1. Maxine Hong Kingston suggests in the preface to the paperback edition that “it did not feel good to be a writer in a place that is not a writing culture, where written language is only a few hundred years old. The literary community in Hawai’i argues over who owns the myths and stories, whether the local language and writings should be exported to the Mainland, whether or not so-and-so is authentic, is Hawaiian” (xi-xii). Is it possible for one to write about a culture that is not “inherently” one’s own? Can one be an “outside” observer to culture and still be authentic? How does culture and tradition (in this case the non-writing tradition) grow and change because of outside influences? Are those influences authentic contributors to culture?

   i. “[He] said that if ‘us local kids’ don’t rite the Hawai’i novel, then ‘the outsider’ will come in and do it. I guiltily identified with this “outsider”…I felt scolded, a Captain Cook of literature, plundering the islands for metaphors, looting images, distorting the landscape with a mainland—a mainstream—viewpoint” (47).

2. Maxine Hong Kingston suggests that in order to separate herself from the division of Asian Pacific American authors, arguing as to whether or not one can write about traditions and customs that are not one’s birthright, she decided to write about her own personal experiences. She writes “personally, about myself and my family, about homesickness for California, and my upcoming high school reunion, about washing the dishes, teaching school, reading” (xii). Although she declares this book to be personal reflections, has she indeed separated herself from the culture and tradition surrounding her? Has she separated herself from the conflict she describes amongst the Asian Pacific American authors? What elements of Hawaii and culture are inscribed in her essays?

   i. “But though I did try to leaver her out, Hawai’i – people sing her and speak her as Spirit—made her way into these essays.” (xiii)

3. Kingston hints at the idea that unification can mean “the coming together of former enemies in peace. It is possible to heal history. It is possible to be one people living in harmony” (xiv). How is this theme of healing history and harmonic living portrayed in Hawai’i One Summer? How can we translate this theme to assist in our understanding of other worldly issues occurring at the time she wrote the essays as well as in present day?

   i. Vietnam War- need for peace
   ii. Current fighting, etc.

4. How does memory take form in this collection? Maxine Hong Kingston did not wait very long between writing an essay and its inspiration or actual event. How does this short lapse in time affect the storytelling? How do the prefaces affect our understanding of the events and the memory of the events? What does Kingston teach us about how memory works? What do we learn about the distinction between memory and interpretation or understanding?

5. Kingston raises an important question about self, society and belonging. Does one need to own land, be an owner of property, in order to belong on this planet? To take this concept one step
further, what stake can one have in society if one does not have a physical stake in the society’s presence and existence?

i. “Our First House”

6. How does one’s self image change throughout the years? Even if one acknowledges a past image of self, can that former image ever be erased or truly altered? When we go to reunions and events with people we “used to know” does that former persona continue to exist? How do we carry on and allow former selves to exist despite change and time and new experiences?

i. “My High School Reunion”

7. Kingston talks about the Vietnam War and the role of a pacifist in wartime. She talks about the aftermath of war as well and remarks that she likes complexities. How can we interpret her experiences during the Vietnam War to better understand current times? How can we learn from the past, share the memories of the past, to act today?

i. “War”

8. Why does Kingston write about mundane things like dishwashing? What does dishwashing tell us about life, or does it tell us anything? What does she mean when she writes “if I can solve dishwashing, I can solve life and suicide” (25). Are mundane tasks important in life, “a life-and–death matter, to be dealt with three times a day” (25)?

i. “One’s life has to be in an orderly phase to load and arrange the dishes inside the dishwasher” (22).

ii. “Paper plates are no solution. There are no paper pots and pans and spatulas and mixing bowls. The plates are the easiest part of dishwashing” (23).

iii. “I do enjoy washing other people’s dishes. I like the different dishes, different sink, different view out the window” (23).

9. In “A City Person Encountering Nature” Kingston suggests that “a new climate helps me to see nature” (37). How can this comment be translated into the study of culture and tradition?

10. In “Useful Education” Kingston talks about writing and creativity. She hints that the essay is “easy to write and easy to grade” (45). She tells her students that “form – the epic, the novel, drama, the various forms of poetry- is organic to the human body” (44). She says that essays stunt her creativity. What do her comments about form say about her own chosen form for Hawai‘i One Summer?

11. In “Strange Sightings” Kingston describes the visions that her son Joseph experiences. What do these sightings symbolize? When the visions and voices finally stop after he begins to wear a Thai medallion around his neck, Kingston says that “in a way it’s a shame to have him put his powers away, fold his wings, but those abilities are not needed in America in the twentieth century” (57). What does this comment say about contemporary American society? How are visions and voices and superstitions treated? Is Joseph better off without these “supernatural” experiences?
12. In “Lew Welch: An Appreciation” he is quoted as saying the “poetry has to be useful” (64). What does Maxine Hong Kingston say about the usefulness of poetry and writing? Both authors proscribe to the notion that when writing, the most important concern is accuracy (65). Can we interpret the accuracy of a poem or essay or other piece of writing if we are outsiders? How is that possible?

13. In “A Sea Worry” Kingston is angry that her students say that there are no words to describe the feeling of surfing. She argues that everything can be described and that one needs to work to find the words (67). Does this argument give you insight to the world of the writer? Why are words so important? If surfing is part of a tradition belonging to Hawai’i and Hawai’i is part of a non-written culture and tradition, must words be used to describe it? What are their purpose? Can we ever accurately insert words into a non-verbal culture and if we do, does that writing dilute or change the culture?