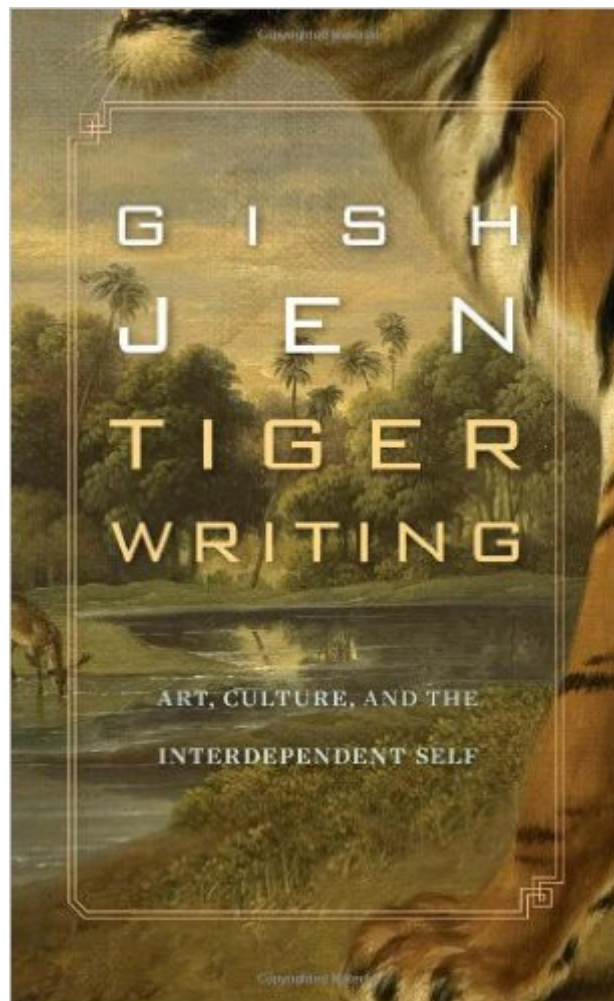


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# Tiger Writing: Art, Culture, And The Interdependent Self (The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures In The History Of American Civilization)



## Synopsis

For author Gish Jen, the daughter of Chinese immigrant parents, books were once an Outsiders' Guide to the Universe. But they were something more, too. Through her eclectic childhood reading, Jen stumbled onto a cultural phenomenon that would fuel her writing for decades to come: the profound difference in self-narration that underlies the gap often perceived between East and West. Drawing on a rich array of sources, from paintings to behavioral studies to her father's striking account of his childhood in China, this accessible book not only illuminates Jen's own development and celebrated work but also explores the aesthetic and psychic roots of the independent and interdependent self—each mode of selfhood yielding a distinct way of observing, remembering, and narrating the world. The novel, Jen writes, is fundamentally a Western form that values originality, authenticity, and the truth of individual experience. By contrast, Eastern narrative emphasizes morality, cultural continuity, the everyday, the recurrent. In its progress from a moving evocation of one writer's life to a convincing delineation of the forces that have shaped our experience for millennia, *Tiger Writing* radically shifts the way we understand ourselves and our art-making.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

I'm a big fan of Gish Jen's novels, all of which appear on my personal all-time-favorites-list. So, I was happy to see she had a new book coming out, but then, a bit deflated when I read that the book was the text of the annual Massey Lectures at Harvard, having to do with some aspect of

civilization--an academic piece, not another of her can't-put-this-book-down novels. While I have found her fiction to be 'smart' with insight into cultural issues, and the Asian-American experience, the things that have put Jen on my favorite author list are her wonderful prose, her LOL wit, her great characters, and just plain great story telling. So, not to dismiss more academic writing, but I didn't expect to meet another Ralph or Mona or Hattie in the pages of another great story, I expected...well, lectures. As a fan, of course I got the book anyway. And, yes, it is the text of lectures, with insight into East-West perspectives and their junction. But, rather than a text of esoteric facts, I found all of the things I love about Jen's fiction, plus more! What a great surprise!!!! I met another unforgettable character, Professor Norman Jen, not a person imagined in the author's mind, then revealed in the story, but Gish's own real life father. And a man no less engaging than the characters in her novels, in some aspects, even more so. I found the story telling I love in her novels-- but a real, non-fiction story germinated in her father's autobiography written when he was 85 years old, as well as other true to life ingredients. I found her prosaic writing, which makes me slow down & savor the words. Through those facets, this work gave me an accessible understanding of the East-West paradox, its reflection in art and literature, insight into Jen's own life and a new perspective to that enriches her fictional work that I have read previously, as well as another layer to consider in her future fictional work (hopefully...?) and that other authors as well.

Ordinarily, if I consider reading a compilation of academic lectures, I'm likely to think "Well, the medicine might be good for me, but it's not going to taste very good." I should have known better than to harbor any such doubts about a book written by Gish Jen, whose novels are not just profound and beautifully written, but extremely entertaining. *Tiger Writing* is all that and more. It starts with a fascinating discussion of the memoir written by Jen's Chinese father and how it illustrates the dramatically different experiences of "self" and "identity" in eastern and western cultures, goes on to describe a number of amazing social science and psychology experiments that help us understand how these differences develop and play out in life and art, and concludes with a brilliant application of these insights to some of her own work. As I read along, my own ideas, thoughts and reactions started popping up all over the place, which is exactly what I hope will happen when I pick up a book like this. And for all this stimulating medicine to come in a book that is so delightful and so charming was a special treat. To paraphrase Jen's quirky and eccentric father, every page deserves an A!

What a joy to read! Gish Jen writes with an ease and humor that makes her prose flow ... And this

book is no exception....In this book, Gish uses her exceptional writing talents to address the differences between East and West in identity, culture, and art. Often the most interesting observations and discoveries happen when an individual in one field decides to study another ... In that same sense a Chinese American, sitting on the cusp, is uniquely positioned to address the different perspectives and approaches of the East and the West. The author's begins with her own historical background and then (seemingly) effortlessly weaves her own astute observations, literary references, scientific studies, and a variety of other cultural and artistic examples into this wonderful often humorous tapestry. In this little book we learn a lot about Gish and a lot about ourselves ...

In *Tiger Writing*, a memoir of art, culture, and interdependent self, author Gish Jen said, "Culture is not fate; it only offers templates, which individuals can finally accept, reject, or modify, and do." Jen was born in the United States of immigrant parents who migrated from Yixing in Jiangsu province, west of Shanghai. The memoir is divided into three sections, which were presented as lectures at Massey Lectures in the History of American Civilization program at Harvard. It is a cultural memoir filled with beautiful passages of Chinese-American diaspora. In narrative format, the author showed the readers how American culture glorifies "independent," while Chinese culture is "interdependent." In the first section, her father's memoir was the primary focus. Unlike American memoirs, which are filled with details of personal affairs and private thoughts, Mr. Jen's focuses on things he saw and experienced, such as intriguing architectural and interior designs and where generations of family members received the character for their middle name. In the second section, Gish discussed the differences between European-Americans and Asian-Americans in terms of self portrayals. Individuals in the first group are more self-focused than those in the second group. In the third section, the author included critical analyses of the two cultures and how scientific studies and anecdotes from literary works made sense in the life of the author's -a novelist's. It's a memoir of diaspora unlike others, for it is also a vivid comparison of two cultures and the collision of two philosophies of self --independence and interdependence. In this memoir, readers can clearly sense Gish Jen's joy and anguish caught in the diaspora. Beautiful and clever.[]This review was originally published on BookReviewClub.com.

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