



The Interpretation of Appeal and Quest for Peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace*

Yixuan Xia

Qingdao University, Qingdao 266071, Shandong, China

DOI: 10.32629/asc.v5i4.2676

Abstract: The title *The Fifth Book of Peace* clearly highlights the theme of peace, which aligns with the contemporary emphasis on peace ideals and the needs for healing the trauma left by war. The paper first outlines the creation background and context of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, then explains how the author appeals to peace through the hesitancy in defining and understanding peace. Finally, the paper thoroughly explores the author Maxine Kingston's practical pathways to seeking peace, aiming to align with contemporary trends and provide new perspectives and referential significance for understanding the value and practice of peace.

Keywords: *The Fifth Book of Peace*; Maxine Kingston; peace; appeal; quest

1. Introduction

Chinese-American writer Maxine Kingston (1940-) has gradually become one of the most influential contemporary authors through her successive publications of *The Woman Warrior* (1976), *China Men* (1980), and *Tripmaster Monkey* (1989). As a work about peace, *The Fifth Book of Peace* (2004) has been the focus of scholarly discussion since its publication. The international academic community has concentrated on its resonances with *The Woman Warrior and China Men* (McDaniel 2011), while domestic scholars have focused on its fictional techniques (Li 2021) and trauma narrative (Wang 2016). Compared with Maxine Kingston's other works, *The Fifth Book of Peace* has not received extensive academic attention, and there is a lack of systematic discussion on the keyword "peace" that pervades the book.

The New York Times Book Review remarked, "Strange and scarred, stitched together from fragments" (Schulman 2003). This paper focuses on the theme of peace that runs through the chapters, supplemented by the philosophical theories of Badiou on "subject" and "event" mentioned by Maxine Kingston in *The Fifth Book of Peace*. It emphasizes Maxine Kingston's understanding, study, and exploration of peace concepts. Narrowly, this paper is a review of the creation process of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, including the reasons, process, and practical methods of Maxine Kingston's writing. Broadly, this paper has positive referential significance for remembering historical memory, calling for peace, and building communities.

2. The Causes for Writing *The Fifth Book of Peace*

At the beginning of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Maxine Kingston mentions, "Subjective truth is a process, and its completion awaits the future" (14). This emphasizes the subjective understanding of the concept of peace and the influence of individual cognition. French philosopher Badiou, in *Philosophy for Militants* (2012), extends the definition of the "subject", suggesting that the subject remains faithful to a particular event, yet the existence of this event is uncertain (334). Therefore, remaining faithful to the process of peace and exploring how to transform situations based on the insights gained from peace, thereby allowing the beneficiaries of peace to transcend appearances and form a relatively subjective truth of peace, is precisely the original intention behind Maxine Kingston's creation of *The Fifth Book of Peace*.

However, Maxine Kingston addresses how to achieve inner peace and world peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, asserting that the concept of peace is "constantly changing with the context and significance of the times" (79). Her expression of peace ideals has thus remained hesitant and indecisive, pointing out the current lack of sufficient interest in peace among contemporary people and emphasizing that a common concept of peace is crucial for the life and development of today's era. Throughout *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Maxine Kingston's views on the essence of peace highly resemble those of Thich Nhat Hanh, "Peace is based on respect for life, on a spirit of reverence for life, We must respect not only human life but also the lives of animals, vegetables, and minerals" (193).

This lack of respect for life is one of the causes behind Maxine Kingston's creation of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. In fact, the Oakland-Berkeley fire acted as a catalyst for her reflection on life and plays a significant role in the book, as she views any act of infringement or harm to life as violence, with violence being an expression of war and the antithesis of peace.

Due to this fire, she rushed from her father's funeral to the fire scene, losing a substantial amount of completed peace manuscripts. Badiou states in *Being and Event* (2005) that "a person often explores the truth of an event by relating elements of their situation to the event" (115). Maxine Kingston exemplifies this viewpoint by basing her further study of peace on the recognition of the value of all life. When Badiou explores how an event shapes a new subject, Maxine Kingston begins to treat people differently and gains a new understanding of reality.

After this realization, Maxine Kingston has imperceptibly transitioned from the identity of a woman warrior. She is no longer as a "Mulan fighting male enemies" (112), but a lover of peace. In her most successful work, *The Woman Warrior*, the admiration for Mulan is evident throughout. However, in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, understanding replaces combat. She inadvertently connects elements of her life — the death of her father and the Oakland-Berkeley fire, "We shouldn't have rushed Dad, Dad had only three days on this side of Heaven, so he set fire to Oakland and Berkeley, and I lost my manuscript" (129). Maxine Kingston's judgment aligns with Badiou's assertion that "fire is a message from God against war" (129). After recognizing her error of merely striving for the appearance of peace. She begins to focus on transcending superficial reality, such as where to start reconciling peace, how to distinguish the appearance and essence of peace, and she realizes that even with her father's cremation, she can still perceive the continuation of his life.

The second cause for writing *The Fifth Book of Peace* stems from Maxine Kingston's frustrated experience searching for "The Third Book of Peace" in China and the United States. Initially, before searching for "The Third Book of Peace" in China, she did not realize the limitations of her situation and internal cognition — discovering the loss of the manuscript might be a starting point to recreate a new book of peace. For Maxine Kingston, creating *The Fifth Book of Peace* with insights from "The Third Book of Peace" and Chinese ancestors' peace perspectives would be a significant leap. She found that the Chinese could help her better understand peace-building issues, as China was striving for global peace development in the 1990s. Maxine Kingston's frustrating search in China, contrary to her expectations, forced her to rethink her situation. Her experience in China exposed the lack of contemporary peace concepts and made her realize that peace concepts change over time. She needed not the lost early manuscript of "The Third Book of Peace" but a completely new work about peace in the present era.

The third cause for writing *The Fifth Book of Peace* is the disagreement between Maxine Kingston and her mother Yong Lan, over fake immigration documents. This disagreement led Maxine Kingston to realize her ability to expand her earlier understanding of peace and her situation, becoming the spiritual essence and direct motivation for creating "The Third Book of Peace". Yong Lan's fake immigration documents helped her daughter see the transience of peace concepts and the inseparability of peace methods — Yong Lan's attitude reflected her old understanding of the essence of peace and an outdated way of achieving peace.

The American wartime situation and tax-free benefits attracted Yong Lan's generation of Chinese to America. However, she criticized her daughter for exposing how Chinese immigrants came to America illegally, jeopardizing the immigration process and the livelihood of Chinese immigrants in America. "This showed that Yong Lan was essentially ignoring the changes and development in America and China" (60). The Chinese tradition of respecting the defeated meant that the defeated were respected to the point of downplaying their defeats. Yong Lan's old peace model was like this, making her daughter, who sought a new way of peace, "Yong Lan's only enemy" (55). This personal animosity, triggered by individual egocentrism and the lack of a reasonable way to achieve peace, became relevant.

3. The appeal of Peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace*

The sequence of Maxine Kingston's causes for creation aligns to some extent with the chapter order of *The Fifth Book of Peace*. The collective disregard for life is the starting point of Maxine Kingston's creation. The frustrating experience of seeking manuscripts made it impossible for her to turn back to outdated peace concepts. With her retreat path cut off, the disagreement with her mother, Yong Lan, clarified the essence of writing *The Fifth Book of Peace* — calling for peace concepts and exploring methods in the new era. Upon realizing this issue, Maxine Kingston quickly found the term "peace" to be extremely complex to explain, leading to her own hesitation.

Badiou and Žižek, in *Philosophy in the Present*, pointed out, "The study of a subject or the investigation of a concept of an event is not necessarily linear. In the process of connecting more and more elements of a situation with practice, the subject has the opportunity to correct its initial understanding of the event" (319). During Maxine Kingston's repeated reshaping of her peace understanding while facing unexpected difficulties, she better grasped her situation and enhanced her understanding of peace. Ultimately, she realized that world and novel integration could be achieved by discovering or rewriting events.

Maxine Kingston knew that her insufficient understanding of peace itself would make the effects of her actions unpre-

dictable. If people disagreed with her belief in an effective peace concept and the close connection between peace concepts and peace methods, the consequences would be more complex. In the third chapter “Water”, she created and understood the characters in the book — Ah Sing, Tana, and Mario—and set a series of “treasures and obstacles” to guide them to some extent (62). She allowed them to correct the hesitation process of peace on her behalf in the book.

The first correction lies in valuing seemingly trivial but indispensable things or events in life. These necessities of life can shape a subconscious sense of peace. By affirming and transcending these necessities, appearances can be revealed, and true peace achieved. This correction originated from Ah Sing’s dream. In the dream, the usual constraints of space and time no longer applied. When Ah Sing woke up, he realized he had argued with his wife, Tana, in the dream but found it difficult to describe clearly. “I wish you could dream the same dream as me” (96). Ah Sing hoped to solve problems together with Tana in the dream. However, when Tana replied that she couldn’t be responsible for or empathize with his dream, Ah Sing realized he must achieve mutual understanding while they were both awake, so they could find peace in their dreams. It is precisely this insight that allowed Ah Sing to distinguish between the reality of waking life and the subconscious “dream” as a life necessity. Recognizing and valuing small peaceful events can prevent conflicts.

The second correction involves showing respect to people in an objective position. Maxine Kingston had the Ah Sing family hosted by a group of locals in Hawaii, who treated them as family and invited them to a feast. However, the feast was “arranged according to Asian traditions” (163). The hosts, in a subjective position, invited guests into their homes to show respect, but this plan could only fail because it respected the hosts at the expense of the guests, even if unintentionally. True peace between the two requires genuine respect. This aligns with the balance and opposition of rational and irrational. Maintaining the essence of this structure provides an opportunity to understand peace.

Maxine Kingston’s third point of correction is the use of a common language. This common language is not necessarily the same but one that people of different races and nations can understand. Although this correction is the most abstract, Maxine Kingston still places it on Ah Sing — in the night when the Ah Sing family attended a Hawaiian party, they heard a peaceful language from native Hawaiians. This language could “soothe breath and senses and even quiet the brain” (61). It turned out that the Samoans were singing, and the song’s lyrics belonged to a place without language barriers. Ah Sing felt he had “returned to a time without invitations but also without expulsions” (179). This is the power of a common language. Language can “develop and transform through production, creating new forces, new ideas, new ways of communication, and new needs” (Saussure 325).

Each chapter in *The Fifth Book of Peace* reasonably advances Maxine Kingston’s creative logic and mental journey. Maxine Kingston’s process of hesitation and the three forms of correction provide a reasonable foundation for writing the final chapter, “Earth”. Gaining experience in appealing to peace can infer the precise methods of exploring the path to peace — such as establishing writing workshops, intending to use practical practices to explore feasible ways to achieve peace, and healing trauma and helplessness caused by war.

4. The Quest of Peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace*

In the concluding section of *The Fifth Book of Peace*, Maxine Kingston emphasizes, “Children, everyone, during times of war, what you need to do is, in moments of destruction, create something” (109). Maxine Kingston deeply understands that calling on the public to explore peace itself is more important than any of her efforts, such as establishing writing workshops to heal trauma. Here, the public refers not only to Americans but to all humanity in a broader, communal sense.

Maxine Kingston places her hope for exploring the path to peace on peace-makers, expecting them to achieve inner peace through peaceful methods and to realize world peace through common peace concepts. Writing can serve as a model and method for exploring peace because it can involve different viewpoints. When disparate views among people occasionally align, a common perspective can be inferred. In Maxine Kingston’s view, writing is highly effective because it also aids in self-understanding and inner calm, helping writers capture fleeting peaceful thoughts hidden by appearances.

From the fourth chapter “Earth”, in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, it is clear that Maxine Kingston’s fundamental purpose in establishing a writing workshop is to seek to reshape her situation — a world filled with war and disaster. However, her approach is flexible. While affirming the peace concepts of Chinese ancestors such as Chuang Tzu and other recognized truths, she does not advocate rigidly seeking fixed concepts of peace or strategies to achieve peace. Maxine Kingston’s research and understanding of peace in *The Fifth Book of Peace* indicate her recognition of the necessity to continually reassess factors related to peace. This is a path to find peace thoughts and ways to achieve peace — establishing a writing workshop. This method of achieving peace allows her to respond to world changes and helps those who share her war trauma. Thus, interpreting how Maxine Kingston seeks a flexible way to achieve peace and her understanding of the nature of peace is valuable to those who, like her, care about peace and future possibilities.

Most members of the writing workshop are Vietnam War veterans. Maxine Kingston mentions in *The Fifth Book of Peace*, “The Vietnam War is the clearest source of anti-war sentiment” (227). With strong anti-war sentiments and the needs for trauma healing, the homogeneity of the workshop members poses a high difficulty for exploring a common peace concept. Therefore, Maxine Kingston’s writing workshop is divided into three detailed practices — exercise, meditation, and silence.

Regarding exercise practice, Maxine Kingston suggests that workshop members, including herself, write down painful memories. This writing exercise helps in dealing with chaotic traumatic memories through literary forms such as essays, stories, and poems, seeking the truth of peace. Workshop members gain a safe distance to communicate and express depression, allowing them to explore their past in a free and private space — on paper. The collective exercise practice not only clarifies the past but also aids in writing their dreams, making it possible to form a common peace concept. As an extension of exercise practice, according to *The Fifth Book of Peace*, “Recognizing each other’s perspectives among former enemies” (241), Maxine Kingston invites Vietnamese veterans to her veterans’ gatherings. This invitation indicates her recognition of the link between peace and the forgiveness of victims. However, this forgiveness comes unexpectedly easily, coupled with her hesitation about peace concepts, making it difficult to support her belief in the power of mutual understanding in later stages.

Regarding meditation practice, it stems from Maxine Kingston’s observation of the workshop members’ commitment to peace issues, helping them recognize how their identities are reconstructed. She turns meditation into a concretized language or text that can influence others, even collaborating with television stations to produce a documentary showing the members practicing various meditations. She calls on them to “use your other senses to understand the people around you” (271). Although these Vietnam War veterans have their “ranks and serial numbers” (261), Maxine Kingston constantly reminds them not to be deluded by their past identities. She guides members to redefine themselves through meditation practice. She tells forty-eight-year-old Mitchell, “You are only twenty because you have been writing for twenty years” (261). According to her logic and the experience sharing and discussions among workshop members, the workshop builds new peaceful subjectivities. New peace concepts are perceived and realized, leading to a new understanding of the truth about war events. These new subjectivities form an undefined part of society and can reshape it.

Silence practice is the last major component of the workshop. It is the silence of noise, helping members achieve mindfulness. Thich Nhat Hanh explains mindfulness as “keeping one consciously alive” (74). Maxine Kingston introduces this concept into *The Fifth Book of Peace* and further explains silence practice—“Belov’s mindfulness resonated with all who could hear, these invisible sound waves expanding outward, defining silence, temporarily surrounded by their own voices” (93). Members focus on whatever they are doing, even gaining keen insights into their surroundings, such as silent eating. In this practice, members abandon the usual way of perceiving reality, experiencing different realities through “hand crafts” and “body senses” (271).

Through the writing workshop, Maxine Kingston attempts to turn workshop members into peace-makers like herself. Deciding to explore the meaning of peace through fictional writing, she helps members focus on what they are doing, transcending their habitual ways of perceiving reality, viewing the world anew. Writing enables them to concentrate on practice, making some ideas acceptable and dim realities approachable. In today’s era, as individuals encounter each other on contemporary city streets and compete for living space and lifestyles, globalization is irreversible and undeniable. Therefore, a peace method based on mutual understanding must include means for different similar groups to reach mutual negotiation. Indeed, Maxine Kingston’s writing workshop forms a similar group—a peace-loving group.

5. Conclusion

In an interview, Maxine Kingston once endorsed Thoreau’s statement: “Human beings should have a broad living space” (341). However, the word “broad” also implies without boundaries. Essentially, *The Fifth Book of Peace* combines fiction and reality, using fictional characters to explore real peace, aiming to achieve a broad and open boundary. Under the development of the new era, the appeal and quest for peace have been ongoing and endless. Peace can shape many positive elements, including tranquility, strength, and trust. Only through continuous understanding and exploration of peace can the equal survival rights of people across borders be ensured, providing positive reference significance for constructing a global community today.

References

- [1] Badiou, Alain. *Being and Event*. Trans. Oliver Feltham. London: Continuum, 2005.
- [2] Badiou, Alain. *Philosophy for Militants*. London: Verso, 2012.

- [3] Badiou, Alain, Slavoj Žižek. *Philosophy in the Present*. Trans. Wu Guanjun. Beijing: Central Compilation and Translation Press, 2017.
- [4] Hornby, A.S. *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary* (8th Edition). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- [5] Kingston, Maxine. *The Fifth Book of Peace*. New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2004.
- [6] Kingston, Maxine. *The Woman Warrior*. London: Vintage Books, 1989.
- [7] Li, Hanyue. "Reality and Fiction: Trauma Writing in Tang Tingting's *The Fifth Peace Book*." *Journal of Lianyungang Teachers College*, vol. 2021, no. 6, 2021, pp. 39-44.
- [8] McDaniel, Nicole. "'Remaking the World' One Story at a Time in 'The Fifth Book of Peace' and 'Veterans of War, Veterans of Peace'". *MELUS*, vol. 36, no. 1, 2011, pp. 61-81.
- [9] Nhat Hanh, Thich. *The Miracle of Mindfulness*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.
- [10] Polly, Schulman. "Out of the Ashes: Maxine Hong Kingston's Memoir of Loss Incorporates Part of a Vanished Novel". *New York Times Book Review*, vol. 28, no. 1, 2003, pp. 7-10.
- [11] Saussure, Ferdinand de. *Course in General Linguistics*. Edited by Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye. Trans. Wade Baskin. New York: Philosophical Library, 1959.
- [12] Thoreau, David. *Civil Disobedience*. London: Penguin Books, 2012.
- [13] Wang, Rongrong. "Trauma Writing in Tang Tingting's *The Fifth Peace Book*." *Journal of Hefei University of Technology (Social Sciences Edition)*, vol. 2016, no. 3, 2016, pp. 54-59.