

On Discovery

By Maxine Hong Kingston

Once upon a time, a man, named Tang Ao, looking for the Gold Mountain, crossed an ocean, and came upon the Land of Women. The women immediately captured him not on guard against ladies. When they asked Tang Ao to come along, he followed; if he had had male companions, he would've winked over his shoulder.

STOP: Follow the instructions below and answer the following question in your notebook:

1. What kind of person does Tang Ao seem to be? (What does he think is going to happen with the women?)

- Highlight parts of the story that you have already read that reveal information about Tang Ao's attitude
- Write the words "Tang Ao's attitude" near those highlighted parts.
- Write your answer to the question on the notebook paper

"We have to prepare you to meet the queen," the women said. They locked him in a canopied apartment equipped with pots of makeup, mirrors, and a woman's clothes. "Let us help you off with your armour and boots," said the women. They slipped his coat off his shoulders, pulled it down his arms, and shackled his wrists behind him. The women who kneeled to take off his shoes chained his ankles together.

A door opened, and he expected to meet his match, but it was only two old women with sewing boxes in their hands. "The less you struggle, the less it'll hurt," one said, squinting a bright eye as she threaded her needle. Two captors sat on him while another held his head. He felt an old woman's dry fingers trace his ear; the long nail on her little finger scraped his neck. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Sewing your lips together," she joked, blackening needles in a candle flame. The ones who sat on him bounced with laughter. But the old women did not sew his lips together. They pulled his earlobes taut and jabbed a needle through each of them. They had to poke and probe before puncturing the layers of skin correctly, the hole in the front of the lobe in line with the one in back, the layers of skin sliding about so. They worked the needle through - a last jerk for the needle's wide eye ("needle's nose" in Chinese). They strung his raw flesh with silk threads; he could feel the fibres.

The women who sat on him turned to direct their attention to his feet. They bent his toes so far backward that his arched foot cracked. The old ladies squeezed each foot and broke many tiny bones along the sides. They gathered his toes, toes over and under one another like a knot of ginger root. Tang Ao wept with pain. As they wound the bandages tight and tighter around his feet, the women sang footbinding songs to distract him: "Use aloe for binding feet and not for scholars."

STOP: Follow the instructions below and answer the following question in your notebook:

2. What do you think the women are doing to him? Why would they do this?

- Highlight parts of the story that you have already read that reveal information about what the women are doing
- Write the words "women's motivation" near those highlighted parts.
- Write your answer to the question on the notebook paper

During the months of a season, they fed him on women's food: the tea was thick with white chrysanthemums and stirred the cool female winds inside his body; chicken wings made his hair shine; vinegar soup improved his womb. They drew the loops of thread through the scabs that grew daily over the holes in his earlobes. One day they inserted gold hoops. Every night they unbound his feet, but his veins had shrunk, and the blood pumping through them hurt so much, he begged to have his feet re-wrapped tight. They forced him to wash his used bandages, which were embroidered with flowers and smelled of rot and cheese. He hung the bandages up to dry, streamers that drooped and draped wall to wall. He felt embarrassed; the wrappings were like underwear, and they were his.

STOP: Follow the instructions below and answer the following question in your notebook:

3. How has Tang Ao changed by this point in the story?

- a. Highlight parts of the story that you have already read that reveal information about how Tang Ao has changed
- b. Write the word “changes” near those highlighted parts.
- c. Write your answer to the question on the notebook paper

One day his attendants changed his gold hoops to jade studs and strapped his feet to shoes that curved like bridges. They plucked out each hair on his face, powdered him white painted his eyebrows like a moth's wings, painted his cheeks and lips red. He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swivelled because of his shaped feet "She's pretty, don't you agree?" the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them.

STOP: Follow the instructions below and answer the following question in your notebook:

4. Nowhere in the story does Tang Ao seem to complain about what is happening to him. Why do you think this is?

- a. Highlight parts of the story that you have already read that reveal information about how Tang Ao feels about what has been done
- b. Write the words “Tang Ao’s feelings” near those highlighted parts.
- c. Write your answer to the question on the notebook paper

In the Women's Land there are no taxes and no wars. Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694 - 705), and some say earlier 45 than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America.

STOP: Follow the instructions below and answer the following question in your notebook:

5. The story is called “On Discovery.” What discovery does Tang Ao make?

- a. have already read that reveal information about Tang Ao’s discovery
- b. Write the words “Tang Ao’s discovery” near those highlighted parts.
- c. Write your answer to the question on the notebook paper