

CHINESE AMERICAN HEROES

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Chinese Americans in Literature

Chinese Americans in Literature: August 21, 1875 commemorates the birthday of Winnifred Eaton, the first popular novel writer of Chinese American descent.

Since the 19th Century, much of the literature of Chinese Americans have dealt with issues of identity, assimilation, family, race, and sexism within the context of living as a perpetual foreigner in America.

The Chinese started immigrating in numbers to America around the time of the California Gold Rush in 1849. Immigration slowed to a trickle when the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was enacted but grew to a torrent after passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 removed all restrictions on immigration by national origin. As a result, Chinese American literature came in waves following the rhythm created by immigration. Most of the early literature by Chinese Americans in the 19th Century was written in Chinese and English. The material mostly focused on combating American perceptions of the “Yellow Peril” and the stereotypes the early Chinese Americans faced. After passage of the Exclusion Act there was a dearth of literature, a notable exception being Winnifred Eaton and her sister, Edith Maude Eaton. Winnifred went by the pen name Onoto Watanna, passing herself off as Japanese American, and Edith was popularly known as Sui Sin Far. In actual fact, the sisters were biracial, Chinese and English. Winnifred was the first person of Chinese descent to publish her novel *Mrs. Nume of Japan* in 1899. Edith published *Mrs. Spring Fragrance*, a collection of her short stories in 1912. Edith Maude Eaton is worth noting for being one of the first to write about life as a Chinese woman in America and show the discrimination and irrational prejudice that she faced. Her reflections on being caught between two different worlds, Chinese and white, are particularly poignant.

Chinese American literature did not make another appearance again until Jade Snow Wong published a book that also recorded her experiences as a Chinese American woman. She wrote two autobiographies, *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) and *No Chinese Stranger* (1975). The first autobiography, which became a Book of the Month Club selection and bestseller in 1950, described her struggle as part of an immigrant family and to become an assimilated American.

The first Chinese American man to break through in literature was C.Y. Lee. He dabbled in journalism before penning one of the most popular Chinese American novels, *The Flower Drum Song* in 1957. This quickly went on to become the hit Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *Flower Drum Song* that opened in 1958. The story dealt with generational conflicts and old Chinese traditions clashing with new American ones. The book and musical launched a film in 1961 by the same

name. The film broke major boundaries by featuring an all-Asian American cast. This accomplishment was a rare triple success for transcending major racial boundaries as a successful novel, Broadway musical, and Hollywood movie.

Chinese American literature took on a new direction during the civil rights era. The Women's Movement and the Vietnam War changed the nation's perception of the Asian "outsider." Ethnic literature became more accepted for its themes of changing the status quo and going against the powers of authority. The themes of identity and assimilation were still there but with even more of an emphasis on gender. Maxine Hong Kingston tackled these issues on a personal level with the bestselling novels, *The Woman Warrior* (1976) and *China Men* (1980). *The Woman Warrior* is considered an American literary classic. Maxine mixed fantasy and semi-biographical elements into her memoirs to tell of her experiences growing up Chinese in America. She explored the difficulties she had bridging the gap between herself and her ancestors and the impossibility of reconciling her Chinese identity with her American lifestyle. *China Men* went on to be another success as well, winning the 1981 National Book Award. In this book, Maxine explores the other side and writes about the men in her family and their struggles.

Amy Tan's most popular novel, *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) centered around four female characters and their mothers. Despite the book's clear Chinese cultural references, the generational conflicts, gender, and family issues discussed in the story are universal. *The Joy Luck Club* was on *The New York Times* best seller list for nine months, won the 1989 National Book Award, and spawned a hit movie by the same name. Many Americans started to see Chinese American literature as not literature about foreigners but literature about Americans.

There are a few Chinese American writers who have criticized Maxine Hong Kingston and Amy Tan. Frank Chin, who wrote *Donald Duk*, *The Chickencoop Chinaman*, and co-edited two popular anthologies of Asian American literature, accused them of perpetuating ethnic and gender stereotypes by highlighting American values and beliefs at the expense of Chinese ones and for portraying Chinese men as one-sided brutal traditionalists.

Chinese American literature has come a long way since the 19th Century. The material has reflected the changing times and progress Chinese Americans have made in America. Chinese Americans started off writing about the struggle to live in a foreign land and gradually spoke of their struggles to belong in America, balancing a Chinese identity and an American one. Eventually we learned that our struggles are not purely Chinese but have become part of the fabric of America as well.

For more information about Chinese American heroes, please visit the Chinese American Heroes website at www.chineseamericanheroes.org