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# REVIEWS

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Sau-ling Cynthia Wong, ed. *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook*. New York: Oxford, 1999. 208p.

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As a volume of Oxford's Casebooks in Contemporary Fiction Series, *Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* collects key documents and criticism on one of the most widely read literary texts in America's colleges and universities today. Despite its broad and inclusive title, this new series focuses primarily on fiction (and in some cases autobiography) by multicultural authors. So far, only the following have been featured besides Maxine Hong Kingston: Toni Morrison (*Beloved*), Maya Angelou (*I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*), and Louise Erdrich (*Love Medicine*). The basic structure of the casebooks falls into three parts: the work's historical context and critical reception, representative criticism, and an interview with the author. The series is general-edited by William L. Andrews.

Compiling a casebook on any widely studied texts is necessarily a daunting task since the editor is subjected to, without exception, the distressing process of excluding many important studies from the few core documents and essays that will finally make into the collection. What to leave in and what to leave out often hinges not only on the quality of the criticism but also the need to balance the various critical approaches to the work. For Sau-ling Wong, the renowned Asian Americanist, the selection must have presented an even bigger challenge, because Kingston's *The Woman Warrior* has not only generated an unusually large amount of scholarship in the quarter century since its publication in 1976 but also a fierce controversy rarely seen in contemporary literary studies.

*Maxine Hong Kingston's The Woman Warrior: A Casebook* consists of one interview, one fictional satire, five critical essays, and two book chapters, making it an excellent guide for instructors and students alike who wish to have a quick tour of the critical landscape of this phenomenal work of Asian American literature and still capture some of the highlights of its vast scholarship. While three of the critics theorize on the gender and genre issues that *The Woman Warrior* raises, the casebook has a prominent focus on the controversy that Kingston's book has generated among the Chinese American community. It is also worth noting that the scholarship contained in this casebook was published predominantly in the 1980s,

the most recent piece being Sau-ling Wong's own 1992 overview of the heated debates over the reception of the work.

The history of *The Woman Warrior's* reception is an interesting one: while the mainstream media enthusiastically welcomed the work, a significant portion of the Chinese American community questioned the way Kingston made liberal use of Chinese historical myths and voiced concerns over her portrayal of the Chinese American community. Sau-ling Wong's critical overview gives a comprehensive account of the controversy, with a focus on what she terms as "the question of fictionalism," namely, "to what extent 'fictional' features are admissible in a work that purports to be an autobiography" (30). Her thesis is that although *The Woman Warrior* is billed as autobiography, it should be read as "a sort of meditation on what it means to be Chinese American" (45). Even straight autobiography "cannot, by definition, be more than one person's life story; thus it cannot be fully trusted" (38). In other words, in foregrounding Kingston's "individual artistic vision" (Kingston 63) and the fictionality of her work, Sau-ling Wong seeks to dismiss critics' charge that *The Woman Warrior* is not "representative" of Asian American experience. In an earlier but more pointed defense of Kingston's book, Sau-ling Wong also attempts to refute criticism on another front: "[c]harges of inaccurate portrayal of traditional Chinese culture miss the point of the book entirely. Kingston has never made any claims, explicit or implicit, to historical veracity" (7).

Sau-ling Wong's argument for the extravagance of "self-actualization" by Kingston is well made, and her frustration over critics' insistence on the necessity of "social responsibility" of Kingston's work is also understandable. However, she seems to have underestimated the burden of "dual authenticity" on the ethnic writer. Like it or not, "the burden of being viewed narrowly as spokespersons for the 'ethnic' experience" is a recalcitrant fact due to the limited volume of ethnic literature as well as its insufficient exposure to the mainstream readership (Woo 173) and therefore cannot be cast off as easily as one might have wished. If read in China where readers would have the adequate cultural background, *The Woman Warrior* would seem, as Ya-jie Zhang, author of the first essay in the casebook, puts it, "somewhat twisted, Chinese perhaps in origin but not really Chinese anymore, full of American imagination" (17). However, in America where most lack the necessary cultural immersion, *The Woman Warrior* can be and is indeed "misread." And the consequences of such cultural misreadings can be disastrous, according to David Leiwei Li: "As Asian American women's oppression is displaced onto their ancestral cultural origin, what the white critical benevolence accomplishes, in addition to elevating the status of *The Woman Warrior*, is precisely the

reinforcement of racial and cultural incommensurability between ethnic and dominant populations within the same nation" (60).

Given the subtle and complex nature of the problems of cultural and ethnic representation, the casebook appears to present a less than adequate sample of scholarship critical of Kingston's "fantasy drawing" on Chinese history, culture, as well as Asian American reality, to afford the reader a meaningful understanding of the charges. What she does include — Frank Chin's "The Most Popular Book in China," a blazing fictional satire on *The Woman Warrior* — rides on emotional excesses and therefore does not represent the most considered critique available. Instead, Sau-ling Wong might have included in their entirety Jeffrey Paul Chan's and Benjamin Tong's criticism of Kingston's problematic translation of the key Chinese term "kuei" for "ghost" as an example of her "pandering to white taste" (32), or Lauren Mar's "Leaping beyond *The Woman Warrior*: The Myths and Realities of a Culture," which questions both Kingston's version of Chinese culture and her representation of the Chinese American community. The most glaring miss, in my view, is a chapter from David Leiwei Li's *Imagining the Nation: Asian American Literature and Cultural Consent* (1998), entitled "Can Maxine Hong Kingston Speak? The Contingency of *The Woman Warrior*." Not only is this an exceptionally insightful critique on *The Woman Warrior*, its topicality would also have made the collection more up-to-date. ✨

#### Works Cited

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