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Maxine Hong Kingston

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The author chronicles the lives of three generations of Chinese men in America, woven from memory, myth and fact. Here's a storyteller's tale of what they endured in a strange new land.

China Men Details

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From Reader Review China Men for online ebook

Aaron says

Excellent storytelling, combining autobiographical and historical fact with imagination and fantasy to tell stories of men (mostly of her own family) and their journeys.

Several of these stories are about her ancestors and their journeys to America: her Great-grandfather of the Sandalwood Mountains, brought from China to Hawaii for indentured field labor; her Grandfather of the Sierra Nevada Mountains who built the railroads; her Father from China, whose journey, of questionable legality, she has to imagine and construct from what evidence is available.

She uses a variety of subjects and formats, to provide a kaleidoscope of stories and experiences. For example, she tells the story of Robinson Crusoe ("Lo Bin Sun") as she likely would have heard it growing up. The chapter "The Making of More Americans" chronicles her family's times and struggles establishing themselves in America. "The Laws" is an essay-format timeline of the U.S. laws concerning Chinese immigration, up to the time the book was published. "The Brother from America" is about her brother that served in Vietnam, struggling with military life and with finding ways to promote peace throughout the war.

The writing is often harsh, dark, and serious, but is just as often lighthearted, fun and joyous.

Martin Allen says

I wanted to read this book as it was one I remember vividly having on my bookshelf as a teenager, but didn't recall much about its content, and I wanted to revisit it to see what the impact was it had on me to remember having it so clearly in my teenage years. Having read it, I'm at a loss to explain its vividness in my mind.

Part fact, part fiction, this tells the story of the family of Maxine Hong Kingston and the experiences of coming to America as seen through a chaptered mixture of biography, fable and allegorical dreams. Maxine writes quite poetically and rhythmically, but it is sometimes hard to keep up with what's real and what's not and the jumping around of story. Deeply interesting in many parts, baffling in others and tedious in a few. Content that I read it again, but not sure it's going to leave a long-lasting impression.

Christine says

This is a collection of remembrances which reads like short stories. But it's non-fiction. I loved some, and others a little less. But it is definitely a one of a kind book. The last long chapter, "The Brother in Vietnam" was my favorite. I'm glad I stumbled onto this book!

umberto says

In fact I read this novel as part of an Everyman's Library hardcover entitled, "The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts", in which I enjoyed reading. I'm sorry I can't assure my Goodreads friends for its readability since it depends, I mean for those familiar with the writer's narratives or dialogues may think it

is all right and thus can keep reading till the end of the story. I have to confess I didn't understand all, some characters were a bit mysterious to me then. However, I liked some parts with her sense of humour, that is, her unique of looking at things as they are.

Let me find the book and reread it, then I can find some few episodes/dialogues for you and, hopefully, a few tips of thought.

Peter says

The story of generations of (mostly male) Chinese immigrants to the United States. It took some getting used to at first. The story doesn't follow a single character, and it seems to hold some of them at arms length, sometimes introducing a character who then tells a lengthy story about another character. These portraits were often sad, sometimes understated, but most of them built up to a dark and lasting emotional weight even if the character only stayed in the story for 15 pages. The stories included brutality and hardship but also resilience and tragic pride. Although the maintenance and performance of masculinity didn't always appear front and center, the whole book had that same undercurrent.

Char says

I used to think I loved California, but I didn't know California. Unless you learn about the Chinese blood that was spilled building this state, and the lives that help form its foundation, you can never know California. Kingston opened my eyes to a history of dreams and exploitation and myth that have changed how I see contemporary Chinese Americans and California. Highly recommended.

TheSkepticalReader says

Let me just begin with the following statement: I don't like immigration stories. I *really*, really don't. If it were not for a class, I wouldn't really have cared enough to pick up this book for myself. No offense really, it's just that...well, all immigration stories revolve around one thing and it's rather boring to have to read about something you're already aware of.

But I don't think I was wholly lost once I actually begin reading *China Men*. While it by no means became a favorite book or any such thing, *China Men* ended up being a rather unique and adventurous experience. There is a lot of exploration of the Chinese immigration history to the United States in the novel and even though I realize it is fiction, some of it echoes reality closely. As a dual English and History student myself, I observed that *China Men* is an excellent blend of myth, fiction, and fact—often all emerging as one. After reading an interview MHK (the author) gave, I assume that she does this on purpose. It's sort of similar to when one participates in one of those study abroad programs, the three basic classes they usually offer are: language, history, and literature—each representing the bases of all civilizations and that is precisely the elements that MHK is commingling together in *China Men*. While I did not care for the major stories that much, the sprinkles of short stories in between each of the major stories were quite haunting. Some were factual, some retellings of Chinese myths, and some were introductions into the other major stories. But there were usually my favorite parts, particularly “The Ghostmate”—absolutely stunning.

MHK's writing is hard to enjoy and yet it's easy to appreciate. Let me explain. While she writes stunning

prose, drawing simplistic words into beautiful sentences, the topics which she tackles are very hard to deal with. Her words are enchanting but they can also be a bit difficult to handle at times. If I knew a bit more about Chinese culture then I would be better equipped to deal with the subject matter but even though I wanted to read more of her writing, the things which chooses to get descriptive with were thoroughly disturbing. Here's an example, a passage that comes right after a man attempts to sell his son in exchange for a daughter and his wife berates him for it,

“Perhaps it was that very evening and not after the Japanese bayoneted him that he began taking his penis out at the dinner table, worrying it, wondering at it, asking why it had given him four sons and no daughter, chastising it, asking it whether it were yet capable of producing the daughter of his dreams. He shook his head and clucked his tongue at it. When he saw what a disturbance it caused, he laughed, laughed in Ah Po's irritated face, whacked his naked penis on the table, and joked, ‘Take a look at *this* sausage’” (21).

And another, as a Chinese immigrant worker plays around with the idea of freedom in a labor camp,

“One beautiful day, dangling in the sun above a new valley,...sexual desire clutched him so far he been over in the basket...Suddenly he stood up tall and squirted out into space. ‘I am fucking the world,’ he said. The world's vagina was big, big as the sky, big as a valley” (133).

As it shows, while I can appreciate the symbolism of these actions, the imagery is a bit disturbing.

But as I mentioned earlier, this is still overall an immigration narrative and because I have little taste for those, I cannot rate it any less than an “OK” book. Because at the end of it all, I expected to learn nothing except that white America is blatantly racist but immigrants often still prefer America to their own countries because “open corruption” is not as common in this side of the world (at least, not completely yet). It's often awful, having to deal with racist white Americans who consider themselves *above* “immigrants” (even though they are, of course, themselves immigrants), but I myself still prefer this country to many, many others—including the one I was born in.

So while I liked Maxine Hong Kingston's writing style and liked learning a bit about Chinese and Chinese-American culture, I did not care so much for the major stories themselves. I would highly recommend it if you are interested in this topic but if not, I am not going to attempt to convince you otherwise.

Dana says

This book was very interesting to read. As a memoir, it was great to be able to see into the author and her family's life. I had to read this book for one of my college courses and it has been very eye-opening to see what these people had to go through, not through the history books, the laws, or even the movies that have come out about the Chinese Americans. This very honest representation of their lives was well written and full of information. There were many things that I had learned differently or, in some cases, didn't even learn in my classes until now. It was all just swept under the rug by the writers of history

This book is set up with short vignettes that break up six other stories of, mainly, the men in Maxine Hong Kingston's family. It shows the struggle of Chinese-Americans in their immigration and their becoming American citizens when they first got here. The story touches a lot on the racism that they encountered as well. When there were stereotypes, Kingston was able to spin them to give them a sort of double-consciousness. There was the negative stereotyped version, then there was also the positive version.

This was a very interesting, and eye-opening book. If you want to learn more about the Chinese American history, pick this book up.

Stephanie says

A multi-genre investigation of what emigration does to cultural identity and masculinity. It's not an easy read; there's violence, mental illness, verbal & physical abuse of women, and feelings of emptiness. I tracked a lot of the sections on suicides and ghosts and guns. I was also interested in the section that mirrored Robinson Crusoe and the mention of other Caucasian classics amidst the Chinese cultural elements - myths, traditions and sayings. I will definitely have to pick up the earlier, more feminist companion work.

Anna says

One Chinese-American tells the story of her family, and how they came to live in America. Each of her ancestors or relatives is the protagonist of a section of the book. One labored in Hawaii, one built railroads, one worked in Alaska, one fought in Vietnam. She also writes of her own experiences growing up in America.

Because of the wide range of experiences and huge time span it covers, this one is a little more disjointed and than any other set of memoirs I've read. However, it's an entirely different perspective than a lot of Chinese memoirs, most of which are set in China during Mao.

So if you're interested in Chinese history, American history, and reading about a real family's struggles, then you're likely to really enjoy this one.

Mollie says

Sorry CHINA MEN- I tried 3 times over two years and I just can't break into you... Loved your sisters in WOMAN WARRIOR but you are a drag...

ren says

Hmm. Reading this was an interesting and complicated experience for me, like buying a variety box of herbal teas and trying out the flavors one at a time, finding some that you really love, some that you're ambivalent about, some that you don't particularly dig but manage to drain the cup in one gulp anyway because you know they're good for your health.

On one hand, I can see the richness of this book, with the intricate narratives, excellent characterization of male figures, clever storytelling techniques and so on, I can't say the same for the way everything is presented. I'm not sure how to explain this - it sounds like I'm not fond of Kingston's writing style, but I actually do enjoy her prose to some extent. Perhaps it's because throughout the collection she uses the same writing style? It would've been fine if there was a coherent storyline that focused on certain characters because in that case, a consistent narrative voice would add to the immersion and all that jazz. But here,

Kingston recounts a lot of different stories in the same narrative voice (even with the erratic POV changes), spends a little too much time on nitty-gritty details, and personally, I was thoroughly bored. On the other hand, as I've prefaced above, I do get why this book has been receiving the amount of attention that it does. It tackles numerous immigration issues, explores the psychology of "China Men" and paints vivid pictures of Chinese families within various historical settings with (somewhat suffocating) meticulousness, and to be very honest, I love the passive aggressive mockery of Robinson Crusoe and the short anecdotes in between longer chapters. So all in all, it was reading experience full of conflicted feelings for me, but I definitely wouldn't mark this as a poor book and would recommend everyone to give it a try to see if it's your cup of tea.

Andrew Wright says

A great gender companion to Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*. The same themes and subject matter pertaining to the nature of Chinese Americanism as the earlier book, and told with the same subtle and complex narrative structure that intermingles myth, reality, memory, journalism and imagination into one lucid literary experience, but this time, dealing with men's experiences instead of women. A great look at the experiences Chinese men faced emigrating to America and a great look at the cultural limbo those emigrants' children face living in between their parents' communal old world expectations and the liberating individualism of America.

Nancy Nguyen says

This is probably my favorite book of this year. I have to be honest. After reading Amy Tan, I was a little disappointed in Asian American literature. I didn't think it was really that good. But everyone around me (mostly white readers) told me *Joy Luck Club* was among the best pieces of Asian American literature out there. Then, I read *Bone and Steer Towards Rock and Aloft* and this book. All those books put the conventions of literature on its head, and the one major ways they could've done that was through the diverse scope. Don't read Amy Tan. Read this book instead.

What a great piece of literature.

Skye Skye says

Kingston is a masterful story teller who seeks to present an interesting tapestry of biographical data and personal indignity. The novel revolves around Chinese gentlemen seeking the American Dream, and how cruel the journey proves to be, but the second theme underlies the historical perspective and is found between chapters in the guise of brutal, nearly inhumane dream sequences: Kingston expresses rage against the discrimination Chinese females must endure. This is an interesting novel of the clashing of cultures and genders.

Gala says

"*The Woman Warrior*," a multifaceted memoir of Maxine Hong Kingston's mother, remains one of my

favorite books in its fluid circling of storytelling devices. From humorous to heartbreaking to historical to fantastic and mythological, it tells a long and idiosyncratic tale that interconnects generations over the sea between China and the U.S. I have no idea why I never read "China Men," which is an extension through the male side of the author's family, with as much elegance and humor and imagination as "The Woman Warrior." I only remove one star because it trails off a bit toward the end, where TWW remains crystalline, in my experience as a reader.

Rowena says

“You fix yourself in the present, but I want to hear the stories about the rest of your life, the Chinese stories. I want to know what makes you scream and curse, and what you’re thinking when you say nothing, and why when you do talk, you talk differently from Mother.”– Maxine Hong Kingston, *China Men*

Maxine Hong Kingston is a great storyteller and this was like no other book I’ve ever read before. It’s a patchwork of fiction, non-fiction, myths and legends, and historical artifacts that helped to shape the story of what it must have been like for her male Chinese ancestors in North America.

This book is about the immigrant experience and how the Chinese leaving their homes in China in hopes of a better financial future, found ways to make their new land their own. As most of us have read so many immigrant stories we can often guess what these stories will bring: frustration, hardships, racism, homesickness, and so on. I think the history of the Chinese in North America is quite unique because of the sex ratio disparity which meant that in many places there were very few Chinese women. It was interesting to see how the men were creative in their own lives, upholding cultures and traditions, far away from home and from their wives, children, and other relatives.

The way the Chinese were treated in the States wasn’t new to me, and they experienced similar treatment in Canada. It was interesting to compare and contrast the experiences.

The language factor definitely contributed to how poorly the Chinese workers were treated, and the frustration was evident in this book:

“How was he to marvel adequately, voiceless? He needed to cast his voice out to catch ideas.”

The frustration also came about to their being exploited by the overseers. The Chinese workers were treated terribly; hard work, dangerous work, the slowest being sent home without pay as an “incentive” for the others to work hard.

I enjoyed how myth was used in the book, how stories from China were transported and taken to another land, to a land that wasn’t theirs initially, but was soon stained with their blood. Myths were also used by the writer to fill in parts of her ancestors’ stories that were missing

One thing that’s similar between the Chinese history in America and in Canada was the building of the railroads:

“They lost count of the number dead; there is no record of how many died building the railroad. Or maybe it was demons doing the counting and Chinamen not worth counting.”

In Canada, they say for every mile of the railroad, one Chinese man died. I visited the Last Spike of the

Canadian railroad (Revelstoke, BC) on a Rocky Mountain tour a few years ago. The tour guide, who was Chinese-Canadian, told us a bit about the history and then directed our attention to the painting commemorating the opening of the railway. We searched in vain for a Chinese face. This is one of the reasons I feel our cultural history has to be taught, to show us we belong in a place that might still look at us as unwelcome strangers. The following line must surely be powerful to a Chinese child:

“Once in a while an adult said, ‘Your grandfather built the railroad.’ (Or ‘Your grandfathers built the railroad.’)”

Driving of the Last Spike Picture in Revelstoke, BC

[image error]"

The Last Spike

[image error]"

I loved this book so much. It's one that definitely warrants a re-read.

Josh Karaczewski says

A fine companion to Kingston's "The Woman Warrior," again blending family history/legend with Chinese history/myth. Less personal, in being less autobiographical, but still an excellent work.

Ryan Mishap says

Few wander into the land of magical realist history, but Kingston is a progenitor of the genre. Combined with "Woman Warrior", this book sheds an ethereal, poetic light on the history of people of Chinese descent in the U.S.

Jennifer says

The reason I'm giving this book three stars is because there were two stories that really stood out: first, the story about the grandfather who didn't tell his life story about dynamiting granite to build a railroad until he was very old and the second about Kingston's own experience with her aunt and family in the States. Both were very eye-opening and realistic.

The rest of the book seemed exaggerated and awkwardly worded. It was hard to read 40 pages at a go because the wording was so weird! I guess it had to have been hard to translate Cantonese into English, but the stories didn't flow all that well. And some of the logic was a bit out there, too.

I liked some of the imagery, especially about the railroad and daily life in China--those bits were excellent. I also liked the historical references, and there were many.

I just didn't like this book as whole. Was it because it was uncomfortable to hear what the Chinese went

through? Maybe. Was it because the horror stories crept me out a little? Maybe.
Definitely read this book at your leisure and not through class: I don't think it's a book you should rush.
