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INTERVIEW WITH MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

Angels Carabí

'Special Eyes: the Chinese-American World of Maxime Hong Kingston'.

ANGELS CARABÍ: The world of magic, the supernatural is present in your work. Was this part of growing up?

MAXINE HONG KINGSTON: Yes, although there is an attitude of rebellion. When I was growing up people around me saw spirits and creatures. I don't know whether it is because of the social and cultural upbringing or that these people had special eyes, maybe their eyes were different. It wasn't just that they brought ghost stories from China but that they saw spirits and magic people in the world around them, and that they tried to use the magic for or against themselves. For a few years I was terrified all the time. I was always afraid of forces that I couldn't control, I thought the world was made of spirits, ghosts, vampires. I was terribly frightened that later I wanted to be a scientist, an engineer, to have a very rational life, I thought I had achieved this goal, that I had controlled and destroyed the supernatural world in order to function very well. Yet, it surprises me that my son, whom I did not raise with a sense of magic, relates to the world of the supernatural. I did not want his childhood to be haunted like mine. I always talked to him in a very rational way, not even giving him a religious upbringing; I barely let him know that there is a Santa Claus. My husband, who is an ex-Catholic, had the same feeling so we did not raise him in a church. It's surprising that even having had a secular upbringing he sees magic creatures; leprechauns, goonies. He is now 23 years old and you would think that all that would be over, that his childhood hallucinations would be over but he hears music, he has special relationships with birds and spirits. So I wonder if people have special eyes, if they have a sensitivity to what is alive on this planet, that they feel and see more than other people, more than the sciencific people.

A.C.: Would that special sensitivity be in any way influenced by the Chinese tradition of telling magic stories and incorporating them into the everyday life?.

M.H.K.: I do feel that my mother gave me stories but I was very careful not to tell my son that kind of legends. I really do think of myself as the rational link in the middle even though I write stories where the world of the supernatural is involved! (Maxine laughs at her apparent contradiction). But you see, when I write, I explain, I put in into words and so I think that I am actually the force of reason in this world and even so the magic is still there, I try to see clearly.

A.C.: Would the language then help to clarify the magic world?

M.H.K.: Yes, but I also feel that language, while it is a force of reason, it is also a way to find the magic, especially in rhythms. When the language is true it finds a rhythm of the heart, a rhythm of nature and it can be a chant to make the world right. An example of this is Leslie Silko*. In *Ceremony* people have a chant and that is language and magic coming together, rather than language being a force of technology. Language explains the world of the supernatural and it also evokes the magic.

A.C.: You once said that you write about the unforgetable, that memory selects what matters.

M.H.K.: People often ask me if I take notes or if I tape people who talk story and whether I do research in order to write what I write. I don't. I think that part of the process of writing is being very awake and aware of life as it goes on, and listening to people without trying terribly hard to remenber the stories. My memory is part of the process of editing and finding what's important and what is not important. There are stories that are unforgetable, images that do not go away even though I try forget them. They will stay and then I will see what is relevant, what is powerful and what cannot be lost. When my mother brings stories from China —the legends, the myths—, she tells them and I remember only some of them. Quite often they were bedtime stories and I didn't hear all of them, they would become part of a dream. Later, when I would be writing, I would ask myself 'how can I remember everything?, how could I be accurate?'. But I decided that I don't have to do word for word the way she passed it on. Whatever I remember, that is the unforgetable. I don't have to tell the story exactly in the same way, there isn't only one version, her version. I trust whatever I don't forget and I have a right to tell the story the way I want to tell it.

A.C.: Would you apply this creative freedom to ancient myths to the point of giving them a present perspective?

M.H.K.: Oh yes!. I feel free to draw on parts of myths that interest me or that I feel are alive, or are applicable, to our 20 th. century American lives. Critics have sometimes attacked my work for not being true to authentic Chinese mythology. They don't like taking the traditional myth and rearranging it or using it

* Leslie Silko is an Indian writer from Laguna, New Mexico. Her novel *Ceremony* was published in 1977.

as I please. But I defend myself by saying that if the myths don't change, then, they die. The only way they are alive is if they have any application to our lives today. It is not my job to be an archivist, preserving the ancient myths. A lot of critics want a writer to have that role today and I refuse it and I feel very free to take any myth and change it around. I think that mythology has always been like that, legends always change from one speaker to another speaker and there is no definitive version. Critics who think that the true version is what you have in the library make a real mistake.

Also to work with myth gives us a continuity from the past; I am sure that the reason we draw on myths from Africa and from Asia is that there is such a sterility in America. What is American culture now?. Is it what we have from television, from advertising?. Is that all we can draw on?. That's not enough.

A.C.: In reaction to this homogeneous American culture, would you say that you are creating a Chinese-American language?

M.H.K.: Yes, yes. I do think that I'm trying to capture a Chinese American accent in the American language. However that's been part of a tradition in American literature from the beginning. American writers have been trying to find out what is American language vs. what is British language. From the beginning American literary people have been asking themselves how to speak. Every generation of American artists has worked with that kind of problem and I feel that I am doing the same thing. The novel that I am working now with is more slangy, it's a modern American slang of the way people talk, but at the same time I include a Chinese-American accent.

A.C.: Is there a different rhythm in Chinese-American language?.

M.H.K.: Yes, there is a different rhythm and also a different vocabulary. The speakers will bring in new translations and will be constantly playing and changing. So it is both rhythm and vocabulary.

A.C.: Can you talk about your new novel?

M.H.K.: *Tripmaster Monkey-His Fake Book* is the title, and I guess in that title you can see the 60's slang but also chinese mythology. I work with the Monkey stories and I show that the Monkey has come to America and that there are many Monkey images. I connect King Kong with the Chinese Monkey. He has the spirit of the trickster and he wants to continue the Chinese-American theater tradition there has been a long one. Sometimes during the 50's he died and only recently he has been regenerated again.

A.C.: The oral tradition of storytelling has been a means to bring history to the community. Now that the communities tend to spread out, do you think that the novel can replace the function of storytelling?

M.H.K.: To take the place of it?. Oh! I don't think so. It is very true that storytelling creates community but in America people don't read enough so I don't think the novel can create that function. Besides there is something very special about storytelling and that is the face to face communication of people on a daily basis, of everyday coming from work and telling one another what happened. With

the novel the reader is solitary. «Talking story» is communal and it has to have at least two people participating face to face for the story to be alive and change. No, I don't think that the novel can take its place. Now storytelling seems to be dying and it is too bad that it is only revived by the new refugees coming from Asia to the United States.

A.C.: The Western world tends to emphasize the individual person whereas it seems that in the Chinese tradition the individual exists in function of the tribe. In *The Woman Warrior,* for instance, the name of the father is not known to the children. As a Chinese-American, how do you reconcile these two different attitudes, the individual one vs. the tribal one?

M.H.K.: I think that's a very difficult struggle because the only way to achieve American success is by doing it individually. Actually, though, I see ethnic Chinese people being able to reconcile these two concepts much better than other tribal people. The struggle lies in breaking away from the families and trying to make a life of one's own, trying to make decisions without consulting the family's decisions that often are against the nuclear structure. Yet Chinese people are able to make this break very well probably because Chinese society allows for a great deal of eccentricity; maybe that's why they become Americans very well. Other people, black people for instance, don't seem able to become individuals and at the same time reconcile themselves with the rest of their people. It is very foreign to us to compete against one another. Everybody rises up as a group or we don't. But American society is not made to rise together as a group, and it becomes a problem. I picture having a school system where the whole class is a tribe where children do not compete for their grades, for a few prizes.

A.C.: I think that you wrote your two books, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* before you went to China. When you went there, did you feel that the China of your imagination, the China that you portray in your novels, was very different from the actual country?

M.H.K.: No! I felt that the China of my imagination was very similar and so I felt really good that I had such a strong imagination. I kept saying: «Oh! my mother should see this!». For the large themes that I wrote about I didn't see anything that invalidated my work. There were only small things that I wished I had seen earlier. Like I didn't imagine how close together people lived, common walls, so many people living in one small area, a whole village had commom walls. That made me understand how each person's life and drama affected everyone else and that's what it seems to be a tribal person, how much it takes to break away and how much it takes for No Name Woman, my character in *The Woman Warrior,* to have a child out of wedlock. The act is not individual, it affects everyone. The whole village changes because of her deed, and I understood it from seeing these common walls. I also saw that the well where she jumped into is right next door to the temple and then I saw how dramatic it is to have a well to commit suicide be next to a holy place, I wished I had put that in the book. Relating this to your question about people becoming individuals in America, I guess I examined how a person was an individual in China and how she had to pay with life. Yet she

had the daring to be an individual and she became a woman that other women hear about, that they can see as an example of bravery. I thought it was brave to have a love affair like that and then it was amazing that my mother could bring the story to us here; so we had a story of individuals here. Although Chinese people think they have all these themes of communism, of community and tribe, they also have these ideas about eccentricity and individuality.

A.C.: Does the community rejoice at the fact that No Name Woman —the evil woman for them— dies?

M.H.K.: No, I don't think so. They think the whole thing is tragic, there is nothing they can fix and the last thing they can do is to say 'Let's not talk about her, let's forget about it'. Also there is a Dionysian outpouring of passion because everybody gets to wear their mask and they slaughter, make mischief and chaos. I think that is in the human spirit. Every once in a while we must go out and make mischief and No Name Woman made it possible for these people to outrage that sex and run amok.

A.C.: No Name Woman becomes a cathartic experience for the villagers.

M.H.K.: Yes, people are able to hit and stab and fling blood around. She becomes a sacrificial victim.

A.C.: The story of No Name Woman is kept secret by the elders. Your novel starts 'You must not tell anyone'. There is a need to keep things in silence.

M.H.K.: Yes, «Don't tell, don't tell». This beginning has a connection with Toni Morrison. She starts her book *The Bluest Eye* with 'Quiet as it is kept' and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* starts 'I can't tell anybody but you God'. I think that this is a theme in the women's writing: 'how can I break silence'. Also there are great taboos in the tribe, family secrets, skeletons in a closet. Then there is the dilemma for the writer: 'I am a writer, I am a person who 'must' tell'. There is the struggle of how to find the voice when everyone conspires and orders you to put all these things away.

A.C.: How did your family react to the disclosing of community secrets in *The Woman Warrior?*. Was it difficult for you to take the responsability of breaking a tradition of silence?

M.H.K.: For me, at first I was saying to myself: «I must write this». There was a total need on my part to put the story in writing. Then I tried to fool myself by thinking that I didn't have to publish it. I even started thinking that the works could be published after my death and then everything would be fine. All of that was fooling myself so that I could keep going. Then I did publish it thinking that it was only in English and therefore my parents and most of their friend would not be able to read it. When it was published in Chinese I felt very much afraid. Some people read one chapter and didn't continue feeling that it was too horrible. So they never saw that in *The Woman Warrior* there is a reconciliation of beauty. However I've been very surprised at the reaction of some of the people that were in the book. Even recently the nephew of Crazy Mary wrote to me saying

that he was so glad about the compassion that I have shown writing about his aunt that when he read the book he understood his family better. The novel as a form pushes you towards reconciliation. You look at the most horrible things that you know about life and the form itself says that you must understand. This way you make others understand and the whole experience takes the form of true love. I think that this is why people say that there is compassion; it is the same as understanding.

A.C.: The Reaction among Chinese-American women with respect to *The Woman Warrior* has been diverse. Some question the accuracy of the work, if it is considered an autobiography.

M.H.K.: I think the reaction on the part of the men has been much worse because the women have ended up being very supportive, but the men haven't. I think it is the same problem with the black women writers and the chicana writers. Men would rather prefer that women don't write.

A.C.: The Chinese-American women are writing more than the men.

M.H.K.: Yes!

A.C.: Why do you think this is so?

M.H.K.: I don't know!. Some say that women's brains are better developed verbally.

A.C.: Chinese American literature is growing now although there is a literary tradition that precedes the present generation of writers. Do You see an evolution from the former literary tradition, for instance from the writings of Jade Snow Wong?*

M.H.K.: I am not sure that I got help from a former generation of Chinese-American writers except for Jade Snow Wong; actually her book was the only available one. Our education was on British and on American literature. As far as chinese literature is concerned, I think I was very lucky to have parents who were literate. They would be able to read stories to us. By hearing them I was immediately trying to find a brand new voice. I thought though that I was working from nothing, that I was reinventing everything. The new Chinese American literature has emerged with the interest of the ethnic studies, in the 60's, but by that time I was already grown and writing. Toni Morrison says that she is writing the books she wanted to read; well, it's the same thing with me. We didn't have the help, we invented everything. There weren't hardly any characters that looked like us. For a while I was teaching at a school where there were Asian American people, mostly Japanese, and in their essays they wrote always about blonde, blue-eyed women. They did not have models because they didn't see people that looked like them on television; and of course, they didn't read. Their models were archetypes, stereotypes that had nothing to do with themselves, and of course, the stories were very bad. They were stories about people they didn't know anything about.

* Jade Snow Wong is a Chinese-American writer. She published her autobiography *Fifth Chinese Daughter* in 1950.

A.C.: In some of her writing Jade Snow Wong uses the third person narrator as a sign of modesty. Was it troublesome for you to decide which person to write in?

M.H.K.: I thought I should have the trouble! (Maxine laughs) It seems so normal for me to write in the first person, in fact I thought there mas something wrong with me, that I was so selfish, so ego-maniac that I couldn't write in any other way. I'm just now learning to write in the third person.

A.C.: Do you see any common trends in the Chinese-American literature that is being produced now?

M.H.K.: Yes, there is a very close look at what remains, a willingness to say that there is a Chinese culture that remains. We question whether we have anything to do with what is going on in Asia at all. People question whether there is something specifically American, but also there is this wish to treasure every little piece that's left. We tend to use images that are Chinese because there is a sense that all has gone away, that all is going to be washed out. People are treasuring old people and that gets it right back where is used to be (Maxime laughs). There is a lot of anger and dismay towards ourselves for letting it disappear.

A.C.: One trend in Black American women writers is to bring historical women into their writing. Is there a similar tendency in Chinese-American writing?

M.H.K.: Yes, yes. This is happening here too; trying to find who the heroines were.

A.C.: Do you see an evolution in your work from *The Woman Warrior,* to *China Men* to your present novel *Tripmaster Monkey-His Fake Book*?

M.H.K.: Well, the language in *The Woman Warrior* now that I look at it, seems to be very stilted and complicated. It was because I was trying to find a language for a very complicated story. As I worked into *China Men,* my goal was to have a very lucid language so that people did not have to stumble with the words. I wanted it to be very clear, like glass, that people could look through the language into the story. I find *China Men* a better written book than *The Woman Warrior.* I think that the language in *China Men* doesn't call attention to itself whereas in *The Woman Warrior* it seems that I keep saying look at my language. For the book that I am writing now I feel that I wanted to free myself from being constrained and I wanted to use another voice of mine which is very modern, very slangy, a hip 60's language which I love. So I'm doing a very modern, different voice. I also move from first person to third person, moving out to seeing more, understanding more other people, seeing others rather than myself, I am getting great joy writing about people that are completely different. Also the shape of the book is different. When I started writing *The Woman Warrior* I didn't think I could write a long book so I did the five interlocking pieces and each one was like a short story or an essay. I know the book has a very complex form but all there is trying to take small parts and doing a mosaic with it. All I could do then was small pieces. *China Men* differed in that there I would have a myth, and then a modern story and then a myth because I was trying to see what myths have to do with lives today, and since usually they don't have much to do (Maxine laughs) they got separated. I think that the book that I am writing today has a coherent

long, long (Maxime laughs) structure. It is not jumping back and forth, is has a chronological order without rising action and climax at the end. I think I found an ending this time. Also when people read *The Woman Warrior* they think that they learn some Chinese language but actually I use very little Chinese; I always translate, I always figure out a way to find the equivalent. Right now, in my new book I am using the most modern slang; for some reason it gives me lots of room. Sometimes I put passages of straight Chinese without translating it. It makes me feel very good about the looseness of modern American language that allows everything to come in. And, you know, all there is that's the way life is. There is nothing artificial about it, it is not that the writer thinks it should sound beautiful but that the people around you speak like that. So I think that in writing a book that has a lot of slang I come closer to the way people talk than the way they do in *The Woman Warrior*. I guess *The Woman Warrior* isn't an 'I' book, it is the voices that I hear inside myself, whereas in my new book I put the voices that I hear around me.

This interview was held at
Maxine Hong Kingston's home
in Oakland, California

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