

Imagining Identity Within Community

Musings on Tripmaster Monkey

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In earlier editions of this book I wrote about hyphenated identity, using Maxine Hong Kingston's (1976) *The Woman Warrior* to address the in-between space that many Chinese Americans experience straddling two cultural traditions and practices. I argued that the hyphen served a symbolic function of bridging the two cultures but simultaneously marginalizing the individual from both cultural contexts. I suggested that the feminist sensibility of the woman warrior can transcend the constraints and reconstruct the hyphenated identity. As Kingston (1976) put it, "I learned to make my mind large, as the universe is large, so that there is room for paradoxes" (p. 35).

In an interview with Seshachari (1998), Kingston reiterated that *The Woman Warrior* is a story of how to come home, how to reintegrate oneself into one's family and community. She deliberately left out the endings because "I wasn't wise enough and I didn't know the endings" (p. 192). This open-ended and "not knowing" quality in Kingston's writing continues to inspire me and my work over the decades. Her passion for writing, her creative way of storytelling about cultural traditions, her vision of community building, her political activities, and her desire to produce something that requires completion by the reader all engage my life in multiple ways. This essay explores ideas and visions of Asian American identity, drawing on Kingston's (1989) *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*. I believe the protagonist in this

book has much to offer in the process of imagining a cultural identity that is counter stereotypical, is situated in communal practices, and challenges the dominant societal structure.

I live and work in San Francisco, which is one of the most diverse cities in the United States. Multicultural identity is not just an academic inquiry but a daily recognition. What does it mean to say that the Bay Area is ethnically and culturally diverse and that multicultural identities characterize this diversity? Many who visit San Francisco remark on its great diversity. To many white Americans, the prominence of Asian American faces in some neighborhoods of the city might serve to provide "evidence" to validate their observation. But how good is this "evidence"? Asian Americans have a long history in the Bay Area (Lowe, 1996; Takaki, 2008). "Asian American" commonly refers to a wide range of immigrants and descendants of immigrants from countries throughout Asia. Parreñas and Siu (2007), in discussing Asian diasporas, acknowledge the uniqueness and specific history of each Asian ethnic group but suggest that the label "Asian American" can be useful for building panethnic coalitions among groups with Asian roots whose identity is based on a shared experience of racialization in the United States. In my essay I use the term Asian American in this context when appropriate.

Identity can best be conceptualized not as a fixed category of names and labels, but as a point of

orientation that is simultaneously positioned throughout the course of interaction and also provides positioning in the process of communication. While one's cultural tradition guides social practice that is coherent to one's sense of identity, simultaneously the creative enactment of one's identity reconstructs the traditional resources. This reflexive process is historical and political. It also characterizes the fluidity and contingency of one's cultural identity that is continually changing and always emerging (Chen, 2004b).

Kingston is known for her abilities to write about characters living on the margins of society who defy the traditional oppressive forces. Through her interwoven storytelling in *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston herself as a Chinese American woman emerged as an archetype of the woman warrior—a character whose identity is complex and rich, who embraces American culture while experiencing prejudice and discrimination, and who longs to connect with her Chinese heritage while being perceived as an alien, a “white ghost” by her own people. “The swordswoman and I are not so dissimilar. May my people understand the resemblance soon so that I can return to them” (Kingston, 1976, p. 62).

In the *Woman Warrior*, Kingston also wrote about the made-up nature of one's identity, “I continue to sort out what's just my childhood, just my imagination, just my family, just the village, just movies, just living” (Kingston, 1976, p. 239). Although identity is always in a process of becoming and being negotiated, it is not a random formation of an individual's doing. In addressing why different social identities are significant in communication, Allen (2004) reminds us that power matters in our understanding of how differences are constructed in a hierarchical social system in which not all differences are evaluated by the same criteria, and not all differences matter in the same way. The shifting meaning and significance of one's cultural category and racial label can best be understood within a sociopolitical and historical context (Omi & Winant, 2008).

The image of model minority associated with Asian Americans as a large group has continued to exist since the 1960s. As Wei (1993) suggested in analyzing the Asian American movement, the image of the model minority stereotype implies the idea of a cultural group that has successfully integrated into

American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barriers. The backlash of highlighting the academic success of this group can be seen in the process of admission on college campuses (Golden, 2007). Selected Asian American success stories celebrate a particular aspect of these individuals' accomplishments, but they neglect the historical and continuing racial barriers and prejudicial attitudes toward individuals that belong to this category. Furthermore, this stereotype does not distinguish between a third-generation Japanese American with a middle-class background and a newly arrived immigrant from Cambodia who struggles with the language and survival in a new country.

The road to acceptance of Asians as full-fledged Americans has always been full of roadblocks, detours, and washed-out bridges. Among many, Ling (1995) reflects her identity construction in an essay “Whose America Is It?” She writes, “in the land of the redwhiteandblue the redyellowandbrown were generally relegated to inferior positions. No matter now enthusiastically we waved the flag, our skin color, eye shape, hair texture and facial features did not change. Nor did our positions in the hierarchy based on skin color and race.” Given the long history of Asians in California, one would think that in the Bay Area, characterized as it is by multicultural identities, ethnic stereotypes of Asian Americans should and can be more readily questioned and challenged. However, as the debate on college admission criteria suggests, embedded in the discourse is an implicit (and erroneous) assumption that Asian Americans can excel in academics but fail in other areas of activities such as leadership and athletics (Golden, 2007). This narrow and one-dimensional characterization of Asian Americans' potentials and capabilities would be unacceptable to any cultural group.

To challenge stereotypes requires us to see the underlying political functions that serve to maintain the hierarchical system. It also behooves us to explore new ways of enacting our identity and relating to others. To generate social change one needs to challenge social injustice and discrimination, create new opportunities, and forge new alliances. Wittman Ah Sing, the main character in *Tripmaster Monkey*, seems to have found a way to re-create Asian American identity and to reintegrate into the American

society as an Asian person with new ideas and new visions. Kingston is always intrigued by the whole life of the imagination, not just the basic facts (Lim, 2008). Her writing in *Tripmaster Monkey* provides us with many possibilities.

Trickster Sun Wukong the Monkey King

The protagonist in *Tripmaster Monkey* is Wittman Ah Sing, named after Walt Whitman. He is a 23-year-old English major, not a stereotypical Asian majoring in engineering, computer science, or business. He attends Berkeley and lives in San Francisco in the 1960s. Wittman is a fifth-generation Chinese American (not a recent immigrant who speaks limited English). He exemplifies the virtues of a quintessential hippie (not a model minority). Wittman is also a playwright, producer, and director (not a capitalist individual entrepreneur). He wants to put on a play that includes everything that is being left out and everybody who has no place in society. "My idea for the Civil Rights Movement is that we integrate jobs, schools, buses, housing, lunch counters, yes, and we also integrate theater and parties" (Kingston, 1989, p. 284).

The character Wittman Ah Sing is inspired to some degree by the Monkey King, Sun Wukong, in the 16th-century Chinese classical novel, *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng-En (Wu, 1970). Sun Wukong was born from an ancient rock that "had been worked upon by the pure essences of Heaven and the fine savours of Earth, the vigour of sunshine and the grace of moonlight" (Wu, 1970, p. 11). He is capable of 72 polymorphic transformations and has vast powers in combat. He is one of the three main characters who accompanied Tripitaka (Hsuan Tsang) on a pilgrimage to India to seek the Buddhist scripture. The story of *Journey to the West* is based on historical events in the seventh century. The Monkey King provides an intriguing context for creating and developing the Asian American character.

Just as the Monkey King is rebellious (against Heaven and the celestial bureaucracy), Wittman fiercely challenges the capitalist structure and the established system that provides the privileged with more privileges and imposes constraints and deprivations on the disempowered. Just like Sun Wukong,

Wittman is curious, creative, and adventurous. His hubris sometimes leads him to impetuous deeds in a quest for justice, integrity, and fun. Whereas Sun Wukong uses his talents to fight demons, play pranks, and protect the pilgrim monk, Wittman is a draft dodger who steadily challenges stereotypes of Asian Americans and single-mindedly pursues his dream of putting on a play that involves the community.

The Chinese American identity enacted by Wittman Ah Sing is characterized by his talents, abilities, strength, playfulness, ingenuity, and child-like sentimentality. However, he is by no means a role model. Whereas the Monkey King overall is a likeable hero with his colorful personality and amazing resources and skills, Wittman can easily be perceived as an obnoxious character who often uses foul language and behaves boorishly. Although he fights against the racism he experiences, in his interaction with his Chinese American date, Wittman reveals his own sexist and racist attitude and his tendency to stereotype Asian American women. As Fulgado (2003) says, Wittman Ah Sing represents an alternative vision of Asian Americans as opposed to the model minority. What makes his character intriguing, however, is that Wittman does not possess a persona that merely opposes the stereotype. He is passionate about literature and is a talented, well-educated Berkeley graduate. He figures out a way to live his life that integrates elements of both his Chinese heritage and his Western homeland. To Kingston, "integration" does not mean melting down differences, but harmonizing diverse and conflicting elements, whether within the self or in a larger community" (Smith, 1997, p. 50). In addition to confronting racist attitudes in society, Wittman is also persistent in righting the wrongs he perceives in the actions of the U.S. government.

Toni Morrison maintains that "Novels are political, and they function as a modern way of keeping communal stories alive" (cited in Smith, 1997, p. 6). Kingston's Berkeley free-thinker and modern American version of the Monkey King of Chinese legend provides a fertile context to explore the construction of Asian American identity. The persona of Wittman Ah Sing as a trickster functions in many ways to disrupt the stereotypes. As Smith (1997) points out, "Tricksters shake things up, splinter the monologic, shatter the hierarchies" (p. xii). Further, they challenge

the status quo and mediate change; they defy homogenization. Wittman's disruptive activities contest a unified perspective of cultural identity, both between different cultural groups labeled as Asian American and within any specific Asian American subgroup. His insistence on the recognition of competing voices can serve as an inspiration for scholars to continue striving to include marginalized voices in their work.

In my essay on the hyphenated identity (Chen, 2004a), I was inspired by the woman warrior and argued that the paradox of living with a hyphenated identity can be a source of power and wisdom. Living on the margin in multiple ways, Wittman moves between states of transition and strives to create a space for transformation. Just like the woman warrior, Wittman is a nonconforming Chinese American who transforms his confusion, ambiguity, and ambivalence into active engagement and positive change. He is a "perpetual wanderer," possessing boundless energy and ability to challenge social constraints, negotiate boundaries, break taboos, and continue to survive despite opposition and hardships (Smith, 1997, pp. 7-8).

A Vision of Community

Kingston created her protagonist Wittman Ah Sing as someone who wants to work hard, who wants to belong, and who wants to create a community that does not exclude anyone, but includes everybody who has no place in other communities. Wittman attempts to accomplish this vision not only through his arts and talents, but also his rebelliousness and bad behavior. Social disorder and disturbance of the status quo is one way to respond to oppression and to reconstruct identity. One thing that is significant in Wittman's endeavor of producing a play is that he does not want to include only Asian Americans, but all marginalized and disenfranchised individuals. As Fulgado (2003) pointed out, this form of "communal consciousness" echoes the political endeavors that gave birth to the Asian American movement as described in Wei (1993).

The process of attempting to create community as a remedy to social isolation is historical. In *The Woman Warrior*, Kingston anchors her storytelling in the family stories that she heard as a child about her

ancestors and relatives. Her Chinese American identity is interwoven with the cultural myths and immigrant stories that her mother had lived through. In *Tripmaster Monkey*, the final play that Wittman produces includes long-lost family members located along his journey to form a community. The new paradigm of community consciousness is not one that abandons immigrant heritage and conveniently erases history for political expediency. It is an identity in process that continues to re-create family history and transform one's cultural landscape.

Developing a political voice in marginalized individuals is one way to combat stereotypes. Creating a new form of inclusive community and cultivating a harmonious communal sensibility for many diverse individuals takes time. As Kingston (1989) wrote, "Wittman was learning that one big bang-up show has to be followed up with a second show, a third show, shows until something takes hold. He was defining a community, which will meet every night for a season. Community is not built once-and-for-all; people have to imagine, practice, and re-create it" (p. 306). Identity construction involves an ongoing process of reflexive interplay between tradition and creativity in a dynamic effort to meet the exigencies of the present without losing the cultural treasures of the past. Coalitions can be formed and dismantled with shifting boundaries and power structures. Wittman in his unique words and actions continues to strive for a vision of identity embedded in community.

Kingston's vision of identity involves reimagination of cultural forms and community discourse. Shome (2006), in a study of call centers in India, articulates the relationship of diaspora and hybridization: "We find the occurrence of complex productions of racial formations, of living in the inbetween, of replacements and displacements, of being both outside and inside multiple nations and geographies that intersect at the collision of multiple times" (p. 108). Wittman's Asian American identity transcends simplistic stereotypes of East meets West. Neither the common idea of assimilation nor ordinary notions of clinging to one's tradition applies to the invention of his identity. Kingston's writing explores an alternative way of envisioning identity that is creative and transformative. In this higher level of conceptualization,

identity is both singular and plural, both communal and individual, both self and other, and both enabling and constraining.

Most important, Kingston figured out a way to transcend the typical binary oppositions. In the 3-night play that Wittman finally produces, everyone has a starring role and everyone is also a spectator. In his monologue at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*, Wittman forcefully critiques American imperialism and racism in making sense of what it means to be an Asian American. He is simultaneously reflecting the historical predicament of the Asian American and carving out a space for how to go on from here. As Kingston said in an interview, at the end of the book, "Wittman Ah Sing has now learned to bring to the surface his Asian American consciousness, and now his challenge is to become a global citizen" (Seshachari, 1998, p. 212). Perhaps this multilayered enmeshment in various historical and cultural spaces and times can serve as a context to understand the construction of cultural identity.

Identity construction often involves the negotiation of a legitimate space for managing the different components of one's social being. In discussing the personal, the political, and the line in between, Palumbo-Liu (1999) points out that "the 'personal,' as I use the term, seeks out a space for its 'freedom' within the logic of the hegemonic—in fact, it identifies with it precisely because it views the dominant ideology as fostering, rather than suppressing, individual initiative" (p. 414). Further, "for 'political' I have in mind a collective social practice that engages individual action with an aim of appropriating, reconfiguring, or deconstructing the hegemonic. In this respect, it is contestive on a larger scale than individual complaint or grievance" (p. 414). Wittman refuses to play the victim. He has bigger ideas, although not always well thought out, of how to create a context in which he can transform not just the Asian American community, but all of American society.

Wittman's many identities include not just a creative playwright, a producer and director of a play, but also a passionate antiwar activist. Striving to understand what his place is in America as a fifth-generation Chinese American, Wittman has to engage with the social structure that he deems oppressive. He continuously rebels against the stereo-

types and injustices that confront him. His endeavors illustrate that he believes in communal change and social activism, just as can be seen in Kingston's unwavering dedication to organize writing workshops for the veterans for more than a decade (Kingston, 2006). "Breaking silence" characterizes the mode that both the woman warrior and Wittman Ah Sing embrace, as Palumbo-Liu (1999) put it, the notion of "pain is political" takes hold in Kingston's writing (p. 415). The pain here can refer to the historical dismissal and erasure of individual voices due to various forms of systemic oppression that marginalize persons of different ethnicities, identities, and cultures.

Conclusion

As Wittman Ah Sing wanders in and around San Francisco, he continuously contests cultural boundaries, tirelessly crusades against racism, challenges American consumer culture, and questions the American dream. The new community he envisions consists not only of other Asian Americans, but includes everyone he meets: "Do the right thing by whoever crosses your path. Those coincidental people are your people" (Kingston, 1989, p. 223). The monkey spirit gives us exuberance and possibilities. Just like Wittman, who must create an identity and forge a community, Asian Americans need to maintain their multiplicity and join forces with all other social and cultural groups in resisting different forms of discrimination. The vision of an identity within community is not a personal story of victimization and oppression but a celebration of engagement and survival, despite stereotypical depictions and prejudices. Perhaps this is what Palumbo-Liu (1999) referred to as healing in collective politics.

Both the woman warrior, Kingston herself, and the trickster Wittman Ah Sing figured out creative ways to imagine their Asian American identity. Diversity should be about creating a system in which not only different voices can be heard and respected but where there are also many opportunities for them to meaningfully engage one another. Given the multiple and transcultural identities of its people, San Francisco seems to offer an ideal context for transforming racial politics and reimagining Asian American identity.

Kingston was arrested, together with two dozen protesters including writers Alice Walker and Susan Griffin, in front of the White House at International Women's Day, on March 7, 2003 (San Juan, 2009, p. 185). They were leading more than 5,000 peace activists protesting against the Bush administration's aggression in Iraq. That same year, the book Kingston had worked on for more than a decade, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, was published (Kingston, 2003).

A long time ago in China, there existed three Books of Peace that apparently were so threatening to the reigning powers that the rulers had the books burned. Years and years later Kingston wrote a *Fourth Book of Peace* but it too was burned up in flames, during the Berkeley-Oakland Hills fire of 1991. The fire coincided with the death of her father, and the 156 pages that Kingston had written disappeared in the fire with her house and everything else. In *The Fifth Book of Peace* Kingston meditated on the devastation of war and destruction, and on the renewal of peace and hope. She did not want to "resurrect" the words in the lost manuscript but to re-create yet another version of the book of peace. "The images of peace are ephemeral. The language of peace is subtle. The reasons for peace, the definitions of peace, the very idea of peace have to be invented, and invented again" (Kingston, 2003, p. 402). She also reflected on the process of writing: "The garret where I wrote, which was just my height, burned. A sign. I do not want the aloneness of the writer's life. No more solitary. I need a community of like minds. *The Book of Peace*, to be reconstructed, needs community" (Kingston, 2003, p. 62). Kingston further translated her antiwar protest against the imperial state and her vision of writing in community in her *Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace* (Kingston, 2006), an anthology that gives voices to veterans and their families, documenting the process of healing and writing in community.

It might be puzzling to some readers that I chose a literary writer's work as the basis for my essay in this volume. It would be clear to those who read my essay in the earlier editions of this book that I respect Kingston as a writer, enjoy her stories and ideas, and am deeply affected by her writings. Among numerous Asian American writers and scholars in the Bay Area, Kingston's work resonates powerfully with my

personal and professional life. Two decades ago her *Woman Warrior* gave me new and powerful means to reflect on my own identity as a Chinese American woman. It has continued to inspire my thinking on the issue of cultural identity. *Tripmaster Monkey* sheds light on another dimension of cultural understanding and challenges cultural stereotypes and associated forms of social injustice in a refreshing and unique way. Kingston's creation of Wittman Ah Sing gives me new ideas and courage for generating communal change.

In the process of writing the Peace book, Kingston thought "maybe if I can just suggest the beginnings of some stories, somebody else will take off on them and finish them" (Seshachari, 1998, p. 205). This essay takes off perhaps in an unintended direction from what Kingston had in mind. Nevertheless, it is an effort to continue the endeavor to address cultural identity in the scholarly community. When Clifford (1988, 2001) pondered the transcultural predicaments of our lives, he showed how we continuously try to make homes away from home in an unfinished and unfinishable process of identity transformation and border crossing. San Francisco seems like a good place to take up where Wittman Ah Sing left off in envisioning a community that is truly inclusive and multicultural. As he eagerly invites anyone who has been excluded to participate in his play, I am happy and much obliged to have my voice heard.

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