

Life, Writing, and Peace
—**Reading Maxine Hong Kingston's**
The Fifth Book of Peace

Te-Hsing Shan

Institute of European and American Studies, Academia Sinica
No. 128, Sec. 2, Academia Rd., Taipei 11529, Taiwan
E-mail: thshan@sinica.edu.tw

Abstract

Unlike her former works, Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Fifth Book of Peace* received little attention. This is unthinkable for a writer who has been hailed as *the* most often taught writer living in the US. One of the main reasons is that critics do not know how to cope with this "weird" text. Nor do they know how to respond to the author's urging her fellow countrymen to face the US collective traumas, especially the Vietnam War. This paper tries to approach this intriguing text from the perspective of life writing. Part I points out the negligence of this book, refutes some serious misunderstandings, and offers "life writing" as a critical approach. Part II places this book in the context of Kingston's writing career and life's trajectory and highlights that "peace" has always been her major concern. Part III argues that whereas the 1991 Berkeley-Oakland fire destroyed the manuscript of her *Fourth Book of Peace* along with her house, this "baptism of fire" generated an empathy which enabled her to better understand the fellow sufferers of the world, especially veterans. Part IV deals with the subjects of trauma narrative and indicates how Kingston combines her writing expertise with the Buddhist mindfulness expounded by Thich Nhat Hanh to lead the Veterans Writing Workshop. And Part V stresses how Kingston and her writing community, by combining life, writing, and peace, create new lives both personally and collectively.

Key Words: Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Fifth Book of Peace*, peace, trauma, life writing