts his confusion about the significance of being a Chinese American there, and expresses his care for other human beings. Characters in both *Tripmaster Monkey* and *The Fifth Book of Peace* affirm the waste and inhumanity of war and wish for peace. Shangrila, a peaceful utopia, appears in *The Fifth Book of Peace*; its name is Plum Village, which is located in France. Kingston explains, 'Plum Village is a product of the Viet Nam–American War. Vietnamese in diaspora settled here. A city of peace has resulted from war' (390). Kingston draws her conclusion on war and peace thusly: 'I chanted my Woman Warrior chant... I have told her story as a women's liberation story, and as a war story. But I now understand, it is a homecoming story. Fa Mook Lan leads her army home from war' (390). Kingston, a pacifist who once took the role of a woman warrior, now puts down her sword and works to bring peace to the world.

Through the hybridization of genres and identity, Kingston has demonstrated the diversity of Chinese Americans and their cultures, and her intentional playing with genres is best exemplified by *The Fifth Book of Peace*, a book she calls a 'nonfiction fiction nonfiction sandwich' in her interview with Eric Schroeder (223). Kingston has also established a positive Chinese American image and drawn the East and West closer. She believes that it is through the meeting of different cultures that the hope of mutual cultural understanding can be finally achieved and love between people and peace in the world thus made possible.

### Peace

*I Love a Broad Margin to My Life*, which the author claims will be her last book, closes the loop of Kingston's discussion on war and peace, commencing in her very first book *The Woman Warrior*. The writer condemns the injustice of war from the beginning of *Broad Margin*: 'You didn't have to be a citizen to be drafted' (8). She also reminds her readers of the cruelty of war: 'Almost 2,000 killed in Iraq, G.I.s'



alone (9). The brutality of war constantly surfaces in this book; for example, in describing Wittman leaving America, the author suddenly inserts the line ‘The troops will never come home’ (41). Locating this sentence between two blank lines, this message stands out and is thus highlighted. Besides the American soldiers, she is also concerned about the people who America is warring against. In describing a photo of a ten-year-old Iraqi boy’s tragic loss of his parents and siblings, the writer discloses her wish for death (22–23).

Kingston’s wars are not limited to those involving Americans; through sending her monkey to China, she is able to reflect on the violent events taking place in China, including the killing of Falun Gong members, the prosecutions during the Cultural Revolution and the two Opium Wars. The wars in Vietnam are remembered as well:

No more PTSD. PTSD over.  
 War over. War won. They won every war.  
 The American War, and before that, war  
 with the French, and before that, the Japanese,  
 and before that, the Chinese. (132)

Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) leaves Vietnam but it performs its influence elsewhere. On being told that the woman warrior Fa Mook Lan killed herself, the narrator proclaims her astonishment and refuses to believe it;<sup>4</sup> at the end of *Broad Margin*, she considers that this suicide ‘may be revisionist history’ since ‘governments have trouble acknowledging PTSD’ (218). Furthermore, in recording the mass suicides of American soldiers coming back from the battlefield, Kingston once again exposes the trauma caused by war. War also affects those who are not soldiers: the narrator recollects that in the Sung Dynasty, the Chinese poetess Wen-chi was captured by nomads and made the barbarian prince’s wife; the woman desired to die at first but afterwards learned to trust her husband. Wen-chi, however, was to leave her husband and two sons at the end of story and returned to China as a stranger. Under the impact of war, the separation of family is not unusual after all. Aware of the destructive power of war, Kingston became ‘an anti-war spokesperson dedicated to promoting peace’, in the words of Nancy R. Ives (72).

To stop warfare, Kingston had previously written *The Fifth Book of Peace* in hopes of bringing peace to the world, and the writer herself participated in a protest in front of the White House. In *Broad Margin*, the author narrates how she was arrested along with twenty-four fellow female demonstrators, including the famous African American writer

Alice Walker. Unfortunately, the protest failed, and America bombed Iraq. Frustrated by this unsuccessful attempt, Kingston resorts to the spiritual way to ‘change the world’ with chi kung: ‘energy will round/ the globe, and heal the bombed–up world’ (209). Unable to witness the arena of war for herself, Kingston sends her monkey on a trip to the Silk Road leading to the Middle East, holding the Bell of Peace to pacify the land scarred by warfare: ‘The ring makes silence all/ around, all around. Explosions cease./ Bombardment ends. Combatants/ stop to enjoy the sound of Buddha’s voice./ The ring gathers time into one moment of peace’ (212).

Kingston has emphasized the equality of human beings and their close interrelationship in order to highlight the injustice of war. Staying in a monastery, Wittman learned that ‘Under the vow of silence, we/ can know we are all equally human’ (119). Moreover, through protesting together against war, the non–violent peace demonstrators were encompassed by love and mutual understanding. The narrator takes the readers to her father’s village in China and to revisit the no–name aunt from *The Woman Warrior*. The aunt was said to have drowned in the village well and therefore haunted the family, but in *Broad Margin* the ghost is appeased by a ceremony. Thus, ‘Curse lifted’ and ‘War over’ become the niece’s conclusion (171). The narrator not only brings back the memory of her familial history but also that of the wider community, from Chu Ping the peace martyr to Su Wu the Chinese peace ambassador to the Mongols. The reader is reminded that many people before us have endeavoured to make peace possible and we are supposed to keep the world peaceful rather than destroy it with war.

Before going back home, Wittman terminates his voyage in the city Xi’an, meaning West Peace and implying again Kingston’s long wish for harmony between all countries and human beings. As a peace activist, the writer struggles to find reasons to live on in this still warring world, and one of her reasons relates to her mother’s vision of the Chinese goddess Kwan Yin. The protective power of the goddess is assumed to be able to guard the lives of living souls and the author is somewhat relieved from the pressure of war. The ex–warrior who aspired to pursue justice via violence has long put down her sword and has transformed into a peace activist; she determines to keep living, to love and to be loved.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> To be consistent with Kingston's translation of Chinese names, I adopt the forms that have appeared in Kingston's texts, most of which are in Cantonese pronunciation.

<sup>2</sup> 'The Four Great Classical Novels' in Chinese literature are *Journey to the West*, *Romance of Three Kingdoms*, *Tale of the Water Margins* and *Dream in the Red Chamber*.

<sup>3</sup> America's military involvement in the Vietnam War was from 1961 to 1973.

<sup>4</sup> In *Broad Margin*, this woman warrior is spelled as Fa Mook Lan, instead of Fa Mu Lan.

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