

# Maxine hong kingston: `no name woman`

[Sociology](#), [Women](#)



In the story 'No Name Woman', Maxine Hong Kingston describes unique experience of women in China and social relations existing in the Chinese society. The continued existence of the "traditional" Chinese family pattern or some reasonable compromise thereof is often explained as necessary to the Chinese way of life, when, in fact, the way of life referred to has ceased to exist. This sometimes leads an author to ignore the fact that the family referred to may be a survival of an institution past its time as a functional prerequisite of the system in which it occurs rather than a prerequisite of the general system currently extant.

The story vividly portrays social life of Chinese village people, oppression and male dominance affecting family relations and destinies of women. The main questions are: What is the role of a family unit and an individual in Chinese society? What is the impact of social status and position of women on family structure and sexual relations?, What is the role of economic relations in Chinese village and their impact on a family unit?

The story can be interpreted as a historical discourse which unveils family structure and family relations existing in the society. From the story, readers know that in each kinship structure there are certain generalized structural requirements which must be satisfied if the structure is to continue its existence. Maxine Hong Kingston depicts that it is essential that some distinctions on a sexual basis be brought out in every kinship structure, but the same is also true for the society as a whole. Kingston describes:

All the village were kinsmen, and the titles shouted in loud country voices never let kinship be forgotten. Any man within visiting distance would have

been neutralized as a lover-" brother ... .. younger brother," " older brother"--one hundred and fifteen relationship titles (Kingston n. d.).

The role differentiation of women relative to men in the kinship structure can never vary independently of that for women in the society at large.

The question of education in terms of family structure is an extremely broad and complex subject addressed by Kingston. Three factors are always of great importance in such educational structures. In general, these are: (1) the content of the education, (2) the methods by which it is taught, and (3) the person or persons who carry out the teaching. There is a tendency to devote a larger proportion of one's concern to what is taught than to the other two categories (Stockman 27). Kingston describes that the methods used, the systems of rewards and punishments by which the learning process is bolstered, and the roles of the primary teachers are of equal importance.

The above remarks apply to family education in general and that of children raised from birth within the family in particular. Some special mention must also be made of the education of members brought into the family from outside at a more mature age. There are two major types of such individuals--those brought in by adoption and those brought in by marriage.

The former may be brought in while quite young, and the earlier the age at which the adoption is made the more closely do the educational features of the case resemble those of the raising of other children (Shu 199). To the degree that the adopted person is mature, and always in the case of

marriage, there is the problem of introducing the new member to the specific family personalities and the particular family situation in which the new member will in future act. Kingston tells readers that:

When the family found a young man in the next village to be her husband, she had stood tractably beside the best rooster, his proxy, and promised before they met that she would be his forever. She was lucky that he was her age and she would be the first wife, an advantage secure now (Kingston, n. d.).

There is in all family systems a specifically institutionalized method of integration of new members, though the rigidity of the system and the sphere of action covered by it may vary enormously. In these respects, the introduction of new members via marriage is far more important than any other mode of their introduction. “ Maxine’s aunt, face blame for exposing their communities to the threat of death or actual death in relation to outside forces” (Griffiths 353).

The other major mode, adoption, never occupies so strategic a role numerically, since in every family there must be at least one such introduction by marriage, whereas adoption is not necessarily so ubiquitous in family systems.

Role differentiation in family structure is depicted as the distribution of persons among the various positions and activities distinguished in the kinship structure and hence the differential arrangement of the members of the structure. This immediately raises the question of the terms on which

differential arrangement is made. " Brothers and sisters, newly men and women, had to efface their sexual color and present plain miens. Disturbing hair and eyes, a smile like no other, threatened the ideal of five generations living under one roof" (Kingston, n. d.). Kingston depicts that the members of society must always recognize some structure of role differentiation and orient their action to it.

Therefore, although the primary basis of a given role differentiation might be, for example, political, the phenomena involved cannot be understood solely in terms of the political variable. Whatever the basis of the differential arrangement of members in a society or group, the action of members of the group and of outsiders in their relations with this group must in part be specifically oriented to this inescapable arrangement. Thus differentiation may be to a marked degree interdependent with one or more of the other four structures to be discussed here, but it is never a dependent variable of one or of any combination of them.

Before going further into this aspect of role differentiation, however, a word or so more needs be said on the functional background of the phenomenon (Lee 17). First, there is the distribution of individuals among the total number of positions of whatever sort in the structure under consideration. This must be done regardless of how numerous or varied either the positions or the individuals may be (Shapiro 5). The number and variety of both categories will, of course, have substantial effect upon the concrete result, but the status of the requirement as a requirement is not affected by these considerations.

The line drawn between the sexes in these respects is sharp and is one of the main factors in the consideration of the family problems. There are, of course, other possibilities of variation along these lines. One other interesting aspect of role differentiation on a basis of sex distinction is that it is so frequently a focus for stress in changing social systems. This usually puts considerable pressure on those patterns which institutionalize a sex differential regardless of objective criteria.

“ My aunt could not have been the lone romantic who gave up everything for sex. Women in the old China did not choose” (Kingston, n. d.). This is apt to be peculiarly true when the changes being made are in the direction of industrialization. The institutional basis of industrialized societies must lay peculiar stress on the differentiation of individuals on a universalistic basis.

Economic allocation in kinship structure has been defined above as the distribution of the goods and services making up the income of the units of the structure and of the goods and efforts making up the output of the units of the structure among the various members of the units. Economic activities and interrelations, insofar as their sphere is confined to kinship orientations, are best studied for present purposes as they operate within the family.

There are, of course, all sorts of economic relations defined in the relational approach to kinship, but, changing as this does with every change of ego, description of the relations is confined to descriptions of ego's relations with other specific relatives, and any systematic operations of kinship groups fall from the picture (Stockman 67). To survive physically, the members of these groups must obtain and distribute these requirements. “ In the village

structure, spirits shimmered among the live creatures, balanced and held in equilibrium by time and land" (Kingston, n. d.).

The story portrays that the members of the familial and family groups must have food, shelter, clothing, and similar necessities if they are to survive physically. " In patriarchal culture, these stories function within what Sandra Lee Bartky has called a " pedagogy of shame" that instructs young girls to learn about the inherent danger and corruption of their bodies" (Griffiths 353). These requirements are not in the nature of free goods as that concept is defined by the economists, and even if they were, the problem of distribution would still arise in the social context to offset the effect of jealousies which might well arise no matter how homogeneous the articles concerned might be intrinsically, and so forth.

The link between the family groups and the larger economic aspects of the society as a whole has an additional importance since the status of the entire family in industrialized societies tends to be largely dependent upon the occupational role of the member or members upon whom the group depends for the bulk of its support. The second question of the directness of the contribution to the family needs has as its limiting case the self-sufficient agricultural family. Here the family might produce all it consumed without reference to exchange for any purpose with individuals or groups outside the family.

The situation of the modern industrial worker's family is at great variance with this since the overwhelming bulk of the income in this case is in the form of money power--earned for work having no necessary connection with

the goods and services for which they are spent (Stockman 76). Critics admit that: “ Kingstone’s style of appropriation reveals the boundaries that define the older narrative as fortresses, and the ways these intellectual fortresses mirror other, fortress-like ideological formations” (Shapiro 5).

Kingston describes that this residual core of family duties which are performed directly is important because the duties are so often integrally connected with the substructure of role differentiation in general and that of sex roles in particular.

The story shows that villagers depend upon the voluntary submission of the family members due to the inculcation of the value system of the society of which they are a part. “ The villagers punished her for acting as if she could have a private life, secret and apart from them” (Kingstone n. d.). There have been cases of sons who have even stood unrestrained and permitted themselves to be beaten nearly to death by their fathers for faults committed.

Such extremes are unusual, but they indicate the lengths to which these matters carry. Other factors in the implementation of power and responsibility are the interrelations with other family substructures which bolster their exercise. “ But Maxine has increasing trouble applying this framework to the complexities of her family's story and to the complexities of American and Chinese societies” (Lee 17). It has already been pointed out above that the patterns of economic allocation, role differentiation, and solidarity are intensely important in these respects. This must not be taken



to indicate any particular general causal priority of one of these elements over the others.

In sum, family structure depends upon and determines economic and social relations dominated in the society. The story " No Name Women" is a good historical source which helps to understand the role of family in economic relations and social values. Responsibility here means the accountability to other individuals or groups of an individual or individuals for his or their own acts or the acts of others.

Social values and strong family relations portray that social action within certain limits is always an extreme, and in a sense it is the symbol of social frustration. Nevertheless, if the family is to function as a unit, it must be possible to see to it that certain requirements are met, by force if necessary, and it must be possible to take a definite person or persons to account if they fail to meet the family values.

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