



# Who Am I?

Examining Maxine Hong Kingston's Racial Identity as Expressed in "No Name Woman"

Christopher Bernstorf  
English 107: Honors Composition  
Dr. Hawkes  
Fall 2008

Kingston uses her outcast aunt in her essay "No Name Woman" as a means of exploring her identity. She cannot decide whether she is Chinese, American, or some mixture of the two, and, if she is a mixture, she is not sure what that means. By the end of the essay, though Kingston herself never seems to decide for certain, readers can clearly tell that she is neither Chinese nor American. Through the thoughts and decisions she reveals to us, readers can see that she is a Chinese-American and what that really means in her life.

Kingston provides us with evidence of her Chinese side when she discusses her own experiences with attraction as a child. She writes of how she always struggled with trying to impress the opposite sex, because she feared that trying to make herself "American-pretty so that the five or six Chinese boys in the class fell in love with [her]" would lead to making all of the boys of every race in the class like her, which is something she did not desire (261). Kingston tells us that, for the Chinese, "any man within visiting distance would have been neutralized as a lover--'brother,' 'younger brother,' 'older brother'" (261). Consequently, she would silently perform

this same Chinese practice in America as a way of making boys seem less intimidating and threatening to her.

Further evidence of Kingston's Chinese side is her belief in many traditional Chinese religious ideas. Throughout the essay, the idea of hexes and curses and the concept of roundness (which goes along with the traditional Chinese belief in yin and yang) appear frequently. In one instance, Kingston is hypothesizing that perhaps her aunt was a vain person and that her vanity "cursed the year, the family, the village, and herself" (260). Another time, Kingston describes how her practice of silently adding "'brother'" to boys' names "hexed" both herself and them because she never had any dates (261). When she is explaining why the villagers made the raid on the home of her aunt's family, she writes that they were showing her aunt "a personal, physical representation of the break she had made in the 'roundness' [of the village]" (262).

Of the Chinese religious beliefs that Kingston adheres to, the one that seems to most fully expose her Chinese side is the making of paper "supplies" for her ancestors (263). This belief is of paramount importance to a Chinese family

because the Chinese believe that their ancestors take care of them. In Kingston's case, this practice takes on an even greater importance because her outcast aunt has not only lacked someone to make her supplies for fifty years but also died of drowning, which means, according to Chinese tradition, she will constantly wait "silently by the water [looking] to pull down a substitute" (264). Kingston's essay, being by its nature made of paper, consequently becomes her offering to her aunt. It provides Kingston with a way to both pay homage to her aunt and also hopefully keep her aunt from taking her as a substitute, which seems like a real possibility due to the fact that Kingston writes, "My aunt haunts me" (264).

In addition to showing us her Chinese side, Kingston also reveals that she is in many ways an American. The first example of her American side comes in the very first sentence of the very first paragraph of the essay. Kingston's mother explicitly directed her not to tell the story of her aunt to anyone, yet she tells us the entire story anyway. This disregard for what an elder family member instructed her to do is most definitely not a Chinese characteristic because, as Kingston makes abundantly clear throughout her essay, Chinese culture is one in which the elders are supreme, where "the young people [massage] their elders' backs" and revere them in both life and death (263). Kingston also provides us with several descriptions of how she and her siblings did all sorts of "frivolous things," such as getting excited over ice cream cones, "the American movie on New Year's Day," and riding carnival rides (257). While Westerners might view these activities as entirely normal for children, they nevertheless stand in sharp contrast to Kingston's somewhat austere mother, whom Kingston describes as "add[ing] nothing unless powered by

Necessity" (257). Kingston also gives us a very literal example of her American side when she writes, "Walking erect (knees straight, toes pointed forward, not pigeon-toed, which is Chinese-feminine) and speaking in an inaudible voice, I have tried to turn myself American-feminine" (260-261).

Kingston's sympathy for her aunt is also something that is highly American. Of all of the scenarios she considers as to why her aunt committed adultery, only two portray her aunt as responsible for the adultery, and Kingston seems to dismiss both of them almost immediately by saying that "imagining her free with sex doesn't fit" because she does not "know any women like that, or men either" (259). Kingston also directly states that she "want[s] her fear to have lasted just as long as rape lasted so that the fear could have been contained" and not have dominated her life (258). Taken together, this statement and her dismissal of her aunt as anything but a victim show that Kingston clearly views her aunt as someone who was wrongly punished. Through writing this essay and thereby breaking away from the family's punishment of her aunt, Kingston demonstrates a very American ideal in that justice is above even the sacredness of the family.

The last major example of Kingston's American side is that Kingston herself does not seem to decide on what she really is. As demonstrated by the examples above, she shows the reader both her Chinese and her American sides. By not deciding on one or the other and leaving readers with the impression that she is instead a mixture of both the Chinese and American cultures, she is demonstrating the very American trait of making compromises. The China that Kingston shows us is a land of black and white, as partially evidenced by all of the black and white and light

and dark imagery in the essay. China is a culture that lacks any gray area whatsoever. The villagers saw that Kingston's aunt was pregnant and, knowing that her husband had not been there for years, correctly concluded that she had had sex with someone other than her husband. However, they did not consider any possibility besides that she had committed adultery and therefore deserved to have her family's house raided and much of its property destroyed. Such a black and white land is one that does not make compromises like Kingston makes in her essay by making readers think she has parts of both cultures within her. She leaves readers with the impression that she is a true Chinese-American who has to struggle through the perplexities of navigating the "invisible world the [Chinese] emigrants" established within "solid America" (256).

## Work Cited

Kingston, Maxine Hong. "No Name Woman."  
*Major Modern Essayists*. 2nd ed. Eds. Gilbert  
H. Muller and Alan F. Crooks. Upper Saddle  
River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1994. 256-264. Print.

*\*Title art by Cody Ensanian*