

Essay: China Men by Maxine Hong Kingston

There are, occasionally, people who are born out-of-place and out-of-time, but nevertheless are burdened with a sense of responsibility to the antiquated system in which they live. Such people are lost between two worlds: The world that they are living in and the world that they were meant for. They are left without a way to fulfill their unique destiny. This is the predicament of "the father" in Maxine Hong Kingston's China Men. I find the character, BaBa, an intriguing individual, and I wish to gain a better understanding of who he is.

From the moment of BaBa's birth, he was considered different from his brothers. Because this baby was thin and frail, the parents believed he was destined to be a scholar. So, as he grew up, he was raised as an "outsider", a scholar among peasants and a privileged child among his brothers. His mother kept him close to her while the other three boys either played outside or did farming chores. BaBa was her favorite of the four boys, "She loved him so much, she licked the snot from his nose" (17).

BaBa's life of solitary study created estrangement from his three brothers, who taunted him as he studied. His special talent for gambling drove a deeper wedge between them:

BaBa was also very good at gambling, but he won so often that his brothers would not play with him. . . So instead of gambling. . . BaBa "hummed" poems. (23)

His unique, solitary childhood and training to become a scholar caused further alienation when he was a young man. At fourteen, BaBa took the Imperial Examinations—the focus of all his studying. He didn't win top honors, but BaBa wasn't concerned because he would be able to take the exams again. Unfortunately, the Imperial Examinations were cancelled shortly after BaBa took them. He would never be able to take them again. As a result, he became a young adolescent without a future. He had not prepared to be a peasant farmer. He was appointed the village teacher because of his standings in the examinations, but this was the most he could hope for.

So, all that BaBa had trained for was suddenly useless to him. This must have been an enormous blow. After a lifetime of study, now there was no longer a place for him in society. Teaching young peasant children turned out to be a nightmare for him. He had studied in isolation from other children and naively assumed his young students would be equally enthusiastic about learning. He was unprepared for their ignorance and disinterest in learning. And he misjudged their capacity for comprehending complex thought patterns. This was, after all, routine for him.

BaBa, then, was a young man without a future in China. His family ties were weak because of his preferential treatment over his brothers and his separation from them. His ties to his homeland were minimal because of the frightening political climate then, which was especially threatening to young men. A scholastic future was hopeless now that the Examinations were cancelled. He was young, married with two small children, and had a job he despised. Talk of the Gold Mountain, then, was especially appealing to him. It was his only option to change his circumstances.

I don't believe BaBa's desire of coming to America was about making money, as it was for most others who came. For him, it was more an escape from a mental prison and a static future in China. He wasn't comfortable with the peasant mentality. The author explained about his delight when he first saw the older scholars at the Imperial Examinations, "They were a different race from the splay-fingered village men, whose most imaginative talk was about the Gold Mountain" (25).

BaBa was unique among the Chinese immigrants because he had a cultured sophistication. His tastes were more refined than most others (including American). What he found in New York was, in part, an identity. He appeared to enjoy western ways and dress. He dressed impeccably, learned polite manners, went to school to learn English, and didn't hesitate to venture out into social establishments with the Americans. In fact, he seemed to be particularly enamored with American women (indicated by his experiences at the dance halls).

For fifteen years BaBa (Ed, the name he used in New York) lived a bachelor's life in New York with his three friends. But his days of freedom came to an end with the arrival of his wife. "Her arrival ended Ed's independent life. She stopped him from reading while eating" (72). This is no doubt a turning point in his life. Though he demanded she become westernized before coming to America by getting an education at a western college ["He did not want an ignorant villager for his American wife" (68)], she proved an unwanted link to his past. Mentally, she always remained Chinese. Despite her education in a western university, she retained the scolding, nagging ways common of Chinese wives. There was a large chasm between their personalities.

BaBa's gregarious, optimistic ways collided head on with MaMa's. He apparently never talked about bad experiences of his past. She didn't seem to stop talking about them. The first things she talked about, after not seeing him for fifteen years, were complaints about the trip over and the hard work she had to do in China, etc. (69). His responses were, "Don't worry any more. That's over now. . . Never mind now, that's all over now" (69).

Very soon after MaMa came over, she asked, "When do you think we'll go back to China? Do you think we'll go back to China?" (71). She was a constant reminder of a link he wanted to sever. The authors say of him, "You say with the few words and the silences: No stories. No past. No China. . . You only look and talk Chinese. There are no photos of you in Chinese clothes nor against Chinese landscapes" (14). But because of his link to China through his wife, he could not become the American he had tried to become while in New York. He could be neither American nor Chinese.

The gambling house, I believe, was an important connection that BaBa needed. Though he worked long hours, it was his one link to what he loved most: intellectual stimulation. His wife did not provide this. The author explains that BaBa would read English to his wife but, "My mother forgot what she learned from one reading to the next. . . She couldn't make out ducks, cats, and mice in American cartoons either" (247). She didn't seem to have an interest in assimilating. His children did not provide intellectual stimulation either, and he no longer had close friends to provide it.

The gambling house gave BaBa a sense of importance and power, in addition to camaraderie and stimulation. The loss of it, then, probably left within him an enormous vacuum inside. It was the last refuge for his craving for contact with culture. The deep depression BaBa experienced, then, after the loss of the gambling house was, as I see it, the consequence of that and various other alienating events in his life. He was probably close to forty at that point and realized that his dreams would never come true. I don't think his silence was unusual. After all, who did he have to talk to? Certainly not his wife. And his Chinese friends had been less than true.

BaBa's silence was defensible escape. Lesser men would have left their families or have taken their own lives. BaBa's retreat was to repair a tortured intellect, one who had no place in time or space. Because of his childhood experiences, he was an individual out of place on both continents. He was a modern man without a genre; a poet without a language; a well without an echo.