

"Wittman Ah Sing's (Political) Artistry: A Comment on Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* in Relation to the Asian American Movement"

By Carmencita-Mia Q. Fulgado

I'm going to start a theater company. I'm naming it The Pear Garden Players of America. The Pear Garden was the cradle of civilization, where theater began on Earth...As playwright and producer and director, I'm casting blind. That means the actors can be any race...I'm including everything that is being left out, and everybody who has no place. 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.

Wittman Ah Sing, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*

The play at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*--that's a desire I had for communal art. It's temporary, but meanwhile, a whole community has had a chance to form around the play....I organized everybody into a communal activity: first the party, then the play.

Maxine Hong Kingston, "The Angle We're Joined At"

In his analysis of the Asian American Movement, William Wei postulates that Asian Americans are perceived with different images, from being seen as foreigners (physically and culturally) whose issues and concerns are therefore irrelevant to the rest of society, to being viewed as America's *model minority*. Wei suggests that the "concept of *Asian American* implies that there can be communal consciousness and a unique culture that is neither Asian nor American, but Asian American. In defining their own identity and culture, Asian Americans bring together previously isolated and ineffective struggles against the oppression of Asian communities into a coherent pan-Asian movement for social change" (1). The image of the *model minority* stereotype suggests the idea of a group that has successfully integrated into American society despite seemingly insurmountable racial barriers. Such notions of attempting to locate Asian American identity amongst the historical prejudicial and stereotypical attitudes is explored in Maxine Hong Kingston's *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*.

Kingston writes this novel during the Reagan years and is first published in 1987. The perspective she portrays of the Civil Rights era is one that should not be solely identified with as "stuck in the sixties time period," but a perspective that can be identified with even in the 21st century. Wittman Ah Sing, the protagonist in Kingston's first work of fiction, is illustrative of the young Asian American living in the 1960s. Wittman, however, is not an immigrant or foreigner, but a fifth generation Chinese American residing in San Francisco. Wittman represents an alternate vision of Asian Americans as opposed to the *model minority*. Although Wittman is a hard worker, he does he want to find work as indicated by his unwillingness to put truthful answers on his unemployment application. He wants to invest his time working on putting on a play. Kingston portrays Wittman as a young artist, a playwright, who wants to create a community that does not exclude anyone, but includes "everybody who has no place." Not only does Wittman want to include Asian Americans, but all marginalized and disenfranchised individuals. Wittman's artistic desire to put on his own play is demonstrative of a "communal consciousness" and is thus, representative of the political endeavors that gave birth to the Asian American Movement.

Although Wittman's character does not march the streets in protest against racism, Kingston's portrayal of Wittman's "communal consciousness" illustrates the Asian American Movement's mission to bring about social change. Wittman is conscious of his own cultural history as a Chinese American, and therefore, as a playwright and artist, he attempts to assert his "own humanity" in a "very complex America." I will address such an argument by first providing a brief introduction of the Asian American Movement. Secondly, I will turn to the novel and examine several scenes where Wittman Ah Sing expresses his desire to be a playwright: how he first articulates his longing to start his own theater company and then ultimately sees

his play come to fruition. Thirdly, I will briefly comment on the last chapter, Wittman's "One Man Show," in which he openly and angrily speaks about what "pisses" him off.

The Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s exposed the pervasive problem of racism in American society and raised questions about exactly how democratic the nation's system was. It was during this time of political upheaval that members of the various Asian ethnic groups decided to band together and act politically. Thus, the Asian American Movement was born. The Asian American Movement along with the implementation of the 1965 Immigration Act helped the Asian community overcome the historical and political barriers to political participation. The Movement, as it was popularly called, was primarily the result of the convergence of two historical developments: (1) the emergence of a generation of college-age Asian Americans and (2) the public protests surrounding the Vietnam War (Wei 1). The Movement organized and enticed Asian Americans to contemplate their identity and culture as being an *Asian American*.

Wittman Ah Sing demonstrates such contemplation about Chinese American identity and culture. More specifically, Wittman desires to bring about social change not as a political activist, but as an artist and playwright. As Irma Maini postulates in her review of *Tripmaster Monkey*, "Writing the Asian American Artist," what underscores "Wittman's growth as an artist is the growing political consciousness of oppressive racial definitions in the Asian American community" (6). Maini even mentions William Wei's examination of the Asian American Movement as a time when young Asian American students rallied together for racial equality, social justice, and political empowerment. Therefore, I agree with Maini when she asserts that Wittman "combines his individual artistic goals with a communal vision, and the result is his play" (6).

As epigraphed in the beginning of this paper, Wittman's idea for the Civil Rights Movement is to integrate numerous public spheres, which include theaters and parties. Wittman first articulates his dream to start a theater company while he is working in the toy store. He shares with the Yale Younger Poet that as playwright, producer, and director he will cast blindly: "Each member of the Tyrone family or the Lomans can be a different color" (52). And thus, Wittman even asks the Yale Younger Poet if he has ever acted and if he would like to join his theater company. Since for Wittman, he can make a part for anyone. He wants to include "everything that is being left out."

Wittman is able to further articulate his ideas for his play at a party with his friends Lance Kamiyama, Lance's wife Sunny and even with strangers he meets there. Perhaps they are "the winners of the party" because they will play a role in Wittman's play. Wittman expresses to his friends his ideas of wanting to bring back "not red-hot communist Chinese--but deep roots American theater" because they "need it" (141). Kingston describes what is going on in Wittman's mind as he begins to formulate the play and cast:

Anybody American who really imagines Asia feels the loneliness of the U.S.A. and suffers from the distances human beings are apart. Not because lonesome Wittman was such a persuader but because *they had need to do something communal against isolation*, the group of lastlayers, which included two professional actors, organized themselves into a play. Players took the parts of the three brotherly friends, and improvised a ritual that made the playwright's sketch up-to-date- and relevant, and showed him what happens next. Wittman thought whaddayaknow, I've written one of those plays that leave room for actors to do improv. (Italics my emphasis 141)

Kingston describes Wittman and his friends organizing his play as a way "to do something communal against isolation." Not only are they joining together to help Wittman put on his play, but they have room to include their own "adlibbing." Wittman realizes that his play is creating a community, one that includes everyone, thanks to the art of improvisation. According to Maini, "Wittman's play, then, is not solely the result of his individual artistic vision, but becomes a collaborative effort, a joint venture that combines different people's stories and experiences" (7). As a playwright, perhaps Wittman creates characters that fit the actor's individuality as opposed to fitting the actor with the character. Once again, Wittman's artistry as a playwright allows him to make a part for anyone.

When Wittman finally gets the opportunity to ask the Association house if he can put on his play there, it takes some convincing, but Grand Opening Ah Sing agrees. Wittman provides a sample of his play and it is interesting to recognize that he has his characters adopt "one another as brothers and sister":

Flying Prince Tai invites the couple to start a restaurant-guardpost at the Mountains of the White Tigers and the Two Dragons, Shantung. There the stranger, the weird and the alienated make their own country. And have one hundred and seven brothers and sisters. The one hundred and eight banditos, banished from everywhere else, *build a community*. Their thousands of stories, multiplies of a hundred and eight, branch and weave, intersecting at the Water Verge. (Italics my emphasis 261)

Although Wittman's play may present the "Chinamen" as "cannibals," he ultimately wants to illustrate that they are "outlaws," "outcasts of America," like the one hundred and eight banditos. They too can build a community and their stories can multiply as well. As Wittman proclaims: "we can make our place--this one community house for benevolent living. We make theater, we make community." Wittman is aware of his cultural tradition of "talk-story," which is a form of oral storytelling that includes everyone; it is communal in nature and instills bonding. According to Maini's analysis of talk-story, it is "inclusive and democratic, cutting across boundaries of age, literacy, gender, and class. Within the socio-historic context of Chinese immigrants in America, it becomes a tool for survival: giving a sense of solidarity, preserving ethnic culture, allowing self-expression, as well as providing entertainment and reprieve from the oppressive 'white demon' society" (9). Wittman is expressively self-conscious and critical of himself as an artist and playwright. His play illustrates his devotion to a literary tradition of storytelling by retelling old stories in a new yet still meaningful way.

By the end of the novel, Wittman sees his play on the stage, his creation of community has come to fruition. Everyone he has met along the way is in the play, even his grandmother.

Wittman's personal and direct commentary at the end of the novel represents one political voice proclaiming the need to create an Asian American community that is no longer "inscrutable." Before Kingston allows Wittman to talk "to his heart's content" and "let him get it all out," she describes Wittman as realizing that such a community cannot be developed in one night:

Our monkey, master of change, staged a fake war, which might very well be displacing some real war. Wittman was learning that one big-bang show has to be followed up with a second show, a third show, shows until something take 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. (306)

Wittman is a young man and at the end of *Tripmaster Monkey*, he has grown in the sense that he is still in the process of developing his artistic and political identities. Yet this is only a start. He is aware that writing his play and having it performed on stage is not the end of his dream to create a community. It cannot be "built once-and-for-all." Kingston demonstrates that Wittman has imagined, practiced, and re-created a community, but others must do the same. Although Wittman's final rant and rave is full of anger and is perhaps even disturbing and difficult to read, he expresses his last plea for a community. He wants to see Chinese Americans surpass this conception of being enigmatic. "We need to be part of the daily love life of the country, to be shown and loved continuously until we're not inscrutable anymore" (310).

What one must keep in mind while reading *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book*, is that Wittman is young and still has a lot to learn about himself and life. Wittman does, however, declare himself as an artist, a playwright, and wants to use his artistry as a means to create a community that will bring about a positive change in America. Kingston's portrayal of Wittman validates an alternate vision of an Asian American artist (Maini 10). Rooted in ancient talk-story, his play brings together his family and friends and illustrates his communal vision. Although Wittman may not consider himself as a political individual, his thoughts and actions as an artist exemplify the underpinnings of the Asian American Movement.

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