# Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book Study Guide

## Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book by Maxine Hong Kingston

BOOKRAGS

# Contents

# Plot Summary

*Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book* is Maxine Hong Kingston's kaleidoscopic novel of the life of Wittman Ah Sing, a young English major, who graduated Berkley just one year ago. Wittman thinks of himself as a poet and a playwright, although he works as a clerk in a department store. After being fired from his job, Wittman goes to a party in Oakland, meeting a plain, young Chinese woman on the bus. Wittman meets an attractive blonde named, Tasa, at the party, and marries her in the wee hours of the next morning, primarily to avoid the draft.

Wittman takes his "friend" Tasa to meet his mother. It is mah jong day, so all Wittman's Aunties, his mother's close friends and former showgirls, are in attendance. Wittman and Tasa visit his father at an RV campground, and travel to Reno to search for Wittman's missing adopted grandmother. Returning to San Francisco, Wittman puts on a three-day long improvisational play, based largely on Chinese myth, in the Benevolent Association hall. The play concludes with Wittman's monologue, a harangue on the meaning of being Chinese in America. The novel is entwined with multiple layers of literary allusions, Chinese mythology, references to drugs and pop culture, insights about ethnicity, LSD flashbacks, racial slurs, and the history of people of Chinese ancestry who, like Wittman, consider themselves 100% American.

As the novel opens, Wittman calls the prettiest, most unattainable girl from his college years and invites her for cappuccino. Nanci Lee, an aspiring actress from L.A., accepts and he is soon telling her the story of his childhood as the son of two vaudeville entertainers. Wittman lures Nancy to his rented room, but manages to scare her by jumping on the furniture and proclaiming himself the reincarnation of the traditional Chinese hero, the King of the Monkeys.

Wittman goes to work at a department store, where he has recently been demoted from management trainee to part-time clerk in the toy department. Not really understanding the purpose of consumerism, Wittman advises his customers not to buy toy guns, not to use credit cards, and gives merchandise away. Frustrated with his work, he walks off the job, before he can be fired.

At a party given by Wittman's best friend from college, Lance, he encounters many cliques of different types, from heroin addicts who are health-food nuts to potheads who are watching a student film featuring the private lives of playing cards, co-produced by Wittman himself. He meets a beautiful blonde girl named, Tasa, who seems interested in him. He summons the courage to confront Lance about their childhood exploits, and in turn, listens to his friend's adventures. At the end of the party, Wittman regales the few remaining guests with the highly improvisational play he is writing, giving them all roles.

After applying for unemployment and registering with the job service as a playwright looking for work, Wittman gets permission from the Benevolent Association to stage his play at their hall. The play, with a cast of hundreds, goes on for three, consecutive

nights. It features traditional Chinese mythological characters in anti-war themes, along with kung fu Buddhist monks and can-can dancers. The final night is a one-man show, a harangue by Wittman on the slights his people have endured, and the meaning of being Chinese American.

# Chapter 1: Trippers and Askers

## Chapter 1: Trippers and Askers Summary

*Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book* is Maxine Hong Kingston's kaleidoscopic novel of the life of Wittman Ah Sing, a young English major just one year out of Berkley. Wittman thinks of himself as a poet and a playwright, although he works as a clerk in a department store. After being fired from his job, Wittman goes to a party in Oakland, meeting a plain young Chinese woman on the bus. Wittman meets an attractive blonde named, Tasa, at the party, and marries her in the wee hours of the next morning, primarily to avoid the draft.

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Wittman Ah Sing considers suicide every day, perhaps because he lives in damp San Francisco, filled with mournful foghorns. Walking through Golden Gate Park, he encounters a variety of colorful characters. Wittman sees a group of newly arrived Chinese immigrants strolling towards him. Wittman recognizes them by their multiple layers of homemade sweaters, nylon clothes and F.O.B. perfume - that is, the scent of mothballs. He imagines them saying to each other "'Ny-lon ge. Mm lon doc.' 'Nylon-made. Lasts forever.'"

Wittman catches the Muni bus for downtown. Along the way, he reads aloud from *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* by Rilke. None of the other passengers objects, which Wittman interprets to mean that they enjoy hearing Rilke on their commute. He fantasizes that the other passengers will write letters to the City Council, demanding a reader always be on this route. Wittman believes that he is starting a tradition that may result in a permanent job.

At a payphone, Wittman finds he has several dimes in his pocket, so he calls the most beautiful and unattainable girl from his college years. Nanci Lee agrees to join Wittman for cappuccino. At school, Nanci moved easily between social circles. Wittman recounts his history for Nanci, telling her that he was born backstage in a vaudeville theater, where his mother was a Chinese can-can dancer, a Flora Dora girl called "Ruby Long Legs." Wittman hopes to "get it on" with Nanci, an aspiring actress in L.A., but tells her he is just interested in catching up, now that they have been out of college a year.

Nanci agrees to go for a walk with Wittman, and he reflects that she was an Oski Doll in college, competing in the intercollegiate Chinese beauty-personality-good-grades contest at U.C.L.A. He wonders what theater Chinese Americans have besides beauty contests. All Chinese American culture seems knickknacks that are sold to bok gwai, the whites, such as backscratchers, chopsticks and Jade East aftershave in Buddha-shaped bottles.

They stop by a bookstore, where Nanci can look for audition pieces. She is tired of being typecast as the Chinese prostitute or the Chinese peasant. Wittman can sympathize. At his high school, it was traditional for the senior with the highest academic average to be cast as the lead in the school play. The year Wittman won, a "special" role as master of ceremonies for the evening was created. Wittman promises Nanci that he will write a part in his play for her, so the audience will see her for herself, not as a stereotype. Wittman contrives for her to notice his poem, published in a literary magazine.

Enticing Nanci back to his apartment, Wittman reads to her from his poems. He is angered, when she compares his work to the black poet LeRoi Jones. He starts jumping around the apartment, feigning a Chinese accent. "Wokking on a da Waywoad. Centing da dollahs buck home to why-foo and biby. No booty-ful Ah-mei-li-can gal-low for me. Aiya. Aiay." Nanci is dismayed.

Wittman tells her the truth. He is the genuine present-day American incarnation of the King of the Monkeys, the eternal trickster from traditional Chinese myth. Nanci, nervous, puts on her jacket and leaves. Wittman mimes monkey antics in the mirror and returns to work on his play, typing furiously. He wonders at what point he will need to let the reader know that all the characters with names like Bill, Brooke and Annie, are Chinese, as the author is.

## Chapter 1: Trippers and Askers Analysis

As an American, whose family has lived in the United States for five generations, Wittman denigrates new immigrants from China by calling them F.O.B.s, for Fresh Off the Boat. He denigrates Chinese American culture, as consisting solely of beauty contests and tacky knickknacks. A year later, Wittman still resents feeling excluded from many social groups at the University of California at Berkley, while simultaneously looking down on the primarily Asian fraternities and sororities. He envies Nanci's ability to move smoothly between social groups, while mentally labeling her a banana - a derisive term for someone who is yellow, or Asian, outside and white, or Caucasian, inside. Wittman imitates the singsong rhythm of a stereotypical Chinese accent in his poems, and jokes that his mother's stage name, Ruby Long Legs, was an alliteration to her Chinese audience.

The only actual act of racial discrimination against Wittman in the book occurs in this chapter, when he is denied the lead in the senior play, because his oriental appearance

will "clash" with the other actors'. It is an injustice Wittman has carried with him for years, and will likely never forget.

The truest thing Wittman tells Nanci, and possibly the truest statement he makes in the entire novel, is that he is the incarnation of the traditional Chinese mythical character, the King of the Monkeys. The Monkey King of Chinese myth brought the Buddha's teachings to China. As the eternal trickster, it is Wittman's role to stir things up, to be constantly feinting and changing from one incarnation to another. The beautiful, remote and unattainable Nanci proves that she is not the right woman for him when she is frightened by this revelation and leaves quickly.

Wittman's assumption of the monkey role is longstanding. As a small child, his entertainer parents dressed Wittman in a monkey's Baby Uncle Sam costume, with an opening in back for the tail. The Baby Uncle Sam suit is a symbol of the novel's central conflict, Wittman's unsuccessful attempts to reconcile himself as a person of Chinese heritage familiar with traditional Chinese myth and culture, and as an American. Try as he many, Wittman's appearance and background prevent his being accepted by mainstream culture. Yet, he is often surprised to see an oriental face when looking in the mirror, because he feels completely a product of America, especially Berkley of the 1960s.

Wittman is truly a product of American, as well as traditional Chinese, culture. He reflects this in dozens of references to the pop culture of his own time, the 1960s. As an English major, Wittman is familiar with many somewhat obscure literary figures. He particularly admires the Beat generation, and wishes he had been born early enough to be a Beatnik. Wittman's wide-ranging mental free association includes references to: the popular opera Carmen; Wittman's namesake and poet Walt Whitman; Count Ilya Tolstoy, the son of the famous author; Shakespeare's King Lear; the actor Michael O'Sullivan; and California authors William Saroyan and John Steinbeck. He also notes: movie comedian Charlie Chaplin; the popular singers, the Coasters; famous author Oscar Wilde; Shakespeare's Hamlet; and renowned French actor Maurice Chevalier. Jack Kerouac is a favorite of Wittman's, and his stream-of-consciousness ramblings often seem to owe homage to the quintessential Beat author.

Interestingly, the book Wittman chooses to read to his fellow travelers on the bus is Rainer Maria Rilke's *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge,* an autobiographical novel by the man many consider German's preeminent modernist poet. Rilke never found consistent form for his poems, which address themes of disbelief, solitude and profound anxiety. By embracing a decidedly European poet, Wittman works to reconcile his own issues of identity, belonging versus isolation and angst.

# Chapter 2: Linguists and Contenders

## Chapter 2: Linguists and Contenders Summary

Wittman writes long into the night, writing about a music boat sailing the Long River across the Earth guided by a River of Stars. Boats crowded with gamblers, diners, sleepers and lovers drift by. A singer, Joang Fu, leaps from boat to boat, entertaining and educating with requests and dedications, weaving magical stories from the lives of his listeners. When he stops typing, Wittman can hear someone in a room nearby typing, although it might be his imagination.

After traveling a thousand days, Monkey and his friends arrive in the West. They load the scrolls that the Indians give them onto a white horse. Partway home, the Monkey becomes suspicious and unrolls the scrolls, finding they are blank. They return to India and are given words, including the Heart Sutra, but find the blank scrolls are the correct ones after all.

Wittman falls asleep and dreams of the cries of tiny skeletal children, succored by grandmothers chopping shrimp and smashing garlic with mighty blows. Storytellers say that Knights smite their opponents with terrific "garlic-banging blows." There is a kitchen on Wittman's floor that any resident can use, although no one ever does. At noon, Wittman wakes up and takes his private roll of toilet paper to the bathroom down the hall. He puts on the Brooks Brothers navy three-piece suit that he bought at the Salvation Army, although it clashes with his long hair.

Wittman goes to his job. He works as a part-time clerk in the toy department of a large department store. Business doesn't make sense to Wittman. He does not understand the point of all the merchandising, all the selling. Wittman maintains his integrity by advising the customers against buying toy guns and using credit cards, for ideological reasons. One of the toys that he particularly objects to is a basketball cannon toy. He chastises mothers for abandoning their children in the toy department while they shop, as if it is a free babysitting service.

When he is sent down to the stockroom for a bicycle to display, Wittman encounters a man in a recliner, reading and smoking dope. The man refuses to divulge his name, but confides to Wittman that he was once a Yale Younger Poet. Discouraged by the Bomb, the poet has ceased writing and retreated to being a stocker at the department store. Wittman promises to write a role in his next play for the man. He confides that he is starting a theater company called the Pear Garden Players of America, where actors will be cast regardless of race. Every member of the Loman family may be a different race.

Mounting the bicycle on a display, Wittman's tie becomes irretrievably tangled in the sprockets, and he cuts it, leaving a short tail. When his co-worker Louise, a management trainee, tells Wittman it is time for them to attend a training seminar, he goes along, although it will leave the floor unattended. Wittman knows that Louise has

forgotten he has been demoted to part-time clerk, rather than management trainee. Still, he thinks the seminar has to prove more interesting than working.

At the training seminar, Wittman immediately looks around for other oriental people, and sees none. Finally, a group of four Orientals emerges, a man and three women. One of the women is wearing the traditional Chinese dress, the cheongsam. Wittman is embarrassed by the man's short stature and "Hong Kong San Francisco" accent, when the man tells a risquy joke with the punch line "ashes overhauled" instead of "ashes hauled." One of the oriental girls chastises Wittman for sitting on the floor, although there are no chairs available. Wittman is disgusted by the elaborate buffet and floorshow presented by the seminar's sponsor, Mattel Toys.

Back at the toy department, Wittman berates another mother for abandoning her child in the toy department, realizing too late that the child believes they are being singled out, because they are Mexican-American. Embarrassed, Wittman gives the child a large toy free. He arranges a blonde Barbie Bride doll on her back, with a wind-up organ grinder's monkey gyrating on top of her, mimicking fornication, and walks out of the store before he's fired.

## Chapter 2: Linguists and Contenders Analysis

The mythical singer of Wittman's play is Joang Fu, meaning a bell of time or Inner Truth. This is also Wittman's byname, determined by his father's casting the Ching. Lovers on the boats request the "Gold Mountain Song," known in English as Oh, Susanna. The Gold Mountain is a synonym for the United States, where many Chinese men went during the Gold Rush to seek their fortunes, sending money to wives and children at home in China.

Wittman deplores the fact that, at every gathering, he is always counting to see how many oriental people - how many people "like him" - he can find, but he cannot stop. He dislikes the young woman in traditional dress immediately, condemning her as making a spectacle of herself. All of the Orientals are busy judging each other, embarrassed at the impressions their fellow Chinese are making on the whites present. When everyone is seated for the floorshow, Wittman realizes all the Chinese have brown hair, not black. He wonders if he has brown hair, too, and has merely accepted the racial stereotypes forced on him by whites all his life.

The near impossibility of treating everyone equitably is illustrated when Wittman inadvertently injures a poor Mexican-American boy and his mother. Wittman has treated them as he does the other mothers, but the child assumes he is being singled out because of his ethnic group. For all his insights and concern with self-presentation, Wittman fails to notice that he often reacts the same way, seeing social slight where none is intended.

As a child of the 1960s, Wittman is deeply offended by the military-industrial complex, which he sees as an organized conspiracy. They have even transformed the innocent

game of basketball into a war toy. The prank with the wind-up monkey and the Bride Barbie doll foreshadows and symbolizes Wittman's coming marriage to Tasa, a blonde Caucasian girl, whom he has not yet met. It also symbolizes the dual nature of Wittman's psyche, with Barbie representing American Popular Culture and the monkey representing Wittman's Chinese heritage. Pop culture references in the chapter include: Jazz musician Louis B. Armstrong, who credits Chinese opera for inspiration; Jazz pianist, Dave Brubeck; Jack Kerouac; English composer, Vaughn Williams; John Steinbeck; actor, Marlon Brando; 1960s counter-culture writer, Richard Brautigan; French actress, Cyd Charisse; poet, Robert Frost; scientist, Albert Einstein; and actor, Humphrey Bogart.

# Chapter 3: Twisters and Shouters

## Chapter 3: Twisters and Shouters Summary

Wittman is feeling depressed and unemployed. He walks down Market Street, contemplating selling umbrellas or driftwood, flowers or hot dogs. He flashes on Jack Kerouac's poem about people, including "the hitchhikers, the hustlers, the drunks. . . the twinkling little Chinese" and realizes that he must be the Chinese, even though he is tall. To kill some time, Wittman goes to the movies. He enjoys the spectacle of *West Side Story*, but thinks that surely the original gangs were black, and wonders why the producers have chosen to create 14 roles for white people.

Wittman boards a bus bound to Oakland, throwing his coat into the seat beside him to discourage company. A very plain Chinese girl boards. She is carrying bags of books and greasy take-out food, and insists on sitting next to Wittman. Wittman can tell the girl wants him to ask her out. She asks him if he is going to Oakland, which she pronounces "Oak Lun." Trying to discourage conversation, Wittman tells the girl that he is Japanese and accuses her of racial stereotyping.

As they pass on the lower level of the Golden Gate Bridge, the girl, whose name is Judy Louis, turns into a giant blue boar, possibly a flashback from the LSD Wittman did in college. He touches her on the tusk, just to make sure that she is really a boar. No one else on the bus seems to notice. Getting off the bus, Wittman and the Chinese girl - she has turned back into a girl by now - walk in the same direction. The girl asks if he is going to the same party she is going to, but Wittman denies it and walks around the block, refusing to arrive with "Miss Refreshment Committee."

Wittman arrives at the party given by Lance Kamiyama, his best friend from college, and Lance's wife Sunny. Sunny calls Wittman the Chinese Beatnik. Lance has assembled a group of young businessmen that he calls the Young Millionaires, which he purposely mispronounces "Mi-yun-neh" in mock Japanese-Chinese fashion. Lance insists that all of the girls at his party are stewardesses, although Wittman personally knows that several are waitresses.

Wittman wanders among the guests, heroin addicts discussing the best health-food stores and well-traveled women wondering aloud why Masai men are attractive, but the women are not. Wittman wanders into a room where potluck doping is going on, and everyone is watching a short film, co-produced by Wittman in his student days. The film details the adventures and personal lives of a deck of playing cards. Wittman eschews the drugs, in favor of second-hand marijuana smoke.

Wittman talks to an A.J.A. girl - American of Japanese Ancestry - who is going to have plastic surgery to her eyelids to make them look occidental. A white man grabs her and tells her that she has beautiful eyes. Wittman wishes that he had said that, but he hates her eyes. He is also intimidated by smart, pretty women. Walking away, he meets a girl

on the stairs reciting *The Shooting of Dan McGrew*. The girl lifts her heavy, long blonde hair from her neck and tells Wittman her name is Tasa De Wesse. She is beautiful, and Wittman is sure she is interested in him.

Wittman wanders around the party for a while. He confronts Lance about their first meeting, at Lafayette Grammar school. Lance was taidomo no taisho - General of the kids. He became their leader in the relocation camp for Japanese Americans. At their first meeting, Lance socked Wittman, a lone Chinese child, whose parents moved around a lot. Wittman got in trouble. The other members of Lance's gang, some of whom are present tonight, lied and claimed Wittman started the fight. The two almost come to blows, before Lance admits he has few memories before junior high school. He apologizes, but offers to fight Wittman, anyway. For Wittman, Lance represents the typical successful, popular Americanized Japanese, a Sansei Nihonjin, dressed in exactly the right clothes, driving exactly the right car. He's someone with no accent, who took over the junior prom and senior ball, dating all the cutest Japanese and Chinese girls.

Lance recounts the year during college, when he traveled to Japan. Asking a fisherman to drop him off on a Molucca-Sulu island, a man on a copra boat gave him a ride to the next island. Lance understood the man to say he would return to pick Lance up, but he never did. He met three Frenchmen, who had been waiting years for a boat to take them off the island. Finally, they built two rafts and paddled to many islands, each with a smaller population than the last. Finally, an old man offers to share everything with him, and Lance starts crying. He gives up trying to get to the International airport at Jakarta or Manila. One day, he walks further inland than ever, and across an isthmus. Suddenly, he is in a city. Quickly, he hails a taxi to the airport, taking Pan Am to Tokyo. When Lance returns home, his parents have given him up for dead and held a memorial service for him, complete with a stone baby in the churchyard. A red bandana is tied around the statue's neck.

In some ways, Wittman envies the Japanese. An executive order has given the Issei, Nisei and Sansei their American history, important places like Tanforan, Manzanar, Arkansas, and Sand Island. The A.J.A.'s identity has been forged on the anvil of cruelty and overt persecution. Moved by his friend's story, Wittman goes outside for a cigarette, and finds Tasa. They dance and kiss, and Wittman feels he has found his woman at last. He hopes that she will blurt out everything he needs to know about women.

## Chapter 3: Twisters and Shouters Analysis

Wittman is offended by the very presence of the Chinese girl on the bus, because she is plain and carrying food from Chinatown. She represents a negative ethnic stereotype to him. Wittman resents her interest and attempts at conversation. He pretends to be Japanese, just to discourage her. They both engage in ethnic stereotyping, assuming they know more about each other than they really do. The girl interests Wittman only when she transforms into a blue boar. Although he judges people by their appearance and ethnic group, Wittman is offended when the A.J.A. girl, who is soon to finish her

medical internship, plans to have plastic surgery to appear more occidental. The paradox is exposed. Wittman does not like Oriental girls who look Oriental, but he does not like them to try to look non-Oriental, either.

The chapter is filled with references to pop culture, especially in Wittman's thoughts and conversation during the party. The depth and variety of these references illustrate how firmly Wittman and the other partygoers are anchored in popular American culture, although most of them are of Oriental ancestry. Wittman is both more American and more Chinese than his reader is.

References to American pop culture include: the 1960's movie, *West Side Story*; the Ku Klux Klan; actress, Natalie Wood; the movie, *Breakfast at Tiffany's*; popular 1960's television show, *The Twilight Zone*; the cartoon character, Bugs Bunny; and Alabama Governor, George Wallace. Other elements of popular culture are: The Fourth of July; Bloom's Day; Pluto, the cartoon dog; Orion the warrior; Alcatraz; the legend of Camelot; poet, William Carlos Williams; Italian actor, Marcello Mastroianni; the Kennedy family; and *Dumbo the Flying Elephant.* Also included are: Omar Sharif, as Dr. Zhivago; the superhero, Captain America; Lolita; *Ulysses*; Mozart; popular singer, Chubby Checker; Napoleon; Macbeth; and the *War of the Worlds,* amongst others. Although Wittman finds a measure of comfort in American pop culture, he is crushed to realize that even his idol, Jack Kerouac, engaged in racial stereotyping towards Chinese people, unable to see them as unique individuals.

# Chapter 4: The Winners of the Party

## Chapter 4: The Winners of the Party Summary

The winners of the party are Wittman and Tasa, Lance and Sunny, Nanci Lee and Charles Bogard Shaw, and Judy Louis. Winners are those who managed to stay up all night, talking about the uncivilized people who had rushed off with someone. They all sit around the breakfast bar, while Lance cooks an "oom-lette," an omelet filled with hallucinogenic mushrooms. Wittman recites the plot of his most recent play about the King of Monkeys, assigning roles to his friends. Lance will be Liu Pei, Chang Fei will be played by Charles Bogard Shaw, and Wittman will be Gwan Goong.

Wittman and Tasa go to her apartment, where Tasa, an artist, shows him her studio and paintings. She sets the ground rules for their relationship. Tasa is not in love with him. They can be together, but if she finds her soul mate, she will leave Wittman immediately. They can be together, but Wittman will not define her life. Wittman is disappointed, because it is exactly what he wanted to say to her. They make love, and Wittman quizzes Tasa. Does she notice that he has the typically widely spaced Chinese toes instead of crowded Japanese toes?

They spend the day driving around San Francisco in Tasa's Porsche. At the Coit tower, they encounter Gabe, a friend of Tasa's. Gabe has become a Universal Life Church minister to avoid the draft. He ordains Wittman on the spot, also to avoid the draft, and marries Wittman and Tasa for good measure.

## Chapter 4: The Winners of the Party Analysis

Wittman is far more concerned with racial stereotypes than his white lover, quizzing her on their skin tones and the shape of his toes. He also stereotypes Tasa based on her blondness, asking her if she is a loose woman, and if her pubic hair is blonde as well.

Tasa's ground rules for their relationship are typical of the social climate of Berkley in the 1960s. Emotional involvement with your lover was considered an immature, manipulative power play. Wittman is disappointed, because he realizes unconsciously that love is more fun when one of you advocates togetherness, and the other espouses autonomy. Gabe marries Tasa and Wittman to help Wittman avoid the draft. Gabe recites the marriage service used in movies, which begins "Dearly beloved, we are gathered here. . ." from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*, from memory. Other references to pop culture include: Italian movie director, Fellini; *Fantasia*; Salome; English poet, Aubrey Beardsley; John the Baptist; the Cal-Stanford football game; and *Far from the Maddening Crowd*, among others.

Chinese mythological figures in Wittman's narrative include Liu Pei, Gwan Goong, Chang Fei. All are characters from the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a historical novel written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century, acclaimed as one of the Four

Classical Novels of Chinese literature. Liu Pei is a powerful Chinese warlord from the time of the Three Kingdoms, who rises from commoner to declare himself Emperor, founding the Kingdom of Shu. Gwan Goong was Liu Pei's trusted and loyal General, worshiped as the God of Brotherhood, especially in Hong Kong. Chang Fei rose from butcher to fearsome General. The three swear to be brothers for all time in a ceremony in a Peach Garden. Both the characters in the novel, and the actual historical characters they are based upon, were soldiers. In Wittman's version, as well as improvisations by his friends, the three engage in anti-war protests like sit-ins and avoiding the draft.

Wittman's methods to avoid being drafted and sent to fight and probably die in Vietnam are myths in themselves. Although thousands of young men were ordained by the Universal Life Church, federal authorities soon recognized that the church existed solely to provide Contentions Objector status for draftees, and disallowed the exemption. Marriage was a viable way to avoid the draft, but since Tasa and Wittman do not have a marriage license, the action conveys symbolic rather than actual protection.

# Chapter 5: Ruby Long Legs' and Zeppelin's Song of the Open Road

## Chapter 5: Ruby Long Legs' and Zeppelin's Song of the Open Road Summary

Wittman and Tasa visit Sutro's, and have their wedding breakfast at the Palace of Fine Arts, where he recites a story to her as a wedding gift. It is a saga in the tradition of the Heroic Couple on the Battlefield, which, he warns her, will turn her Chinese. While he has access to a car, Wittman decides to visit his mother, Ruby, in Sacramento, and introduce Tasa to her.

Wittman has forgotten it is mah jong day, and Tasa is confronted with all his Aunties, as well as his mother. Wittman's Aunties, his mother's close friends, were all Flora Dora dancers with Wittman's mother during World War II. Wittman discovers Popo, his grandmother, is missing. Popo may or may not actually be Wittman's grandmother. She simply appeared on the family's doorstep from China one day, claiming kinship. The family has supported her for years, because the old woman seems to know most of their stories. It seems likely that Wittman's mother has dumped his Popo in a nursing home.

Wittman takes Tasa to meet his father, Zeppelin, who lives in a camper along the river. He subsists by panning for gold, occasionally finding some gold dust. Zeppelin is playing poker and repairing cars with his buddies, Wittman's Uncles. He admits that they took Popo to the mountains for a picnic. When the old lady insisted they go into Reno to gamble, the Ah Sings complied. When it was time to return, the two searched, but could not find her. Zeppelin figures the old woman got by okay before she came to live with them; and she will get by okay on her own, now.

Zeppelin is amazingly cheap, a Chang characteristic. He illustrates this point to Tasa by telling her the story of the man who went into a restaurant and ordered tea with lemon for 15 cents. When the waitress served the man tea with a wedge of lemon, he continued loudly demanding the entire lemon, as the menu stated, until the manager acquiesced.

Wittman and Tasa go to an expensive restaurant, where Wittman becomes offended by the loud mouth Caucasian businessmen at the next table. Wittman angrily confronts the men, shouting, and is ejected from the restaurant, after spending his last money to pay for the meal. The two return to Tasa's apartment, where they make love. On the way, Tasa solicits suggestions for excuses to call in sick tomorrow at her job as assistant claims adjuster.

# Chapter 5: Ruby Long Legs' and Zeppelin's Song of the Open Road Analysis

Wittman longs to be free of ethnic stereotypes, but is careful to tell his bride a story that will "make her Chinese." Wittman, who is called Wit Man by his mother, initially introduces Tasa as his friend. His mother bemoans his beard, and Wittman's being fired from his job. Wittman tries to placate his mother by shaving his beard, but she does not even notice. He further agitates his mother by admitting he and Tasa are married. Wittman's father is proud that he has been mistaken for a Basque, Mexican, Filipino or Italian many times. He insists because he is pure Chinese, he can pass as a member of many ethnic groups, including Gypsy.

Wittman sees his father's cheapness as an inherent attribute of Chinese men, who prefer to earn a living without giving up their souls. He will teach Tasa to survive on almost nothing, taking her to the Salvation Army and Baptist mission dining rooms on her birthday and anniversaries. Never to St. Mary's soup kitchen, however. It is too close to Chinatown.

When the businessmen in the restaurant tell a joke, whose punch line might be "Every Mexican in town has one," Wittman is offended. He is not offended because they are telling an ethnic joke, but because he assumes they really mean, "Every Chinaman in town has one." Kingston may be using irony to illustrate that any ethnic joke denigrates people of all races. However, Wittman is guilty of racial stereotyping himself. He cannot hear the men clearly, and is assuming their laughter is at his expense because they "look like the kind who entertain one another with race jokes."

Wittman remembers as a child at Christmas, he and his father walked through a train station in a large snowy city, perhaps New York or Chicago. Homeless, bearded men in ragged suits kept stopping them to give Wittman a toy. Wittman was convinced each man was Santa Claus. He realizes now that each had money only for one toy, and chose to give that toy to Wittman, perhaps because he was Chinese. This event symbolizes the positive aspects of ethnic identity, within the context of American pop culture. Other references in the chapter include: the popular 1940's song, *Let Me Call You Sweetheart*; the temptress of Greek mythology, Cassandra; Sheba Queen of the Jungle; French poet, Rimbaud; the S.A.T.s; and the pop music, TV show, *American Bandstand*, which Zeppelin Ah Sing watches with the sound off. Other references include: actress, Marilyn Monroe; the play, *Night Must Fall*; Charlie Chaplain; *The Gold Rush*; Egyptian queen, Nefertiti; Juicy Fruit gum; and *Fanfare for the Common Man,* by Aaron Copland.

The family's personal mythology is explored in this chapter. Wittman believes Popo is his long-lost grandmother, a woman his parents have exploited, forcing her to sell her building in Hong Kong to pay for living expenses in the U.S. Wittman's mother believes that she has suffered long enough, depriving herself to support an unrelated Chinese woman for 20 years, and teaching her to be a wardrobe mistress, a marketable skill.

# Chapter 6: A Song for Occupations

## Chapter 6: A Song for Occupations Summary

For someone who wants to be a free man, Wittman feels he has incurred a lot of obligations. He has to create a play for Nanci Lee and the Yale Younger Poet. He has to find his Popo, and stay with Tasa "for richer, for poorer, forsaking all others."

Waking too late to call in sick, Tasa goes to work. Wittman goes downtown with her to register for unemployment. They have agreed that they will each work half the year, and collect unemployment half the year, while practicing their respective arts.

At the unemployment office, Wittman has trouble registering, because he does not have a driver's license, not owning a car. They will not accept his student I.D., library card or social security card. Wittman encounters an elderly Chinese woman with an injured hand, who normally works as a cannery fruit packer. She is registering for both Workman's Compensation and Unemployment, thinking she will be awarded at least one.

Wittman tries to explain to the elderly woman that she cannot collect Unemployment if she is physically unable to work, and she cannot collect Workman's Compensation if she is physically able to work. Instead, she might go to jail for lying on her applications. The woman persists in seeing registration as some sort of lottery, where she might win one or both prizes. She teaches Wittman the correct answers to qualify for unemployment, in order, and insists he memorize them.

After registration, the Unemployment Office sends Wittman to the Employment Office near Chinatown. There, Mr. Sanchez, a young Mexican-American man, reluctantly lists Wittman's occupation as playwright, although he urges Wittman to also list Clerk and Sales as potential occupations. Despite Wittman's flawless colloquial English, Mr. Sanchez, who was a Teaching Assistant for one semester at Berkley, insists he received C's, only because his professors were being kind. They routinely award "Chinese C's" to students who finish their assignments, but will never be proficient in English.

Wittman goes to the Benevolent Association to request assistance, although he is a bit intimidated by the powerful old men. The powerful president of the Association is not in, so Wittman speaks respectfully to an "old fut" in an undershirt, who is tending a tiny patch of garden planted out front. Wittman wants to put on his play at the Benevolent Association, as a fund-raiser. When the old man hears part of the plot, he agrees to bring the matter up for a vote. Meanwhile, Wittman will begin to use the Benevolent Association hall to rehearse.

Crossing the street, Wittman suddenly sees his Popo, walking without her cane to show off her still-shapely legs. He carries her pink box of pastries and helps her across the street, ignoring the blaring horns. Popo tells Wittman that his parents took her high into

the Sierra Mountains for a picnic and abandoned her, like a cat or a dog. She shared her Fire Duck with plum sauce and steam rolls with stray cats and dogs. Wittman invites Popo to live with him, but she continues the story.

Popo was standing by the road crying at the cruelty of her ex-children when an old Chinese man drove by. He picked Popo up and asked her to marry him. The two drove to Reno, where they got married. They bet on the same numbers as their wedding date and won a lot of money. The love story is the talk of Chinatown. Popo's new husband, Lincoln Fong, is a wealthy property owner in the city. Wittman asks Popo to convince her new husband to provide money for sets and costumes for the play. She agrees, after Wittman promises her a role.

## Chapter 6: A Song for Occupations Analysis

The elderly Chinese woman at the unemployment office presents another ethnic dilemma for Wittman. She speaks with an accent and seems to regard it as her duty to keep Wittman, a young Chinese man, constructively occupied. She personifies many of the racial stereotypes, which Wittman paradoxically rejects and believes. Yet, the woman also personifies the sense of community and helpfulness that ethnic heritage confers, when she gives Wittman the secret words that will qualify him for free money from the government.

Wittman is enraged that Mr. Sanchez believes his English is poor, despite the evidence of Sanchez's own ears. The man, judging Wittman solely on appearance, assumes he speaks broken English. Wittman interprets the lecture on "Chinese C's" to mean his instructors may have given him a lower grade than he deserved, without reading his papers, simply because of his race. When the "old fut" at the Benevolent Association refuses to speak English, Wittman betrays his own American prejudice, thinking anyone can speak English if they want to. Rather than use his "half-ass Chinese," Wittman continues to speak politely to the man in English, and he replies.

The story of Popo's abandonment and resulting good fortune has a quality of myth or fairy-tale about it. Even in her despair, Popo was kind, sharing her food with the abandoned, starving dogs and cats in the mountains. Just when her despair was at its worst, her prince appeared, in the form of a wealthy, courageous Chinatown elder. Wittman hopes that when he is elderly, he will have the good sense to be attracted to a crone like his grandmother, and not a young woman. He thinks his grandmother, with her geisha hairstyle, looks a bit like an aging Debbie Reynolds. The plot of the story Wittman recounts for the "old fut" also relies heavily on characters from Chinese mythology, although Wittman transforms the tales to suit his own purposes.

The Unemployment Office is a place bereft of culture, even American pop culture, so there are fewer references and allusions in that section of the story than in any other. Still, Wittman is reminded of: beat poet, Lew Welch; the Nazi prison camp, Auschwitz; the Verdi opera, Aida; Frankenstein; French actress, Yvette Mimieux; the Big Bang theory of creation; *The Time Machine*; NASA; actress, Rita Moreno; 1960's teen idol,

Sandra Dee; G.I.s; Pall Malls; the Guggenheim Foundation; President Harry Truman; and California Jesuit explorer, Junipero Serra, founder of the missions. Other references include: actress, Debbie Reynolds; English Restoration diarist, Samuel Pepys; and Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

# Chapter 7: A Pear Garden in the West

## Chapter 7: A Pear Garden in the West Summary

Wittman calls his mother to report that he has found Popo. As always, to prevent her worrying, his first words are "Ma? I'm not sick or in trouble." He asks his mother, and her troupe of dancing Aunties, to be in his show. At first, his mother demurs. The War Bonds Rescue China act contributed to World War II, which spawned nuclear weapons. Ruby Long Legs, Wittman's mother, refuses to support war now that her son may be sent to Vietnam. Wittman wins her over by pretending to believe that the old girls can no longer dance well. Wittman calls everyone to rehearse the following night, including Tasa, Lance, Nanci Lee and the Yale Younger Poet. The entire community attends the show, including the "old fut," who proves to be the head of the Benevolent Association, after all.

Lance appears with a kung fu expert named, Siew Loong, Little Dragon. Wittman was born in the year of the dragon, as well, but does not feel the need to make it part of his name. Wittman accuses Siew Loong of being a misfit exchange student, a social outcast who deludes himself about his martial arts abilities, until Siew Loong renders Wittman unconscious with a single finger. They rehearse the play, about a kung fu Buddhist monk, who confronts a cowardly California town. The plot soon degenerates into a wild melee of fighting, with tanks and airplanes unfairly victorious over the more honorable martial arts.

Wittman finds that he is still attracted to Nanci Lee, and feels he cannot, in good conscience, go home with his wife Tasa. He admits to Nanci that he is married and offers her a ride home in Tasa's car.

## Chapter 7: A Pear Garden in the West Analysis

Although Wittman has vowed to cast regardless of race, he gives the Caucasian Yale Young Poet a choice of roles: Lee Yoon the Blue-eyed Tiger, Liu Tang the Red Hairy barbarian, Tuan Ching Chu the Gold-haired Dog, or Doctor Huang Pu Tuan, also known as Uncle Purple Beard. All of these "barbarians" have aspects of their appearance that are more typically considered Caucasian than Chinese. Thus, Wittman is stereotyping the Yale Younger Poet, while he struggles not to be stereotyped himself.

Within Chinese mythology, "barbarians" were not necessarily considered ugly. The Chinese believed that a unique or unusual aspect of appearance such as red hair, very bushy eyebrows, obesity, or emaciation, indicated a unique attribute; such as, extremely high intelligence, great courage, or good luck.

The play itself is a wild combination of traditional Chinese mythical characters, negative racial stereotypes, the work of early 20th century Chinese American authors, and kung fu movies. It is a sort of Chinese western, an anti-war diatribe *High Noon,* starring Kung

fu Buddhist monks, with can-can dancers and a cast of hundreds. References to popular culture in the chapter include: kung fu movie legend, Bruce Lee; 1920's pop song, *The Sidewalks of New York*; King Kong; Barbie; *Huckleberry Finn;* the popular ABC TV series, Hawaiian Eye; actor, James Dean; actress, Fay Wray; and super hero, Captain Marvel.

# Chapter 8: Bones and Jones

## Chapter 8: Bones and Jones Summary

On Halloween, Wittman's play, *The War of the Three Kingdoms*, opens. It is an improvisation, only loosely based on Wittman's original treatment. He has cast Lance Kamiyama and the Yale Younger Poet as the Double Boys. They trade vaudeville jokes in mixed Carolina and Asian accents. Conforming to stereotype, the women in the play all have their names translated, like Jade Snow, while the men's names are untranslated, like Sung Chiang, whose name means Timely Rain. One of the players looks Mexican, and inquiries confirm that he is Mr. Sanchez of the Unemployment Office.

The show features elements from traditional Chinese theater, such as magic tricks and juggling. It also includes Chinese American elements, such as the trapeze artists the Flying Lings, and a distinctly American can-can performed by Ruby Long Legs and her geriatric dance troupe, the Flora Dora dancers.

The play's climax is a free-for-all, where everyone fights everyone else, and Wittman sets off thousands of firecrackers. The San Francisco Fire Department responds with a hook and ladder truck. Finding no fire, the firemen demand to know if they have a fireworks permit. Wittman knows that only Class C flash powder technicians are qualified to set off theatrical explosives in the state of California; and none of them is present. The firemen agree to overlook the violation, and are given tickets to the performance the following night.

## Chapter 8: Bones and Jones Analysis

Wittman perfectly illustrates his major inner conflict by uniting Lance and the Yale Younger Poet as Siamese twins. Chang, also called Bones, is played by Lance Kamiyama, Wittman's best friend. He represents both the Chinese portion of Wittman's personality, and his quest for material success. Eng, or Jones, The Yale Younger Poet, represents Wittman's American and artistic selves. By yoking the two in uneasy tandem, he illustrates his own conflict, and that of his culture. When Chang dies, Eng withers away, unable to survive without his ethnic heritage.

Wittman's play is an improvisation using the characters of traditional Chinese mythology, the conventions of Chinese theater, and plot lines from early 20th century works by Chinese American authors. Ultimately, however, it has a modern American theme about the cowardice, futility, and the stupidity of war, especially nuclear weapons.

Figures from Chinese mythology include several dragons, Tripitaka and Garuda. Garuda, the eagle, is a lesser Hindu deity. Tripitaka is a heroic Chinese Buddhist monk and translator, who founded the Faxiang School focusing on karma and rebirth. It's an appropriate metaphor for Wittman himself, and for his play.

For once, Wittman is grateful for a racial stereotype, when he realizes that Chinese people can to shoot off more firecrackers than anyone else, without going to jail. He revels in this intersection of American popular culture and traditional Chinese culture. Most of this chapter focuses on Chinese mythical figures, but there are references to the following: the Peace Corps, which was founded during the 1960s; P.T. Barnum, the expert marketer and flim-flam man of Barnum & Bailey circus fame; and President Abraham Lincoln; and the Nobel Prize. There's also note of: the Roman myth of the hunter Narcissus, who fell in love with himself; the Lone Ranger's faithful sidekick Tonto;Confucius; and Rudyard Kipling's negative stereotypes of the Chinese.

# Chapter 9: One-Man Show

## Chapter 9: One-Man Show Summary

The improvisation continues, for three nights. Instead of giving the same performance, the players continue the previous night's saga each evening until late into the night. As Chinese audiences like their morals spelled out, and American audiences are beginning to like being insulted, Wittman takes the stage for a diatribe the final night.

Wittman admits that only in America do the Sings keep the meaningless vocative "Ah" in front of their name. Alone and illiterate, the first Ah Sing immigrant had no other Chinese to correct him. He remembered being called ah Sing, like uhm, Jones, and told the schoolmarm that was his name.

Wittman derides the show's overwhelmingly positive reviews, which use expressions like "Exotic" and "East meets West" and perhaps worst of all "Snaps, crackles and pops like singing rice." Deeply offended, he points out that the review for *Raisin in the Sun* did not read, "American meets Africa." He exclaims that he reviews should read, "West meets West," since the entire theme of the show is that Chinese Americans are 100% American. Wittman dramatically cuts his hair on stage, so that he resembles the typical "all-American" boy in jeans, sweater and sneakers.

Wittman objects to Occidentals at cocktail parties, who ask if he speaks English, particularly after he has been conversing in flawless English with them for hours. He tells the story of Wellington Koo at a state dinner in Washington, D.C. during World War II, where Wellington was the featured speaker. A diplomat across the table asks, "Likee soupee?" Wellington nods, slurps his soup, and gets up to deliver the keynote address to wild acclaim. Sitting back down, Wellington turns to the diplomat and asks, "Likee speechee?"

Wittman objects to negative stereotypes of Chinese on TV and in the movies, like the Cartwright's Hop Sing and Charlie Chan. He objects to Caucasian actors being used to portray Chinese characters, and Chinese actors being prohibited from playing non-Oriental parts. He suggests that when asked to jabber in Chinese, the actors should take the opportunity to convey political messages, like "C.I.A. out of Southeast Asia."

In his diatribe, Wittman objects bitterly to the hyphen in Chinese-American. It seems to modify American, suggesting that his people are not completely American, the way perfectly good means less than good. Chinese Americans need a phrase to express their heritage as well as the acronym A.J.A. - Americans of Japanese Ancestry - expresses theirs. However, Wittman hastens to add, the Chinese Americans should not have to be locked up in work camps to earn their right to a unique name. Instead, Wittman argues that the words should be Chinese American. Both completely Chinese, and completely American, combined in the same person. The definition of American

should be expanded to include many types of Americans, Jewish, Black, Japanese, Italian, Greek, Mexican, and they should all be appreciated for being 100% American.

Wittman challenges everyone to disprove the stereotype that Chinese people do not express affection, by kissing their neighbor. Wittman publicly announces his marriage to Tasa, launching a diatribe against her for not cooking and cleaning like a good wife. Instead, the audience only hears his words when he says, "I'll love you forever" and toasts the happy couple with champagne and firecrackers. He realizes that in his play, the three brothers and Cho Cho were the best soldiers who ever lived, yet they lost. Wittman is surrounded by the Chinese American community he helped create, and he is transformed into a pacifist.

## Chapter 9: One-Man Show Analysis

The Ah Sing name perfectly captures the essence of Wittman's Chinese American status. Only Sings in America retain the meaningless initial syllable and write it down, out of respect for an ancient ancestor and the family he founded. Ah Sing is a last name as quintessentially American as it is Chinese, just as Wittman himself is American and Chinese to the core.

Wittman realizes in his retelling of Chinese myth that the greatest of warriors - the three brothers and Cho Cho - have been defeated in war. He takes this to mean that the unjust U.S. war in Vietnam can be lost, and that he can prevail as a draft dodger, even if he has to go to Canada. In an expression of one of the major themes of the novel, Wittman embraces pacifism.

The phrase "Snaps, crackles and pops like singing rice" sounds like one of Wittman's typical reference to both Chinese culture and the American pop scene, but he is mortally offended to hear it from someone else in a review of his play. References to popular culture in this chapter include: Greek philosopher, Aristotle; author, James Agee; and the movies *Vertigo* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. In his monologue, Wittman has critical comments on the portrayal of Chinese characters in movies, including works by Jerry Lewis, Lon Chaney, Charlie Chan and John Wayne.

# Characters

## Wittman Ah Sing

The intelligent, creative protagonist of *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book,* Wittman Ah Sing is a mass of contradictions. He is a Chinese American, who resents racial stereotypes, yet engages in stereotyping constantly. He sees racial slurs everywhere, yet unintentionally insults a small Mexican-American boy. Wittman is an English major, just one year out of Berkley, who is familiar with English classics and a fan of the Beat poets. He speaks fractured Chinese, but is intimately familiar with Chinese mythology, and both classical and 20th century Chinese literature.

Wittman fancies himself a reincarnation of the King of the Monkeys, the most powerful of Chinese deities, who brought the Buddhist sutra from India to China. As a child, Wittman's theatrical parents dressed him in a Baby Uncle Sam suit. The costume formerly belonged to a monkey and had an opening in the back for his tale. In costume, Wittman often acted as an organ grinder's monkey, collecting money for his father, a street musician.

Wittman is as much a child of American popular culture as he is Chinese. His ramblings include frequent references to American pop culture, from the movies *West Side Story* and *Vertigo* to popular TV shows Hawaiian Eye and the Twilight Zone. Wittman vigorously objects to the portrayal of Chinese men as obsequious wimps on television; such as, Hop Sing, the Cartwright's houseman on Ponderosa. As a child of Berkley in the 1960s, Wittman is against the Vietnam war and a draft dodger. He marries Tasa, whom he does not love, primarily to avoid being drafted. Wittman then adamantly objects when Tasa refuses to cook and clean to his standards.

## Nanci Lee

Nanci is the most beautiful, unattainable girl from Wittman's college years. She is a former Oski Doll, competing in a Chinese contest focusing on beauty, academic achievement, and personality. When Wittman finds a few dimes in his pocket, he calls Nanci from a pay phone and invites her for cappuccino. She agrees. The two, who graduated a year earlier, catch up. Nanci is an aspiring actress in L.A. She despairs of ever getting serious roles, because of her ethnicity, and wants to read as Portia and Cassandra in auditions. Instead, producers are constantly asking her to take her shoes off, if she is being considered for the role of Chinese peasant; or to leave them on, if she is being considered for the role of Chinese prostitute. Wittman promises to write a role that allows Nanci to be herself.

Despite the fact that the two went to Berkley together, Nanci didn't know Wittman well, because as a beautiful girl, she moved easily between all social groups, while his friends were almost exclusively Asian. Nanci is intrigued by Wittman's poetry, but when

she compliments it as being like the black writer LeRoi Jones, Wittman becomes enraged. He starts talking with a singsong Chinese accent, and hops all around the furniture claiming to be a monkey. This frightens Nanci, and she never really approaches Wittman again, although they meet through his play and at a party.

## Lance Kamiyama

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Lance is Wittman's best friend and nemesis. Lance is a third-generation American of Japanese Ancestry, a Sensei. He was born in a work camp located at Tanforan, the former racetrack, where his family lived in a horse stall. According to the old woman who lived in the next stall, Lance was a rebellious child, who would defecate at the foot of the flagpole, under the disapproving eyes of the M.P.s

Since that time, Lance has embraced his American identity completely. In grammar school, he was the leader of a gang of boys who victimized Wittman as the lonely, awkward outsider. Wittman confronts Lance about this at the party, but Lance confesses his traumatic childhood has left him with no memory of any events before junior high. In high school and college, Lance is the perfect Asian student. He always wore the right clothes and drove the right car, took over the junior prom and senior ball, and dated all the prettiest Japanese and Chinese girls. At the party, Lance recounts his story of being marooned on a series of islands.

As an adult, Lance is a financially successful civil servant, although he opposes the Viet Nam war. He discusses investments with his friends, and has created a cadre of successful young Asian businessmen, and their stay-at-home wives the he calls the Young Millionaires. Lance and his Caucasian wife, Sunny, often give parties, always with a theme. Lance introduces all of the single women at his parties as stewardesses, although many are actually waitresses, artists or assistant claims adjusters.

## Tasa de Weese Ah Sing

Tasa is the beautiful blonde-haired girl Wittman meets at Lance's party. She is a painter, who works as an assistant insurance claims adjuster. Tasa owns a beautiful Porsche car, which her parents bought her in return for agreeing to attend an inexpensive California state university.

In the wee hours of the morning following Lance's party, Tasa and Wittman are married by Tasa's friend Gabe, an officially ordained minister of the bogus Universal Life Church. Tasa and Wittman are not in love, and the marriage is primarily a way for Wittman to avoid the draft. Tasa has very definite ideas of her own about relationships, however. She informs Wittman even before the wedding that he is not the love of her life. She will

be with him until, and unless, she meets her soul mate. Then, she will leave. Tasa insists that Wittman will never be the center of her existence.

After the marriage, Tasa confides that she does not intend to be a wife. That is, she does not mind cooking and cleaning part of the time, but feels Wittman should contribute, caring for her from time to time. This idea, unusual in the 1960s, meets with Wittman's complete disapproval. The two live together in Tasa's apartment, which quickly sinks into complete disorder, when neither will agree to clean. In order to eat, the two must clear dirty dishes and rotting leftover food from the dining table to make room for their plates. Wittman's ideals of equality do not extend this far, and he launches a diatribe against Tasa's performance as a wife during the last night of his play.

## Sunny Kamiyama

Sunny is Lance's beautiful, slender, blonde wife. The two are inseparable and Sunny, a housewife, seems to have few interests of her own, although she is not entirely surprised to hear Lance described as smug.

## Ruby "Ruby Long Legs" Ah Sing

As the beautiful and glamorous Ruby Long Legs, Ruby toured the U.S. with the Flora Dora girls, a troupe of can-can dancers, during World War II. Now, the dancers are her mah jong friends, and Wittman's "Aunties." They still perform occasionally for charity events, at nursing homes, and for Wittman's play. Ruby is a typically over-protective mother, chastising Wittman for growing a beard, but not noticing when he shaves it off mid-visit. In Ruby's version of events, she is a long-suffering woman, who has deprived herself for 20 years to support Popo, who is not even related to her. Ruby claims that Wittman's grandmother has mysteriously wandered off, or perhaps she is at the movies and will be back later.

## Zeppelin Ah Sing

As a stage door Johnny, Zeppelin Ah Sing won the heart of Ruby Long Legs by buying whole rows of seats and donating them to soldiers, guaranteeing a sold-out show. Zeppelin was himself a street musician, but his real love is panning gold. Zeppelin lives in an RV near the river, where he fishes and works on cars with his buddies. He publishes a mimeographed magazine of abandoned mines, with very limited distribution. Zeppelin claims that the mines still have ore in them, which an adroit person can make a fortune extracting.

Zeppelin is, in Wittman's view, a typical Chang, meaning he is cheap. Zeppelin would rather figure out a way to finagle things for free than work at a traditional job. One of Zeppelin's favorite stories is about the man who managed to con a restaurant manager out of a whole lemon, plus a cup of tea, because the menu said "tea with lemon."

Zeppelin claims the Ah Sings took Popo for a pleasant picnic in the hills. Popo has brought her life savings and wants to gamble, which Ruby and Zeppelin resent, because the woman does not pay them rent. When the old woman insisted they continue to Reno to gamble, she became lost. Despite all their efforts to locate her, Popo could not be found.

## Popo Ah Sing Fong

Wittman's beloved grandmother may or may not actually be related to the Ah Sings. She simply showed up at their house one day from China, claiming kinship. The old woman seemed to know most of their family stories, so she was accepted, and lived with Ruby and Zeppelin for twenty years. The Ah Sings influenced Popo to sell her office building in Hong Kong, to pay for her expenses in America. Wittman's mother insists that Popo care for her dance troupe's costumes, teaching her a marketable skill.

Popo loves to gamble in Reno. She tells Wittman the Ah Sings abandoned her in the mountains, when they became tired of caring for her. It's a charge that the couple denies. When a wealthy Chinatown elder picks Popo up and proposes to her, they celebrate their wedding by gambling in Reno, winning a lot of money. Popo convinces her new husband, Lincoln Fong, to contribute costumes and make-up for Wittman's play.

## Mr. Sanchez

Mr. Sanchez is the administrator, who Wittman encounters at the Employment Office, when he files for unemployment. After much discussion, Sanchez agrees to put "playwright" down as Wittman's primary occupation, although he also puts "clerk." Sanchez notes that Wittman is not unemployed through laziness or lack of talent, but simply because "our theater is dead."

## Siew Loong --Little Dragon

Lance brings a kung fu expert, Siew Loong, to rehearsals for the play. Wittman doubts the man's claims that he can render someone unconscious with a single finger and accuses the young man of being an awkward exchange student who is seeking acceptance, until Wittman regains consciousness and realizes he has seen a demonstration.

# Objects/Places

## Golden Gate Bridge

Wittman thinks that the Golden Gate Bridge is the perfect bridge, a symbol of all that is good about America. He takes the bus to Oakland, traveling on the tunnel-like lower level of the Bridge, where Judy Louis transforms into a blue boar.

## Golden Gate Park

Wittman walks through Golden Gate Park to catch the bus. The park in the 1960s was a Mecca of sorts for all types of hippies and counter-culture types, where drugs were bought and sold, and anti-war demonstrations staged. On one visit, Wittman, dressed in a Brooks Brothers three-piece suit for work, is urged to look through an empty toilet paper roll by a hippie, who is probably stoned on LSD. When Wittman complies, the hippie calls Wittman a "hippie-dippie."

## Sacramento

Wittman and Tasa travel to his hometown of Sacramento, partly because he wants to introduce his new wife to his mother, and partly because Wittman figures that, as long as he has the use of Tasa's car, he might as well go see his folks. In Sacramento, Wittman's mother lives in a modest tract home within sight of the state capitol.

## Wittman's Apartment

Wittman takes Nanci Lee back to his Chinatown apartment, but is reluctant to take his new wife, Tasa there. With a communal kitchen and a shared bathroom down the hall, Wittman's apartment is really more a rented room.

## Tasa's Apartment

Tasa's apartment is bigger and sunnier than Wittman's, with a separate space for her to paint and a bedroom. The two live there, but Wittman is soon angry that Tasa refuses to do all the housework.

## The Benevolent Association

When he needs help, Wittman turns to the Benevolent Association. Zeppelin is a long-time supporter of the association, buying tables at charity dinners and books of raffle tickets with his last twenty dollars. Unlike some Chinese families, such as the Wongs,

who have their own Benevolent Association housed in a modern office building they own, the Ah Sings share an association with many families. Wittman approaches the head of the Benevolent Association to provide a venue for the play.

## The Employment Office

After filing for unemployment, Wittman must register at the job bank. There, he encounters Mr. Sanchez, and watches a cartoon film on proper grooming and hygiene for a job interview.

## The Barbie Doll and the Organ Grinder's Monkey

In keeping with Wittman's Berkley-inspired anti-materialism, few objects have symbolic significance in the novel. However, the Barbie Doll and the Organ Grinder's Monkey symbolize both Wittman's inner struggle, and his relationship with Tasa. When Wittman quits the department store job, he places a Bride Barbie on her back with a wind-up monkey on top of her, mimicking fornication. The Bride Barbie represents American culture, and the monkey represents traditional Chinese culture, both essential features of Wittman's psyche.

## Mattel Tricycles

Wittman attends a seminar with a floorshow and appetizers on his last day of work. The training event is sponsored by the Mattel toy company, to merchandise their newest introduction, a tricycle.

## Basketball Canon

On Wittman's last day of work, a grandmother asks his advice on buying a Basketball Canon for her grandson. Wittman tries to discourage her, noting that now every toy has been converted into a type of gun. The woman is offended and purchases the toy anyway.

# Social Concerns And Themes

In 1782 in his collection of essays on American life, Letters from an American Farmer, Michel Crevecoeur posed the question, "What then is the American, this new man?" It is a question which has concerned American writers ever since. Tripmaster Monkey; His Fake Book, Kingston's novel of a young ChineseAmerican male roaming the streets of San Francisco in the early 1960s, adds another piece to the emerging picture of what this new man looks like.

Through the antics and diatribes of Wittman Ah Sing, an unemployed would-be-poet full of allusions and illusions, the author poses a number of important questions about the nature of the relation between the individual and his community in America. Walt Whitman, "the poet that his father tried to name him after," once wrote: "One's-Self I sing, a simple separate person,/Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-masse." The modern Wittman, too, is on a quest to reconcile self and society. The trouble is that he is not sure how he feels about either.

Wittman sees himself as an artistic loner, yet the reader sees him as a painfully self-conscious young man reaching out for understanding and acceptance while denying that he wants to belong to any society which fosters war, racism or materialism.

Wittman is essentially an angry idealist whose frequent harangues reveal as much about his own prejudice and paranoia as they do about the ills of his society.

Wittman's anger toward society is both legitimate and melodramatic. It is appropriate for a young man sensitive to his times and to the tinge of racism in the attitudes and behavior of white America. His social activism takes the form of reading the German romanticist, Rainer Maria Rilke, to his fellow passengers on the bus and lecturing shoppers on the evils of keeping toy guns and using charge cards. His selfappointed mission is "to spook out prejudice."

Believing that "you have to be dumb to be happy on this Earth," Wittman would like to strike a pose as the selfsufficient artist: "If he could stand by himself alone, him and his cigarette, he would have perfected cool." But his need to belong, both to his community and to America as a whole, prevents such perfection. He remains exquisitely sensitive to social stereotypes, which suggests that he is an outsider despite his five-generation American ancestry.

Even the critical success of Wittman's marathon play, replete with ghosts, kung fu, fireworks, sixteenth-century Chinese warriors, senior citizen cancan dancers, Forest Dragon, and Horned Dragon, is not enough to pacify him.

The final chapter, "One Man Show," consists of Wittman's explosive fortypage monologue to his predominantly Chinese-American audience explaining why they should be offended by the laudatory reviews which focus on the exotic oriental nature of his play in such terms as, "East meets West," "Sino-American theater," "snaps, crackles

and pops like singing rice," "sweet and sour." "What's there to cheer about?" he taunts the audience, "You like being compared to Rice Krispies?" For Wittman, "There is no East here. West is meeting West. This was all West."

He resents labels such as "exotic" and "inscrutable," which he believes many Americans attach to all things oriental. "That's a trip they're laying on us," he harangues his audience, "because they are willfully innocent. Willful innocence is a perversion."

Yet Wittman is more a part of his culture than he realizes. He himself remains willfully innocent to the end.

In his eagerness to claim America, while rejecting its excesses, Wittman reveals his own uncritical acceptance of a number of social stereotypes. His desire to rebel leads to an over-zealous admiration of any who appear more disenchanted than he. "What do you do down here with your extra time?"

he asks the dope smoking former Yale Younger Poet in the stockroom. The reply, "Handle consciousness," causes Wittman to exclaim, "Hey, I do too. Me too. I want to do that too, man." Because he is "overawed by anyone who achieved more pain than he did, given average American conditions," Witt man lionizes the Beat writers of the 1950s. Jack Kerouac and Allen Ginsberg course their way through this novel side by side with sixteenth-century Chinese writers. Wittman-the-Cynic becomes Wittman-the-Romantic in his idealization of the recent past: walking with the beautiful Nanci Lee, he feels "the two of them making the scene on the Beach, like cruising in the gone Kerouac time of yore."

The pervasive nature of popular culture, suggested by repeated references to writers, movies, and folk heroes, is a recurring theme. Often Wittman and his friends define themselves by what movies they like or dislike and which poets they read. Kingston presents an array of names — from Dave Brubeck to Daniel Boone, Jesse James to Marilyn Monroe — to suggest the wide variety of popular culture as well as its influence on a young man's imagination. When hailing a cab, for example, Wittman finds that "his hand shot up like in the movies." As he slides into his girlfriend's Porsche, he recalls "James Dean had been killed in a Porsche, a silver Spyder. It was a risk car."

Just as his reviewers are caught in East-West stereotypes, Wittman is caught in the surfeit of images of popular culture. His alienation and ambivalence toward society, as well as his search for acceptance, are presented vividly in the idiom and images of the post-Beat years in California.

# Techniques/Literary Precedents

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book is an unusual book in terms of both its narrative technique and its rich variety and odd mixture of images and allusions. It slides from objective description to interior monologue without warning or explanation. Allusions to literature, movies, and other aspects of popular culture cover a wide spectrum, William Shakespeare to Gary Snyder, Europa to Nabokov's Lolita (1955). The entire novel is a mix of logical narrative, stream of consciousness, non sequiturs, and a cascade of imagery, often for pages, drawn from sources as diverse as Chinese legends and Charlie Chaplin movies. The whirl of words and images, which seem to tumble over themselves, is both riveting and exhausting; readers may feel they are being flung from the ferris wheel to the roller coaster in Kingston's verbal carnival. Although at times disorienting, the sudden shifts in tone, point of view, imagery, and allusion ultimately provide a kaleidoscopic view of the diverse nature of modern society. Like George Seurat's Pointillist paintings, Kingston's novel must be viewed as a whole. She deliberately breaks conventional patterns and thwarts expectations. In Kingston's hands the novel is an elastic form which she stretches to suit her purposes.

Early twentieth-century writers provided a powerful example for defying the expected. Henry James, James Joyce, and William Faulkner broke with literary convention by refusing to be bound by a single, limited point of view. Each redefined and broadened the novelist's scope. The vivid language and antiromantic pose of the Beat writers of the 1950s, especially Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, can be felt throughout Kingston's book. But Wittman's attempts to romanticize the anger and antiestablishment views of the Beat writers betrays deeper feelings; his self-conscious detachment often highlights his desire for acceptance.

Perhaps the most useful literary progenitor is the protagonist's namesake, Walt Whitman, whose poetry embraces all aspects of American life and culture in language that is vivid, graphic, sensual, and imaginative.

Anger, irony, passion, pity, and wonder are all part of Whitman's America.

In its rich variety of images, unconventional subject matter, and strong sexual overtones, his poetry provides a model for Kingston's protagonist. Like the poet, Wittman Ah Sing wants to sing a "Song of Myself" that celebrates his individuality and ties him firmly into the American community.

# Themes

## Ethnicity

Wittman Ah Sing is both more quintessentially American, and more Chinese, than his reader is. An overarching theme of Kingston's work is that the two are compatible. Wittman, as a Chinese American, is both 100% American and 100% imbued with his own distinctive brand of Chinese culture, honed by five generations in America. When Wittman insists his play is not "East meets West," as approving critics insist, but "West meets West" he is inviting the reader to redefine their ethnically limited version of what constitutes an American to include the traditions and culture of many races.

As an American, Wittman abhors his father's cheapness, Judy Louis's plainness, and the Chinese propensity to bring bundles and boxes of fragrant food on journeys and pretend the delicious aroma is coming from someone else's luggage. As a person of Chinese ancestry, Wittman longs to be accepted for all these qualities, plus his skin color, the shape of his eyes and toes.

Although the novel deals extensively with racial slurs and ethnic stereotyping, only two actual incidents of prejudice are portrayed in the novel. The first is Wittman's painful memory of not being cast in the lead role in his high school senior play, although he had earned the honor. The second is an ambiguous event, where businessmen Wittman can barely hear, seem to tell a joke that ends, "Every Mexican has one" in an expensive restaurant. Wittman interprets the joke as an ethnic slur, with the punch line "Every Chinaman has one," changed at the last minute. Wittman angrily confronts the men and is thrown out of the restaurant.

Wittman resents ethnic stereotypes when other people apply them to him, yet he is constantly engaging in such stereotyping himself. He thinks of his wide-spaced toes, his mother's over protectiveness, his father's cheapness and an elderly Chinese lady's propensity to keep young Chinese men busy, as typically Chinese. Wittman deplores Judy Louis as typical of a plain Chinese girl on the bus, bringing take-out from Chinatown back to her parents. He sees traveling with aromatic food as distinctively Chinese behavior. In fact, because the novel cleaves so closely to Wittman's thoughts and perceptions, virtually all the stereotyping and prejudice within the novel come from Wittman. Kingston may be using this tactic to imply that in a prejudiced society, we invariably absorb negative stereotypes. These internalized stereotypes become far more corrosive and dangerous, and far more difficult to avoid, than external prejudices.

## Pop Culture

Kingston uses a plethora of icons of American pop culture to illustrate how firmly rooted in American culture Wittman is, despite his knowledge of and appreciation for Chinese

culture, especially Chinese theater, classical and modern Chinese Literature and Chinese myth. It must be noted that Kingston's work encompasses the entire Western cannon as being part of American culture in this sense. Educated at Berkley, Wittman is thoroughly versed in the classics, from Aristotle to Shakespeare to LeRoi Jones. As someone who is 100% American, Wittman's knowledge of American culture is encyclopedic, from the writings of Rudyard Kipling, to Father Junipero Serra, the Jesuit founder of California's missions, to Presidents Truman and Lincoln, Marilyn Monroe, King Kong and Captain Marvel. An English literature major at Berkley, Wittman is familiar with Rimbaud, Samuel Pepys, and Shakespeare. He's also a fan of Rilke.

Often Wittman disagrees with the images portrayed in American pop culture, especially the images of the Chinese and other ethnic groups. He finds subservient Chinese characters like Hop Sing, the Cartwright's loyal servant on the TV show Ponderosa, highly offensive. Wittman insists in the monologue closing his show that American culture tries to foist a slave complex, and a suicide complex, on Chinese people. He insists that his audience resist. Wittman also objects to Chinese actresses like Nanci Lee perpetually playing only Chinese prostitutes or Chinese peasants. He wonders why Portia or Cassandra cannot happen to be Oriental. Wittman also objects to Hollywood's use of actors like Lon Chaney playing Chinese characters and Jerry Lewis ridiculing them. He accurately predicts that when the U.S. loses the Vietnam war, suddenly images of Oriental people with blood on their faces, or blowing up, will become very popular.

## Myth

Wittman's versions of traditional Chinese myths are uniquely his own. Following the ancient Chinese art of storytelling, Wittman shifts the meaning of the myths slightly to conform to his audience, and the morals or themes he wants to convey. His retellings reflect his heritage as a fifth-generation Chinese American, although they are loosely based on characters from classical Chinese works such as the Romance of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, a 14th century historical novel by Luo Guanzhong. Many of Wittman's stories relate more to kung-fu movies and anti-war sit-ins than to traditional Chinese mythos.

The women in Kingston's novel hope that by transforming themselves into women warriors, they will be liberated. Kingston herself clearly disagrees, and suggests that they will be truly free of the military-industrial complex when women reject all war, refusing to roll bandages, shoot guns, work in arms factories or serve coffee and donuts to soldiers. After the chaotic three-day play, Wittman is transformed into a pacifist, when he sees that the mightiest warriors have been defeated.

Many of Wittman's myths have to do with the triumph of art and narrative over the military-industrial complex. A central argument of the novel is that art can, or at least should be able to, defeat materialism, racism and war. This is an ethos typical of Berkley in the 1960s, passionately espoused by Kingston, as well as many war protestors. *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book's* uniqueness lies in Kingston's choice of

typically Chinese metaphors and literary devices to illustrate this point, perfectly intertwining Wittman's Chinese and American halves. While Wittman, only one year out of Berkley, may be confused about reconciling Chinese myth and American popular culture, Kingston never is.

# Style

## Point of View

Wittman's point of view is the most essential element of *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book*. Typically, authors and critics reduce novels to those that are plot-driven and those that are character-driven. In the spirit of experimental novelists such as James Joyce, Kingston has created a unique, demanding novel that is point-of-view-driven.

The plot is merely a framework for the revelation of the universe, as filtered through Wittman's fertile consciousness. Much the same effect could have been achieved had Wittman never left his apartment, with the entire novel occurring within his head. Characters and events are merely a foil for the revelation of Wittman's thoughts and personality. By illustrating the rich and varied imagery available to Wittman because of his dual cultural heritage, Kingston makes a strong argument that ethnicity is a tremendous asset, and an essential part of the American experience.

An occasional passage includes an alternate point of view, as when after they make love the reader sees Wittman from Tasa's point of view. At the end of several chapters, the point of view is broken with the distinct, dispassionate and soothing voice of a narrator, who usually introduces the following chapter with the briefest encapsulation. At the end of Chapter 1: Linguists and Contenders, the narrator says, " Our monkey man will live - he parties, he plays - though unemployed. To see how he does it, go on to the next chapter." This narrator's voice is notably absent at the end of Chapters 3, 4 and 5, where it would interfere with the increasing pace of the narrative.

## Setting

The novel is set primarily in San Francisco in 1963, with many recognizable landmarks including Golden Gate Park, the Golden Gate Bridge, Muni busses, Coit Tower, Sutro's and the Palace of Fine Arts. The narrative is laced with compelling descriptions of these locations including the hippies in Golden Gate Park, one of whom sells Wittman a peek through an empty toilet paper roll and then calls Wittman, arrayed in his Brooks Brothers suit, a "hippie dippy." Although Wittman lives in Chinatown and returns to it several times during the novel, there is no description offered. Perhaps to Wittman, Chinatown is as familiar as his own refrigerator, and no more remarkable.

Wittman and Tasa travel to his hometown of Sacramento to see his mother and father, to Reno in an attempt to locate Wittman's missing Popo or grandmother, and back to San Francisco. At the California border, transporting fruit across the state lines is illegal.

When Tasa is asked if they carry any fruit, she proves a worthy consort for the King of Monkeys by replying, "only Juicy Fruit."

Wittman is a recent graduate of the University of California at Berkley, near San Francisco, and Berkley is metaphorically the center of the novel, although none of the action actually takes place there. Nanci Lee, Lance, Wittman and several minor characters are Berkley graduates. At Berkley, Wittman has developed his opposition to the Vietnam war, his abhorrence for materialism, and his faith in community as a way to overcome the military-industrial complex.

## Language and Meaning

The kaleidoscope is an apt metaphor for Hong Kinsington's novel. Often, a sentence is followed by a second sentence that restates the same basic principal, including an allusion to literature, pop culture or Chinese myth. The second statement gives greater focus to the first, but it also shifts the meaning slightly, as a kaleidoscope creates beautiful new patterns with even the smallest turn.

There are far too many literary allusions and references to popular culture for any one reader to grasp in Kingston's novel. Wittman's thoughts are a montage of movies, books, plays, Chinese myth, songs, theater, and his own imagination. His thoughts frequently take flight into pages-long images or sagas that may be retellings of Chinese myths, Wittman's own writings, or simply flights of fantasy. In his role as eternal trickster/hero, Wittman often indulges in erudite puns, such as in Chapter 3, when he refers to himself as an "Agoraphobic on Market Street, ha ha." Agora is, of course, the Greek word for market. The title itself, *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book*, is a triple pun on the saga of the King of the Monkey's journey to bring the Buddhist sutra to China from India, the 1960s drug culture, or LSD trips, and the King of the Monkey's role as Master of Trickery.

In order to fully decipher all the layers of meaning entwined in the novel, the reader would need to be a Chinese American expert on Chinese mythology, American literature, Chinese literature, American popular culture and Chinese theater. Whitman constantly rings changes on these icons, often forming them into symbols of the anti-war movement. The very richness and variety of the cultural world Wittman inhabits is central to Kingston's message, that ethnic identity adds to, not detracts from, the American experience.

## Structure

The plot of *Tripmaster Monkey, His Fake Book* is actually the least important part of the novel. The work is so complex, interwoven with Wittman's writings, imagings and storytelling, so multi-layered with American popular culture, ethnic stereotype, Chinese

and American cultural icons and Chinese myth, that it is difficult for even the most alert reader to be certain of actual events. Indeed, the discrete but overlapping layers of meaning, allusions and references within the narrative, and the compelling nature of Wittman's storytelling in the ancient Chinese tradition, are the story.

The novel is divided into nine chapters, most of which are named with puns for the participants of the story. The novel departs from simple objective scene for pages at a time as Wittman engages in the time-honored Chinese tradition of storytelling. Indeed, although Wittman proclaims himself both a poet and a playwright, his plays are nothing more than simple outlines or treatments, from which the actors improvise. Wittman's primary gift is storytelling, at which he excels. In the Chinese tradition, Wittman tailors the story to the audience and situation. The three different oral versions of Wittman's play are completely different from each other, and from the play's ultimate improvisational format. The reader is the receiver of long, complex narrative in the form of dreams, writing, verbal stories, harangues, amusing anecdotes, history, grievances, and the recitation of the play itself.

# Quotes

"Here we are, Walt Whitman's 'classless society' of 'everyone who could read or be read to.' Will one of these listening passengers please write to the City Council and suggest that there always be a reader on this route? Wittman has begun a someday tradition that may lead to a job as a reader riding the railroads throughout the West." Chapter 1, pg. 9

"People who have gone to college - people their age with their attee-tood - well, there are reasons -- people who wear black turtleneck sweaters have no place. You don't easily come home, come back to Chinatown, where they give you stink-eye and call you a saang-hs', a whisker-growing man. Beatnik." Chapter 1, pg. 11

"'U.S.S. Coral Sea is coming into port. I know some guys on it.' She'd [Louise] said that already. This was where he came in. Very short loop. He vowed (again) never to repeat himself." Chapter 2, pg. 63

"The dumb part of himself that eats Fritos and goes to movies was avidly interested in race, a topic unworthy of a great mind. Low-karma shit. Babytalk. Stuck at A,B,C, can't get to Q. Race - a stupid soul-narrowing topic, like women's rights, like sociology, easy for low-I.Q. people to feel like they're thinking. Stunted and runted at a low level of inquiry, stuck at worm. All right, then his grade-point average was low (because of doing too many life things), he's the only Chinese-American of his generation not in grad school, he'll shovel shit." Chapter 3, pg. 75

"Unfortunately for peace on Earth, the listening ladies were appeased, and Lance had run out of plowshare ideas. Nanci and Tasa and Sunny and Judy thought that if they were allowed to play war women, they were liberated. The time of peace women, who will not roll bandages or serve coffee and doughnuts or rivet airplanes or man battleships or shoot guns at strangers, does not begin tonight." Chapter 4, pg. 148

"A dog jumped on him. 'Down, Queenie. Behave.' Said Auntie Jadine, its owner. 'Where are you manners, Queenie?' Those who usually spoke Chinese talked to the yapperdog in English. 'Down, Queenie. Come heah.' They spoke English to him and to the dog. American animals." Chapter 5, pg. 179

"'Wit Man has come to see his momma,' explained the aunties, one to another. 'Good boy. Big boy now.' Clack clack clack. A racket of clack clack clack [playing mah jong]. 'All grow up. College grad, haw, Wit Man?' Nobody asked it he were a doctor or an engineer yet. How tactful. Not asking about work at all." Chapter 5, pg. 179

"'When?' Asked Wittman. 'When do we meet again? How about tomorrow everyday nighttime I bring the troupe? And grand-opening night be Tenth Month, thirty-first day. Guai Night. Hawk Guai Night.' Imitation of Ghosts Night. Scare the Ghosts Night. Hallowe-en. 'Call a meeting for our play, okay? Take a vote. Okay? Okay.'" Chapter 6, pg. 262

"'I think, Ma, that there are people who know how to prefer old bodies. Good thing too, else we're going to be lonely most of our time.'" Chapter 7, pg. 269.

"Black and white boys are chanting, 'Ching chong chinaman sitting on a fence, trying to make a dollar out of fifty cents,' caterwauling the vowels and honking the 'n's,' slurring us. The kung fu guys chase them, and they run like the cowards they are." Chapter 8, pg. 300

"Of course, Wittman Ah Sing didn't really burn down the Association house and the theater. It was an illusion of fire. Good monkey. He kept control of the explosives, and of his arsonist's delight in flames. He wasn't crazy; he was a monkey. What's crazy is the idea that revolutionaries must shoot and bomb and kill, that revolution is the same as war." Chapter 9, pg. 305

" I'm one of the American Ah Sings. Probably there are no Ah Sings in China. You may laugh behind my family's back, that we keep the Ah and think it means something. I know it's just a sound. A vocative that goes in front of everyone's names. Ah Smith, Ah Jones. Everyone has an ah, only our family writes ours down. In that Ah, you can hear we had an ancestor who left a country where the language has sounds that don't mean anything - la and ma and wa - like music. Alone and illiterate, he went where not one other Chinese was. Nobody to set him straight." Chapter 9, pg. 307

"Dear American monkey, don't be afraid. Here, let us tweak your ear, and kiss your other ear." Chapter 9, pg. 340

# Key Questions

Fans of Kingston's use of fable and myth in contemporary settings will enjoy discussing her utilization of this technique in Tripmaster. The irony of Wittman's name will lead members of the discussion group into a comparison of the novel's main character with his American poet namesake. Individuals may find lively discussion regarding the theme of writing in general and how such creative activity works to form a frame for Kingston's work.

1. Compare and contrast Wittman's American aspects of personality with his Oriental aspects of personality.

2. In your opinion, how successful is Wittman's assimilation into the American culture? Conversely, how successful is his attempt to escape from his Oriental heritage?

3. What is the overall message regarding culture which Kingston wants her reader to carry away from this novel?

4. Discuss the symbolism in the book's title.

5. Discuss the effects upon the storytelling on the shifts in narrative point of view.

6. Make a list of all the allusions to occidental culture, such as of its writers, movies, etc., that you note in the novel. How do these allusions add to the theme of cultural mores?

7. Why or why don't you find Witmann's internal dialogues successful in helping to define his character?

8. In your opinion, does the main character ever answer his self-imposed questions regarding his cultural identity? Find the scene which best illustrates this self-discovery.

9. Which minor characters are most important to Wittman's story, and why?

10. Discuss the success or failure of Kingston's novel to honestly embrace the difficulties encountered in the adoption of a foreign culture as one's own.

# Topics for Discussion

What are some of the negative racial stereotypes about the Chinese people that Wittman objects to?

What stereotypes about Chinese people does Wittman himself hold?

In your opinion, are stereotypes and prejudice more dangerous when they come from within or without? Why?

What provokes Wittman's confrontation of the businessmen in the restaurant? What assumptions does Wittman make about the businessmen? In your opinion, was Wittman's behavior justified?

How does Wittman view Judy Louis, the plain Chinese girl on the bus? Does he want to be seen with her?

Who are "the winners of the party?" How does one become a party winner?

Lance Q was born at Tanforan, a relocation center where American citizens of Japanese Ancestry were forced to live in horse stalls during World War II. In your opinion, was this treatment fair? Could something like this happen, today?

Why does Wittman retain the meaningless syllable Ah in his last name, Ah Sing?

Does Wittman consider himself American or Chinese? Do you agree with him? Why or why not?

# Related Titles

Although in many ways it is very different in tone and technique from her earlier books, Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book continues Kingston's quest to explore what is unique about the American experience. The voice is different but the restless probing, the questioning, the humor, the pain, and the anger are similar. Like Kingston's autobiographies, her novel explores the values and norms of American society through the literature, legends, idioms, and parables of another culture. Such a juxtaposition requires a creative use of language and sudden shifts in point of view, which may be unsettling for readers expecting the flow of a conventional novel.

The novel succeeds, but on its own terms. The Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book lacks the structure provided by the autobiographical approach, as well as some of the immediacy and authority of the first-person perspective. Yet the rich imagery and the radical shifts from literary allusion to street jive ultimately result in revealing the confusion, anger and the idealism of a young man during an unsettled period of both his life and that of his country.

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