On Discovery Study Guide

On Discovery by Maxine Hong Kingston

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Introduction

"On Discovery" was first published in 1980 in Maxine Hong Kingston's second book, *China Men,* Along with another vignette, "On Fathers," "On Discovery," serves as a prologue to the family stories and histories contained within the volume. A blend of history, fiction, myth, and autobiography, *China Men* is a companion volume to Kingston's groundbreaking 1976 work, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts.* The story of a Chinese sojourner, or traveler, who makes several ironic discoveries in his search for an Idealized America called Gold Mountain, "On Discovery" was highly acclaimed, as was the rest of *China Men.* Nominated for the 1980 Pulitzer Prize, *China Men* won both the American Book Award and the National Critics Circle Award.

Born in Stockton, California to Chinese immigrants, Kingston often integrates autobiographical elements with Chinese myths and fictionalized history to explore cultural conflicts confronting Americans of Chinese descent. Her work draws upon several sources: the ordeals of the Chinese immigrants who endured exploitation as they labored on American railroads and plantations; the "talk-stones," or oral tales of mythic heroes and family histories told by her mother; and her own experiences as a first-generation American. *China Men* is an attempt to understand her silent father, who never spoke of the past, and to tell the story of what happened to him and other Chinese men who immigrated to America. "What I am doing in this new book is churning America," explained Kingston in a 1980 *New York Times Book Review* interview. Written as part fairy tale and part history, "On Discovery" not only foregrounds the discrimination that faced Kingston's father and his forebears in America, but it also hints at the complexities of American racism and Chinese cultural misogyny that would be explored throughout *China Men.*

Author Biography

Born on October 27, 1940, in Stockton, California, Maxine Hong Kingston is the daughter of Chinese immigrants. One of six children, Kingston was not supposed to be a writer at all: her mother wanted her to be an engineer. However, after a few semesters at the University of California at Berkeley, Kingston decided to major in English. She graduated from Berkeley in 1962 and taught English and mathematics to high school students before publishing her first book, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* in 1976. A blend of memory and family stories, fiction and personal experiences, myth and history, *The Woman Warrior* won the 1976 National Book Critics Circle Award for nonfiction and was included in *Time* magazine's top ten list of books for the year. In 1980 Kingston published *China Men,* which features "On Discovery" as its first story. *China Men* was nominated for the 1980 Pulitzer Prize and received the American Book Award and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Her 1989 novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book,* won a PEN West Award for Fiction. Kingston has also written *Hawaii One Summer:* 1978, a collection of essays and short stories about Hawaii (where she has lived for many years), as well as numerous essays, articles and short stones. Kingston has received many awards and honors; the State of Hawaii recently declared her to be a living treasure.

Kingston's work draws from a variety of sources and genres-Chinese and American literature and myth, contemporary feminism, family stories, and folktales-to explore the experiences of Chinese American men and women in America. Because her books are interdisciplinary-they contain history, fiction, biography and myth-they are taught in history, women's studies, ethnic studies, and American culture classes as well as in English literature classes. A major theme of all of Kingston's work is churning America, and each of her books demonstrate that American history contains many different stories. In *Tripmaster Monkey,* Kingston's protagonist, Wittman Ah Sing (named after Walt Whitman and his famous poem, "I Sing America"), creates not the Great American Novel but the Great American Play.

Kingston is married to Earll Kingston, an actor, and has a son, Joseph, a musician. She currently resides in California, where she is a Chancellor's Distinguished Professor at the University of California at Berkeley. When asked by *SSFS* to comment on the story "On Discovery," she stated that it "is but the introduction and prologue to an epic novel, *China Men.* Anything mysterious and strange that you don't get should become clear to you when you read the rest of the book." Further commenting on the novel, she said that through it, "I mean to claim America for myself. If America belongs to the 'discoverers' who got here first, Chinese explorers got here a thousand years before Columbus." Lastly, she noted: "I mean 'On Discovery' to be a feminist story."

Plot Summary

"On Discovery" begins with the words of a fairy tale: "once upon a time." The story opens with a Chinese explorer named Tang Ao, crossing an ocean in search of the Gold Mountain Gold Mountain is what Chinese Immigrants called the United States because of the gold discovered in California in 1849. Instead of Gold Mountain, Tang Ao discovers the Land of Women. Because he does not expect women to capture him, they easily take him prisoner.

The women lock him in a women's bedroom filled with canopies, makeup, mirrors, and women's clothing. They tell Tang Ao that he needs to get ready to meet the Queen. After they take off his coat, some women shackle his wrists behind him. The women then kneel before him to remove his boots and chain his ankles together.

When the door opens, Tang Ao expects the Queen to appear. Instead, he finds two old women with sewing boxes who tell him not to resist. Two other women sit on him to prevent his moving, and another holds his head while one old woman traces his ear, scraping her fingernail on his neck. He asks what they are doing. As she sterilizes the needle in a candle flame, the old woman jokes that she will sew his lips together. The women all laugh as the old woman pierces his ears using needle and silk thread. Although the women do not literally sew Tang Ao' s lips together, after that moment he does not speak.

But the ritual is not over. The women bind his feet, bending his toes back and cracking the arches of each foot. Then they squeeze his feet, breaking many little bones along the sides. They wrap his toes so tightly that Tang Ao weeps with pain. The old women seem not to notice; they wind the bandages tighter and tighter around his feet and try to distract him by singing.

The women keep Tang Ao prisoner for several months. During this time they feed him "women's food." Every day, the women put new thread through the scabs that have grown in his earlobes the previous night until one day they put gold hoop earrings in his ears. Every night, the women remove the bandages with which they have bound his feet, but Tang Ao begs to leave the bandages on. Because his veins have shrunk and the blood flowing through them throbs unbearably, Tang Ao now prefers to have his feet wrapped tightly in the bandages. The final indignity comes when the women force Tang Ao to wash his own bandages. Embroidered with flowers, the bandages are attractive on the outside, but they smell of rotting, moldy cheese from his decaying and infected feet. Tang Ao is embarrassed because the dirty bandages seem like soiled underwear.

One day, the women put Jade studs in his ears. They unwrap his bandages and strap his feet to shoes that "curve like bridges." They pluck every hair from his face, powder his face white, and paint eyebrows, lips and cheeks. Finally, Tang Ao is ready to serve a meal at the Queen's court. His hips sway and his shoulders swivel because of his deformed feet. Everyone at court marvels at how beautiful he is. They especially admire

his feet as he bends to place their dishes before them. The diners call Tang Ao "she": "She's pretty, don't you agree?"

The narrator adds a postscript to the preceding "fairy tale," explaining that in the Land of Women there are no taxes or wars. The narrator says that sources disagree about when Tang Ao discovered the Land of Women. Some scholars say that the Land of Women was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), but others claim that it was much earlier than that, A.D. 441. The narrator also suggests that the Land of Women was in North America

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

A man named Tang Ao is searching alone for the "Golden Mountain". After crossing an ocean, he finds himself in the "Land of Women." A small group of women capture him easily, and he goes with them willingly, thinking that he has nothing to fear from them because they are women and that he may seduce them.

The women lock him up in, not in a cell, but in a room full of make-up and women's clothing. They tell him that they must prepare him to meet the queen, that his armor, coat, and boots must be removed; they shackle his wrists and ankles. Two old women walk into the room with sewing boxes and tell him that the less he struggles, the less it will hurt. While two women sit on him and a third holds his head, one of the old women prepares a needle and silken thread. She jokes that she is going to sew his lips together, but instead pierces Tang Ao's ears with the needle and threads the silk though the holes, leaving it hanging down. The women then bind his feet, breaking the bones of the feet and wrap them in tight bandages so that they become small and pointed. As they do this, they sing an old foot-binding song.

The women continue feminizing Tang Ao; for several months they feed him traditional "women's food" like tea with white chrysanthemum, that is supposed to "stir the cool female winds inside his body," chicken wings for his hair, and vinegar soup for his "womb." They put gold hoops in his pierced ears, and continue the foot-binding process, which causes so much damage to his feet, that he is more comfortable with them bound than unwrapped. He cries out for them to re-bind his feet. His bandages, which are embroidered with flowers, stink. The women make him wash them and hang them to dry, Tang Ao is embarrassed because they remind him of underwear, but he never protests or tries to escape.

The women complete the transformation by putting jade studs in Tang Ao's ears and arched shoes on his feet, removing all the hair from his face and covering it with make-up. They take him to the queen's court, and he serves dinner to a group of diners who are not identified by title or by gender. The diners admire the "woman" who serves them, and gaze lustily at Tang Ao's now tiny feet.

The story ends with a scholarly note saying that there are no taxes or wars in the "Land of Women." Scholars disagree over whether the land was first discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (AD 694-705), or earlier in AD 441, somewhere in North America.

Analysis

This is the first story in a collection of stories (*China Men*) about several generations of Chinese men who immigrated to America. In the story, a solitary male adventurer sets out alone in search of adventure and fortune and instead is captured and turned into a

woman and a servant. He is searching for the "Gold Mountain," another name for America among Chinese immigrants. It and suggests wealth and prosperity and is also a phallic symbol. The man crosses an ocean, which stands for the Pacific Ocean, but instead of finding a place of prosperity and masculine power, he arrives in the "Land of Women.". Tang Ao's experience and his degraded status, is a metaphor for the experience of the Chinese who immigrated to America.

The women easily capture Tang Ao because he is not "on guard against the ladies." When he goes with them, it is with the expectation that he will seduce one of them, or find himself in a romantic situation. In reality, it is he who is seduced by the women, because he allows himself to be captured by them. Immigrants were often seduced into coming to America by false promises and high expectations created the western men who wanted to exploit the Chinese for labor. The immigrants agreed to go, thinking that they would get a better end of the bargain, just as Tang Ao expects to seduce the women. In the end, the roles are reversed.

From the perspective of the immigrant experience, Tang Ao's transformation can be interpreted in more than one way. It is seen as a negative comment on the position in which immigrants found themselves in America. It can also be read as a statement about the process of discovery that immigration causes. Tang Ao discovers what it is like to be a woman, to be something completely different from what he had been before. He experiences it as a gradual process, being stripped of everything that would once have identified him - from his clothing down to the way his body looks and moves. He retains part of the core of his being even though he becomes a woman, although he loses everything else. There is a high price to be paid for discovery, and it can cost one one's identity.

The loss of Tang Ao's manhood is foreshadowed by the removal of his armor and clothing.. These are the outer signs of his manhood that the women strip away, as they later strip away more fundamental parts of his manhood such as his facial hair and walking mannerism. As a man, Tang Ao was able to go on a quest alone; as a woman with bound feet, his ability to walk is even more restricted than that of a modern woman wearing high heels. The women tell him that they are going to sew his lips together, and though they are joking, they are serious. By turning him into a woman, they take away his ability to speak in the same way that they take away his ability to travel independently. When he becomes feminized, he becomes silent and a servant. The story is also ambivalent about whether Tang Ao is tortured for trespassing. In one sense, his body is mutilated, his bones broken, his clothing stolen, his identity replaced; in another sense, he experiences what is typical treatment of women in his homeland.

According to the note at the end of the story, there are no wars or taxes in the "Land of Women," the message here is ambiguous, because it is presented as a place where men are either absent, effeminate or powerless. The message is that a female-dominated society seems more peaceful and well organized than a male dominated one. However, since the women still follow the rituals of foot-binding, make-up, special foods and clothes that would be normal in a male-dominated society, they can't be described as completely independent from men. The narrator doesn't specify whether

there are men in the "Land of Women" or not. All of the characters except for Tang Ao are women. It could be that all of the inhabitants are either women or men who have been transformed in the same way that Tang Ao is transformed; on the other hand, the diners at the end of the story seem to react to Tang Ao's appearance like men normally would. They are described as "licking their lips" at the sight of his "dainty feet." It is unclear if they are men, or if they are men behaving like women.

It is important to note that Tang Ao is not simply made to look like a woman, but like a beautiful woman of high social standing. Jade was highly valued, and so the earrings that he is given would have been expensive. His facial hair isn't simply removed so that he seems more feminine - the women make his face up in a stylized manner, and his eyebrows are painted on like "moth's wings." Most importantly, his feet are bound. Because of the crippling effect of foot binding, and the length of time that it takes (the women begin the process immediately after Tang Ao is captured).) Only women from families wealthy enough to employ servants had bound feet. Since the women who capture Tang Ao and carry out his transformation aren't described as having bound feet, and since they wouldn't be able to move easily enough to capture and subdue a man if their feet were bound, they were probably "normal" women. Since Tang Ao was captured, and since, at the end of the story he is acting as a servant, we can't say that his position is better than that of the other women. He is not only transformed into a woman, but also into a trophy to be displayed by or for the queen.

The final paragraph of the story mentions a scholarly debate about the discovery of the "Land of Women." This serves two functions. It tells the reader that the story is not supposed to be interpreted as a completely fictional event, but that some of it meant to be taken as true. Though the story begins with, "Once upon a time," it is also supported with "evidence" that the setting, if not the characters, is real. The final scholarly note gives the story a feeling of magic realism, which is maintained in the stories that follow , and are based more upon verifiable history. Thus, the story not only established the theme of the book, but it sets the tone as well.

The scholarly note also provides more evidence that Kingston intends the story to be read with reference to the Chinese discovery of immigration to America. In addition to the search for the "Gold Mountain" and the crossing of the ocean, the last paragraph tells the reader that the "Land of Women" was likely located somewhere in North America. If located there, then America was discovered by the Chinese long before Columbus sailed, and thus the relationship between the two is much older and deeper than the reader might expect.. The process of discovery has been going on for centuries, and Europeans have no special claim to it.

Characters

Tang Ao

The main character of "On Discovery" is Tang Ao, a Chinese explorer in search of riches in the Gold Mountain (America). Instead of finding the Gold Mountain, however, he finds the Land of Women, where he is captured and made into a woman. His feet are bound, his ears pierced, his facial hair plucked, and his face painted. Through his transformation, Tang Ao learns that one can "discover" new lands and ideas without conquering. The source of "On Discovery" is an early nineteenth-century Chinese novel written by Li Ruzhen called *Flowers in the Mirror* In the original version, Tang Ao is a scholar who travels the world in order to find and save twelve flower fairies who have been banished from the Heavenly Court.

Narrator

The narrator of "On Discovery" is, like many of Kingston's narrators, a trickster who plays jokes on the reader by being elusive about the genre and narrative of the story. A trickster narrator allows the author to tell several versions of a story at once, thereby questioning the authority of the canonical, or commonly accepted, versions of a tale. The narrator begins "On Discovery" with the words of a fairy tale: "Once upon a time." The narrator then tells the fantastic story of how Tang Ao, an explorer, is captured in the Land of Women, all the while encouraging the reader to interpret the story as a fairy tale.

At the end of the story, however, the narrator suddenly suggests that the story is a true history by presenting the reader with "facts" in guise of dates, rulers, and geographic locations. Perhaps the Land of Women is not mythical after all, the narrator says: "Some scholars say that the country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America." The narrator suggests a historical basis to the narrative, but presents readers with several historical choices-is the narrative a fairy tale, or did it take place under the reign of the Empress Wu, or did it take place in the fifth century? Who are those who say one thing over the other, and how can readers tell which source to believe? The Empress Wu is a historical Chinese ruler; however, in an essay in *College Literature,* Ning Yu notes that "two of the three dates that Kingston cites here are inaccurate, and deliberately so." The authority and reliability of Kingston's trickster narrator is questionable, and the narrator's tricks lead the reader to question the authenticity of the story.

The Women

An unknown number of women from the Land of Women capture, strip, shackle, pierce, pluck, paint, and bind Tang Ao. Kingston does not make it clear how many women remake Tang Ao in their image, but her descriptions of their activities convey that the

women are strong, independent, and cheerful. When one woman jokes that she means to sew Tang Ao's lips together, the other women laugh, and they try to calm Tang Ao's suffering by singing traditional footbinding songs. The women are quite pleased with the result of their labor; they declare that Tang Ao is very pretty.

Themes

Discovery

An important theme of "On Discovery" is discovery. Kingston has said she wrote the story to claim America for herself, for her father, and for her Chinese-American forebears. Tang Ao discovers the Land of Women just as Christopher Columbus discovered America, but significantly earlier. In Tang Ao's discovery, however, no conquest is made. Rather, his discovery is a result of a shift in perspective. At the beginning of the story, he winks at the women who capture him, but by the story's end he has become one of them. Discovery is an important theme in Kingston's work: for Kingston, writing itself is an act of discovery, and certainly she "discovers" new things in her Chinese and American source material that readers might not have seen before.

The American Dream

One of the most important themes in "On Discovery" is the elusiveness of the American Dream for the Chinese immigrants who came to build the railroads and work the cane fields of the United States. Seeking wealth and social mobility, the Chinese immigrants in America found instead institutionalized racism that prohibited them from becoming American citizens. As Kingston explained in "The Laws" section of *China Men* although the Fourteenth Amendment, adopted in 1868, stipulated that naturalized Americans bad the same rights as native-born Americans, the Nationality Act of 1870 said that only whites and "African aliens" could apply for U.S. citizenship. Since the Chinese immigrants were not white, they could not apply for citizenships and thus were not eligible for same rights as citizens. Laws in California prevented the Chinese immigrants from owning property or businesses. In 1882, the U.S. Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which banned Chinese laborers from entering the country. In 1924, Congress explicitly excluded Chinese women from entering the United States. It was not until 1943, when the U.S. and China signed a treaty of alliance against the Japanese, that the Exclusion Act of 1882 was repealed.

Expecting great riches in his quest for the Gold Mountain, Tang Ao finds himself instead in emasculated servitude. He is hobbled in his mobility by the foot binding just as the Chinese immigrants to America were by anti-Chinese laws. Chinese immigrant men, like Tang Ao, were forced to do "women's work" that white Americans did not want to do. Just as Tang Ao must wash his dirty bandages and serve the wealthy people at the Queen's court, many Chinese immigrants, shut out of other kinds of employment by discriminatory laws, worked long hours in laundries and restaurants for low wages.

Sex Roles and Sexism

In "On Discovery," there is a reversal of stereotypical sex roles. As a man, Tang Ao travels the world seeking treasure. In the Land of Women, he is conquered and made

into a woman whose feet are bound and who is locked in a beautiful room. As a woman, Tang Ao finds himself in great pain; he cannot move without help, and he must perform menial tasks he finds embarrassing. Yet the diners at the Queen's court declare his feet beautiful as he bends to serve them. The torture that Tang Ao undergoes in the Land of Women is actually the process of the traditional foot-binding of Chinese noblewomen. Historically, to have one's feet bound was a sign of nobility and beauty, and men admired the effect on women. But for Tang Ao in the Land of Women, he finds the ritual to be the worst sort of torture imaginable.

Constricted by female traditions, Tang Ao is no less strong or smart than he is as a man. The women capture him effortlessly, and they use Tang Ao's own assumptions about women to do so. The women are strong: they sit on him, pierce his ears, and break the little bones in his feet even though he cries out in pain. Women themselves are not weak; they only appear that way because of the social roles forced upon them, as Tang Ao-a discoverer-appears weak once those social roles are forced on him.

At the beginning of the story, Tang Ao does not take women seriously. In "On Discovery," Kingston writes, "[I]f he had male companions, he would've winked over his shoulder" when the women ask him to follow them. To him, the women are sexual objects who exist for his amusement. By the end of the story, however, Tang Ao's perspective has changed. As a prisoner in the Land of Women, he comes to understand how it feels to be a woman in a sexist culture.

Identity and Transformation

In "On Discovery" Tang Ao is transformed from a man into a woman. As a prisoner in the Land of Woman, Tang Ao's very identity changes. Through this act of transformation, Kingston challenges readers' understanding of the dichotomies of male versus female and victim versus victimizer. Although these ideas are often understood to be opposites, Kingston suggests that they are not. In "On Discovery," Tang Ao is simultaneously a man and a woman. Biologically, he is a man; socially, he is a woman. He is both a victim (the women take him hostage) and a victimizer (historically, Chinese men have inflicted these painful constrictions on women).

Through her fable, Kingston suggests that the position occupied by Chinese men in America re sembles the position held by Chinese women in traditional China. Segregated in Chinatowns for much of the last two centuries, Americans of Chinese descent came, like Tang Ao, to occupy a "woman's" role in U.S. society, doing work that white men would not do In both nineteenth- and twentieth-century American stereotypes of Asians, Asian-American men are depicted as being "womanly" and not masculine.

But Kingston goes further. Having been transformed into a woman, Tang Ao now has a different understanding of how his own culture treats women. Through the transformation of Tang Ao, Kingston suggests that all forms of oppression-including racism and sexism-are linked, and that to eradicate oppression, people must understand the ways in which they themselves have participated the oppression of

others. Through Tang Ao's transformation (and throughout *China Men* and *The Woman Warrior),* Kingston demonstrates that men and women are not so different from each other and that the battles against racism and sexism must be fought together at the same time.

Silence and Speech

Although only touched upon in "On Discovery," an important theme in all Kingston's work, including *China Men* is the difficulty and necessity of putting silenced stones into speech. Historically, Chinese Americans have been silenced by discrimination and fear of deportation; their stones do not appear in conventional history books.

In "On Discovery," the women joke that they will sew Tang Ao's lips together. A few pages later, in the story "The Father from China," Kingston writes of her father's "wordless male screams" and "silences." The principle motivation for writing *China Men,* Kingston tells the reader, is to speak her father's stories and to get her father to speak for himself: "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'in mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong."

Style

Setting

The setting of "On Discovery" is the Land of Women, which is, the narrator suggests, North America. The Land of Women is run by women, and there are no taxes or wars. The dates, too, are difficult to pin down: the narrator initially places the story in a timeless setting of long ago in a place far away, but by the end, the narrator is fairly certain that the events of this story occurred either during the reign of the real-life Empress Wu (A.D. 694705) or in the fifth century; in either case, long before Christopher Columbus sailed to America.

Point of View and Narration

"On Discovery" is narrated in the third person. The narrator presents a limited point of view, staying on the surface of the story and not allowing readers access to Tang Ao's or the women's unspoken thoughts. Tang Ao therefore remains a flat, or undeveloped, character about whom the readers do not learn much.

The narrator is an unreliable narrator in that it is difficult for readers to know whether or not to believe what the narrator is saying The narrator says that "On Discovery" is both fairy tale and fact, fantastic yet true. The form of the story, too, mixes genres, beginning as a fairy tale and ending as a historical document. The subject of "On Discovery" is clearly epic-the discovery of anew land by a brave Chinese adventurer-but the narrator's treatment of the subject is decidedly not

Parody and Allegory

While "On Discovery," like *China Men* mixes genres, it most relies heavily on both parody and allegory. A parody imitates the style and features of a "serious" story in order to make fun of it. Parody often makes fun of something that is usually taken quite seriously. In her story, Kingston parodies the myth of the discovery of America.

An allegory is a narrative in which the plot, characters, and sometimes setting not only tell a coherent story on the surface, but also tell a second, hidden story. There are two types of allegory: historical/political allegory and the allegory of ideas. Kingston's story (and much of her other work) incorporate both. "On Discovery" functions as a historical allegory as it outlines in broad strokes many Chinese immigrants' experiences in America: they arrive hoping for importance and wealth but find mostly poverty and discrimination. Through a number of discriminatory laws, the Chinese in America were emasculated, which is Just one metaphorical step away from being made into women.

"On Discovery" is also an allegory of Ideas. Like Lemuel Gulliver in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* who travels to outlandish lands only to discover the disgusting habits

and foibles of the British in each, Tang Ao travels to the Land of Women only to discover, in grotesque parody, the sexist practices of the Chinese nobility. "On Discovery" is an allegory of ideas in which Kingston suggests that men of Chinese descent in America need to recognize the ways in which their treatment in America mirrors their own treatment of women.

By having Tang Ao, the allegorical Chinese man in . America, systematically tortured by being made into a woman, Kingston argues against both racist and sexist oppression.

Symbolism and Metaphors

Because "On Discovery" is an allegory, almost every aspect of it has some symbolic significance. Allegorical symbols pair a particular instance with a general concept, so that the character of Tang Ao represents all the Chinese sojourners who went to the Gold Mountain (America) in search of wealth, the foot binding symbolizes the ways in which the Chinese in America were systematically hobbled and emasculated, the soiled bandages that Tang Ao is forced to wash suggest the kind of degrading and devalued labor the Chinese in America performed.

An important metaphor in "On Discovery" is that of discovery. In the story, Kingston claims America for herself and the Chinese immigrants who first found it long before Columbus. For Kingston, discovery does not involve conquest but a change in perspective that allows for new understanding. Another important metaphor that is more present elsewhere in Kingston's work is silence

The women threaten to sew up Tang Ao's lips; the men in Kingston's book do not tell their stories readily Also, the stories of the Chinese Americans who settled here have been silent far too long.

Poetic License

In her work, Kingston often employs Chinese myths, family stories, history, and her own experience in her narratives, including "On Discovery." Rather than tell the stories the way they have always been told, however, she adapts them for her own purposes, a technique called poetic license. Poetic license applies to the ways in which poets and writers are permitted to change the *literal* truth in order to convey a metaphorical or deeper truth. In "On Discovery," she borrows from Li Ru-zhen's nineteenth century novel, but she does not stay true to the original story line. In Kingston's version, Tang Ao is not explicitly a scholar, in Li's version, it is Tang Ao's brother who goes exploring; Li's explorer was searching to rescue fairy women, whereas in Kingston's, the explorer is seeking gold and is captured by women.

Kingston's sense of poetic license is not limited to adapting written stories; she often adapts her own experiences or family stories to get to a larger truth. In a 1980 *New York Times Book Review* interview, Kingston told Timothy Pfaff: "I wrote from stories I remembered because I knew if I asked them again, they would just tell me another

version. Besides, I feel that what is remembered is very important. The mind selects out images and facts that have a certain significance. "

Postmodernism

With its unreliable, trickster narrator and its blending of history, fiction and myth, Kingston's work, including "On Discovery," is an example of post-modern fiction. Post-modern literature like Kingston's blends literary genres such as the fairy tale and the historical narrative. It also plays with cultural and stylistic levels; although not very prominent in "On Discovery," Kingston often uses phrasing reminiscent of the oral tradition, suggested by the "once upon a time" of the story's opening, with the high culture of classical Chinese myths. Post-modern literature, like Kingston's, resists easy categorization. Readers wonder whether it is fiction or fact, biography or myth.

Much post-modern literature attempts to subvert accepted modes of thought and experience. Kingston in particular attempts to "break the silence" and put into words histories and experiences that have seldom made it into canonical literature or history. Kingston explains in her 1980 *New York Times Book Review* interview that through *China Men* she "is claiming America . . . in story after story Chi nese-American people are claiming America."

Historical Context

The Gold Mountain and the Chinese in America

Though "On Discovery" takes place in the timeless domain of legends and myths, it can be useful to explore the history of Chinese in the United States to see parallels between history and Kingston's writing. The California Gold Rush of 1849 attracted immigrants from allover the world. Three Chinese immigrated to California in 1848; by 1851, there were 25,000; and by 1884, fully half of the farm laborers in California were of Chinese ancestry. The phrase *Kim Sum* or "Gold Mountain," which the Chinese called (and still call) America, summarized their dreams of striking it rich and returning home to China. Despite their dreams of wealth and their desire to return home drenched in gold, many of these Chinese travelers to America stayed and made America their home

Laws in the nineteenth century made sure that the Chinese in America would have inferior status compared to other immigrant groups. Although the Burlingame Treaty of 1868 permitted free immigration of Chinese people to the United States, it explicitly forbade Chinese immigrants the right to become American citizens. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the Geary Act of 1892 soon followed. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned the entrance of Chinese laborers into the United States, both skilled and unskilled, for ten years; and the Geary Act of 1892 extended the 1882 Exclusion Act for another ten years. In 1904, the Chinese Exclusion Acts were extended indefinitely and made to include Hawaii and the Philippines as well as the continental United States.

Exclusionism was a U.S. policy at both the state and national levels well into the twentieth century. In 1924 Congress passed an Immigration Act that specifically excluded Chinese women and wives from entering the Umted States. Furthermore, any American who married a Chinese immigrant lost his or her citizenship. In 1943, when the United States and China became allies against Japan in World War II, Congress repealed the Exclusion Act of 1882, though immigration continued to be limited to a quota of 105 immigrants a year. During the war, the Japanese killed more than ten million Chinese civilians. Nevertheless, Chinese immigration to the United States did not rise.

After Congress passed the 1946 War Bride Act, which allowed soldiers to bring foreign-born wives to the United States, the government finally permitted the wives and children of Chinese Americans to enter the country. When the Communist government took over China in 1949, Congress passed refugee laws which allowed non-Communist Chinese refugees to seek asylum in the States. It was not until1965, 1968, and 1978 that new Immigration and Nationality Act and amendments defined "national origin" to mean "country of birth" rather than "race" and the Western and Eastern hemisphere were allotted more equitable quotas of immigrants to the U.S.

Writing Against Stereotypes

In addiction to writing in the context of a history of institutionalized racism, Kingston is writing against stereotypical images of Asian Americans that have pervaded American popular culture for over 150 years. The Chinese in American culture were synonymous with opium dens, tong wars, coolie labor, the "yellow peril," laundries, and low wages. Basically, these stereotypes fall into two categories, "bad" Asians and "good" Asians. The "bad" Asians are villains like Fu Manchu or brute hordes that cannot be controlled and therefore must be eradicated. Stereotypes of "good" Asians present Asian Americans as loyal, lovable allies, sidekicks, and servants. Asians are represented as being comical, non-threatening, noncompetitive, and asexual servants of white men. In stereotypical thinking, Asian men are shown as having no sexuality at all, whereas Asian women are depicted as extremely sexual" dragon ladles" and "geisha girls."

The purpose of both these dichotomous Asian stereotypes is to show the goodness of white Americans. When the Asian caricature is heartless and

treacherous, by comparison, the white person is shown as having great integrity and humanity. When the Asian is depicted as cheerful and docile, the white person is shown as a benevolent master. Behind both these stereotypical caricatures is the idea of irreparable difference, with the assumption of Anglo-American superiority. As in "On Discovery," Kingston often exploits a stereotype to make the reader aware of its painful impact on Chinese-American men and women and to metaphorically suggest the ways in which Chinese men in America were legally and culturally emasculated.

Sources for "On Discovery"

Kingston has said that "On Discovery" draws from two sources: Jonathan Swift's eighteenth century novel, *Gulliver's Travels* and Li Ru-zhen's nineteenth century novel, *Flowers in the Mirror.* Both novels concern voyagers who travel to imaginary lands. "On Discovery" adapts the characters and plot of *Flowers in the Mirror* and the allegorical intent of *Gulliver's Travels.*

In *Flowers in the Mirror,* Tang Ao decides to join his brother on a voyage. A god comes to him in a dream and tells him to search for twelve flower fairies (called "high ladies") and to bring them back to China. Lin Zhi-Yang, Tang Ao's brother-in-law, travels to the Land of Women, where he plans on selling cosmetics to the Queen and her concubines. The Queen decides that Lin Zhi-Yang should be her concubine, and the women pierce his ears and bind his feet to prepare him for his new role. With his superior command of technology, Tang Ao impresses the Queen by stopping the flooding waters, thus saving his brother-in-law and demonstrating Chinese ingenuity.

In *Gulliver's Travels,* Lemuel Gulliver travels from imaginary land to imaginary land, only to discover in each exotic locale the worst traits of the British, represented allegorically by the Lilliputians' pettiness, the Y alioos' brutishness, and other unsettling characteristics among the strange races he encounters. Gulliver travels far and wide to

gain new insight about the human condition. Through allegorical satire, Swift criticizes the arrogance and pettiness of the British-and of people in general.

Both *Gulliver's Travels* and *Flowers in the Mirror* are written in the historical context of empire. Swift, an Inshman, criticizes Britain's Imperialism, and Li Ru-zhen celebrates China's. When *Flowers in the Mirror* was first published, China was a great imperial power with colonies of its own.

The original story of Tang Ao is a tale of imperial conquest, but Kingston subverts the original story of colonization and conquest so that the potential conqueror finds himself in the position of the conquered. Discovery, she suggests, is not an act of conquest but of insight and understanding.

Family Stories

In addition to historical facts, American stereotypes, and Chinese fables, Kingston's work incorporates idiosyncratic family stories and personal experiences. Like Tang Ao, Kingston's father was a scholar and a teacher in China; thus "On Discovery" can be read on yet another level, as a metaphor for the author's father's experience in America. Like Tang Ao, Kingston's father came to America in search of material wealth but found himself stripped of his previous social status, obliged to work in Chinese laundries, rendered speechless and illiterate because he could not speak or read English. The myth of "On Discovery" takes on a deeper significance as *China Men* progresses and each individual "China Man's" story gets told. The reader gets a sense of the ways in which for Kingston ancient and modern, factual and metaphorical, public and private narratives are inextricably interrelated.

Kingston has also said that she draws upon a tradition of "talk-story," oral versions of classical myths that get passed down from generation to generation. In traditional China, many peasants were illiterate, and so stories would be preserved through repeated tellings.

Critical Overview

China Men, in which "On Discovery" appears, was highly acclaimed. Nominated for the 1980 Pulitzer Prize, it won the American Book Award and the National Critics Circle Award. The title of the book comes from the derogatory term "chinaman," which is considered an ethnic slur. Kingston divides the word into its two parts, "china" and "men," thus restoring the dignity of her forebears who came to America as she prepares the reader to listen to the stories of men of Chinese descent in America.

Upon its publication, *China Men* received impressive reviews from all the major literary review ers. In the *New York Times Book Review,* Mary

Gordon observed that *"China Men* is a triumph of the highest order, of imagination, of language, of moral perception." John Leonard wrote in the *New York Times,* "Four years ago, I said [Kingston's] *The Woman Warrior* was the best book I'd read in years. *China Men* is, at the very least, the best book I've read in the four years since." Henrietta Buckmaster, writing in the *Christian Science Monitor,* found Kingston "brilliant. Her sense of words is magical." Anne Tyler called the book "a history at once savage and beautiful, a combination of bone-grinding reality and luminous fantasy." While historical events seem "robbed of factual precision," observed Tamar Jacoby in the *San Francisco Review of Books,* they "are somehow brightened and clarified." In an essay in the literary Journal *MELUS,* Linda Ching Sledge declared, "It already seems apparent that for sheer literary talent, originality of style, and comprehensiveness of vision, Kingston is a major American writer and the most formidable Asian-American writer in this nation's history." Sledge further suggested that *"China Men* is neither novel nor history but represents that transmutation of 'oral history' into cultural literary epic."

, 'On Discovery" in particular has been singled out for praise as well In *American Literary History,* David Leiwei Li wrote that "Kingston has exercised her cross-cultural imagination to its fullest potential." In *Conflicts in Feminism,* King-Kok Cheung wrote admiringly that "I cannot but see this legend as double-edged, pointing not only to the mortification of Chinese men in the new world but also to the subjugation of women both in old China and in America. . . . The opening myth suggests that the author objects as strenuously to the patriarchal practices of her forefathers in their adopted country." And in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,* Donald Goellnicht noted that through the figure of Tang Ao, "Kingston seeks to redress this wrong of stereotyping and historical erasure, not by a simple reversal. . . but by a disruption of this gendered binary opposition."

Although *China Men* won many awards and was considered by many newspapers and journals to be one of the best ten books of 1980, Kingston's rewriting of Chinese myths has been criticized by a few. In an early review of *China Men* in the *New York Review of Books,* Frederick Wakeman, an expert on Chinese language and literature, criticized the ways in which Kingston altered and popularized classic Chinese literature such as *Flowers in the Mirror.* He wrote that Kingston's stories, including "On Discovery" "are only remotely connected with the Original Chinese legends they invoke; and sometimes

they are only spurious folklore, a kind of self-indulgent fantasy that blends extravagant personal imagery with appropriately *voelkisch* [folklike] themes." In an interview with Jean Ross in *Contemporary Authors,* Kingston responded that because Wakeman studies classical literature, "he sees me as one who doesn't get It right, and who takes liberties with it. In actuality, I am writing in the peasant talk-story Cantonese tradition ('low' if you will), which is the heritage of Chinese Americans" She also told Timothy Pfaff in the *New York Times Book Review* that "I can't help but feeling that people who accuse me of misrepresenting the myths are looking at the past in a sentimental kind of way It's *so easy* to look into the past. It's harder to look into the present and come to terms with what it means to be alive today."

Chinese-American novelist and playwright Frank Chin suggested that Kingston's manipulation of myths reinforces American stereotypes of Asians. In his introduction to *The Big Aieeeee!* Chin accused Kingston, along with Writers such as Amy Tan and David Henry Hwang, of writing "fake" Chinese-American literature that primarily caters to the racist fantasies of white Americans. By exaggerating Chinese patriarchal attitudes and practices and by deliberately misrepresenting Chinese history and legends, Chin observed, Kingston reinforces American racist Ideas that Chinese society is more misogynistic than, and therefore inferior to, American culture. Chin's discomfort with Kingston's and Tan's popularity with "mainstream" audiences has much in common with some African-American critics who feel that Writers such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker are anti-male in their focus because they expose problems in African-American communities to Anglo-American audiences.

Kingston explained that while she intended "On Discovery" and her other works to be feminist, her fiction neither attacks men nor allows ugly stereotypes to remain unquestioned. In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz in the *Michigan Quarterly Review,* Kingston said, "I think . that the men have had a very bad time." But, still, she continued, "Their anger is misplaced. They aren't reading his right Instead of being angry with us-I mean, it takes a lot of words to write articles against us-they ought to be home working on those novels."

Many Critics have been quite impressed with Kingston's treatment of anti-Asian stereotypes In the *South Dakota Review,* Alfred Wang wrote that the "brutalization and mass emasculation of the Chinese-American male in America have not been dealt with honestly or profoundly in belles-lettres until the publication of . . . *China Men."* Donald Goellnicht noted that "Kingston can both deplore the emasculation of China Men by mainstream America *and* critique the Confucian patriarchy of traditional family life." In light of the battle between Kingston and Chin, it is interesting to note that whereas *The Woman Warrior* told a woman's story and *China Men* told of the men's experiences in America, her 1989 novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* contains a male central character and a female narrator.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3
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Critical Essay #1

Leverich has a doctorate in *English literature from the University of Michigan. She has taught writing and literature at Michigan, New York University's School of Continuing Education, and Georgetown University. In the following essay, she discusses feminism and history in "On Discovery.* "

When Maxine Hong Kingston began writing her first novel, she found that she was really writing two books. In an interview with Paula Rabinowitz in the *Michigan Quarterly Review,* Kingston said:

At one time, *The Woman Warrior* and *China Men* were supposed to be one book. I had conceived of one huge book. However, part of the reason for two books is history. The women had their own time and place and their lives were coherent; there was a woman's way of thinking. My men's stones seemed to interfere. They were weakening the feminist point of view. So I took all the men's stones out, and then I had *The Woman Warrior.*

Because she felt that the stones of *China Men* undermined the feminist perspective of *The Woman Warrior,* Kingston separated the stories that comprised *China Men* from those included in her first book. Yet she has said elsewhere that she intends "On Discovery" to be a feminist story. Certainly, LI Ru-zhen, the author of *Flowers in the Mirror,* a source for "On Discovery," was a feminist who championed women's rights in nineteenth century China. This essay explores the ways in which "On Discovery" is a feminist narrative that also presents the hitherto silenced stories of men. Furthermore, "On Discovery" demonstrates that the women's and men's stories do not have to be separated; in fact, it stresses the importance of recognizing the ways in which men's and women's stories are similar and connected.

When Tang Ao arrives in the Land of Women and is captured, his first impulse is to wink at an imaginary male companion. He thinks it is funny to be taken prisoner by ladies, and therefore he is not on his guard. Because he does not suspect women as potential attackers, he is easily caught. In short order, the women make him feminine. The feminization of Tang Ao is a rather brutal process, involving footbinding, ear piercing, hair plucking, and face painting. The women's treatment of Tang Ao can be read as a story of feminist revenge. Although the tortures suffered by Tang Ao seem cruel, many Chinese women had for centuries been forced to undergo similar mutilation. The footbinding of Tang Ao can be read as a kind of revenge fantasy against the Chinese patriarchy in which the residents of the Land of Women do to Tang Ao what men have done to women in China for centuries. By having a man go through these ordeals, as KingKok Cheung observes in *Conflicts in Feminism,* "On Discovery" clearly suggests that Kingston objects as strenuously to the patriarchal practices of her ancestral culture as she does to the racist treatment of her forefathers in America.

Under Confucianism, a philosophy followed by many Chinese, women did not have as much status in the family as men. Kingston's earliest memories involve hearing her

father curse women. In "The Father From China," a short story in *China Men,* she seeks to understand how her father, who clearly loves her very much, could say terrible things about women. She wrote: "What I want from you is for you to tell me that those curses are only common Chinese sayings. That you did not mean to make me sicken at being female. 'Those were only sayings,' I want you to say to me. 'I didn't mean you or your mother. I didn't mean your sisters or grandmothers or women in general'."

Kingston describes in meticulous detail the process by which those in the Land of Women make Tang Ao a woman. The language is colorful and lush, aesthetically pleasing to the reader. Like the embroidery on the cloth bandages used to bind Tang Ao's feet, Kingston's narrative is intricate and delicate even as it contains great pain. Though Tang Ao cries out in agony at the torture of footbinding; for the women, this torture is a normal part of their everyday lives. They try to soothe Tang Ao with songs but continue to bind his feet. When Tang Ao' s feet are appropriately small, they dress him in high platform sandals in which he can barely walk and make him serve food at the Queen's court. Once Tang Ao is in this state of submissive servitude, they pronounce him "pretty." Through Tang Ao' s ordeal, "On Discovery" criticizes ideals of beauty that are predicated on pain and subservience.

By transforming Tang Ao into a woman, Kingston does not mean to suggest that women are in any way unequal to men. Quite the opposite. in fact. Kingston reverses male and female sex roles as a way of redefining heroism. As Linda Ching Sledge writes *in MELUS.* "Like the crafty Odysseus biding his time in the land of the nymph Calypso. the Chinese hero' s strength consists of an ability to find new methods by which to endure. in this case to acquiesce and hence outlast his captivity." In other words, Tang Ao's ability to adapt and survive is heroic. Adaptation and survival are not what readers would normally consider "heroic"; traditionally, conquest and wars are heroic. Kingston plays with this idea in "On Discovery" because Tang Ao initially thinks that discovery is a heroic act of conquest. The narrator lets the reader know that in the Land of Women, this definition of heroism does not apply: "In the Women's Land there are no taxes and no wars." If there are no wars, then what is commonly understood to be heroic needs to be reevaluated. Given what the Chinese immigrants endured in America, Kingston suggests, their very survival is a sign of strength and heroism.

To understand how enduring the transformation into becoming a woman might be considered heroic. readers need to understand the historical context against which Kingston sets "On Discovery." Kingston provides much of this context herself in "The Laws," a chapter in *China Men* that lists U.S. laws that discriminated against Chinese immigrants from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. These range from the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act which prevented Chinese immigrants from legally immigrating to the United States, to laws that forbade Chinese immigrants from becoming American citizens, owning property or businesses, voting, testifying in court, to the 1924 Immigration Act which excluded Chinese women and declared that any American citizen who married a Chinese person would lose his or her citizenship. Although the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 was finally repealed in 1943. Its damaging effects continued to be felt among Chinese-American communities.

Deprived of the right to bring their wives to the United States or to marry American citizens, the Chinese immigrants lived an isolated existence. working in service professions-in laundries, in restaurants, as servants to wealthy white people-that Americans considered "women's work." The backbreaking labor of the Chinese immigrants as they built a portion of the transcontinental railroad in the nineteenth century and worked in the cane fields was not respected. Instead, it was stereotyped as "coolie labor" for "slave wages." In *Asian American Literature,* Elaine Kim cites a poem by Daniel O'Connell that was popular in the 1870s. Note how the following portion of the poem describes a swarm of inassimilable "chinamen" who are taking over America:

We will make a second China by your
pleasant Western seas;
We will swarm like locusts that scourged the East
of old.. .
We can do your women's labor at half a
woman's tale. . .
We'll monopolize and master every craft upon
your shore,
And we'll starve you out with fifty-aye, five
hundred thousand more!

In the period that this poem was circulated, over 40,000 Chinese immigrants were driven out of towns along the West Coast of the United States. In the 1870s, a series of anti-Chinese riots broke out in the West, from Seattle to Wyoming. Chinese farm laborers were massacred, their living quarters and laundries were burned, and employers of the Chinese were threatened. Because Chinese laborers could not testify in court, they had no legal recourse. For the Chinese in America to endure such discrimination and to live to tell their stones, Kingston suggests, is an act of heroism. If the Chinese male immigrants are heroes, so too are the women, who experienced all that the men suffered ill addition to sexism.

Yet the stories of these men and women often were not heard or even spoken out loud "On Discovery" is feminist in its insistence on the necessity of putting silenced stories into speech. Historically, Chinese Americans have been silenced by discrimination and fear of deportation. In "On Discovery," the women joke that they will sew Tang Ao's lips together. A few pages later, in "The Father from China," Kingston writes of her father's "wordless male screams" and "silences." The principle motivation for writing China Men, Kingston suggests, is to speak her father's stories and to encourage her father to speak for himself. In "The Father From China," the narrator tells her father, "I'll tell you what I suppose from your silences and few words, and you can tell me that I'in mistaken. You'll just have to speak up with the real stories if I've got you wrong."

Another way in which Chinese Americans have been silenced is through stereotypes. In American popular culture, Asian men have been represented as having no sexuality (historically, they did "women's work" and lived alone because miscegenation laws forbade them to marry) whereas Asian women have been coded as being u1trafeminine. These stereotypes can silence the individuality of Asian-American men

and women; in addition, these stereotypes can get in the way of white audiences from carefully listening to the words of individual Asian-American writers. To counteract the effects of stereotypes, in the 1970s, some Asian-American writers founded a group that was dedicated to publishing writing by Asian-Americans that portrayed Asian-Americans in non-stereotypical ways.

One such voice which arose at mid century, Chinese-American writer Frank Chin, has suggested that stories like Kingston's "On Discovery" represent Chinese-American men as feminine and emasculated and thus cater to white audience's preconceived stereotypes of Asian men. According to Elaine Kim in the *Michigan Quarterly Review,* Chin calls for a "singing, stomping and muscular" reclamation of Asian-American manhood against hurtful stereotypes. Although Chin's position is admirable, Kim observes that it is marred by his tendency to code" creativity, courage, and 'being taken seriously' as 'masculine'." In his emphasis on reclaiming Asian-American masculinity, Chin oversimplifies Kingston's feminism, assuming feminism to be mean "anti-male" While it is true that Kingston is criticizing sexism in Chinese and Chinese-American culture, to criticize is not the same as to attack As Donald Goellnicht observes in *Reading the Literatures of Asian America,* "Kingston can both deplore the emasculation of China Men by mainstream America *and* critique the Confucian patriarchy of traditional family life." In other words, to be a feminist is not the same thing as to be anti-male; one can be supportive and still give constructive criticism. Metaphorically, depicting the transformation of a traveler into a Chinese woman does not suggest that Kingston believes the stereotypes to be true; in fact, turning what is commonly perceived as "masculine" (an adventurer in search of conquest) into what is considered "feminine" encourages readers to question exaggerated caricatures of both gender roles.

Seen in its literary, historical, and social context, "On Discovery" foreshadows the male Chinese-American experience in America. It is a metaphor of the fact that anti-Chinese exclusion laws forced the Chinese immigrants into confinement and isolation, the social equivalent of having one's feet bound so that one has no mobility. "On Discovery" is a feminist story that asserts men's as well as women's needs to be represented fairly and redeemed from cultural stereotypes and historical obscurity. Kingston's creative re-visioning of the Tang Ao myth at the beginning of her book dramatizes the structural Identity and similarities of sexism and racism.

Source: Jean Leverich, for *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Yu is an assistant professor American literature at Western Washington University. He has published critical essays on Henry David Thoreau, Fanny Fern, and Sui Sin Far. In the following essay, Yu discusses the contrast between "high culture" and "low culture" in Asian-American literature and delves into the historical and literary influences of Kingston's "On Discovery "

The Orient, Edward Said postulates, is a "European invention" of the "Middle East" as a "place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences." Orientalism is a Eurocentric and hegemonic discourse that "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for domination, restructuring, and having authority over the Orients."

But America's concept of the Orient, according to Said, is different from that of Europe, for it is "much more likely to be associated. . . with the Far East (China and Japan, mainly)." I would argue that upon closer scrutiny, however, the process in which Euro-America constructed the "Far East," or more specifically, China, is not very different from Europe's own "invention" of the "Middle East." Like European orientalism, American orientalism is a hegemonic discourse that constructed China as Euro-America's Other, preventing Chinese American as well as Chinese voices from forming and emerging. . .

American Orientalist discourse is so powerful and so omnipresent that Chinese Americans can still feel its oppressive force today. Despite differences among themselves, Chinese American authors work consensually to replace the American Orientalist discourse with their own voices. To achieve that, some start by rejecting their hyphenated status: these writers and their ancestors either never had a mainstream status in Chinese culture or lost It long ago because of emigration. In America, the hyphenated status tends to marginalize Chinese American authors, excluding their works from mainstream literature; it insinuates that their achievements are somehow compromised, or even "low," their works read for anthropological curiosity rather than liter ary merit. . . .

Amy Tan, another well-known Writer of Chinese American descent, resists the same pigeonholing in similar language. She hopes that people stop calling her "an Asian American writer," because, she insists, "I'in a writer of American literature.'" Both authors' resistance can be regarded as a frontal engagement with the hegemonic American Orientalist discourse: they forthrightly reject the lowness implied by the hyphenated label that marginalizes them through the sediments of the American orientalist discourse. For them, the highlow dichotomy is not between the low "bitter labor" and the high Confucian scholar, but between the low "heathen Chinee" stereotype and the high "just American" mainstream status. Seeing through the label that veils the high-low dichotomy, they reject the low and claim the high.

Maxine Hong Kingston, however, deals with the implicit low status imposed on Chinese American Writers in a different way. Her second book, *China Men,* especially her unusual use of the "high" Chinese classics in it, has aroused criticism from both mainstream American and Chinese American communities. More relevant to my argument in this essay are the remarks of Frederick Wakeman, Jr., who is displeased with Kingston's treatment of Chinese "high culture" because "many of the myths are largely her own reconstructions. . . a kind of self-indulgent fantasy." He argues that Kingston's "pieces of distant China lore often seem jejune and even unauthentic---especially to readers who know a little bit about the original *high culture* which Kingston claims as her birthright.'" Wakeman's ironic tone is made clear by his status as a top U. S. sinologist who has spent most of his life reading and absorbing Chinese "high culture" With the diligence characteristic of T. S. Eliot's "individual talent" assimilating the "whole of the literature of Europe from Homer.'" The combination of his status and tone suggests that he knows more than "a little bit about the original high culture," perhaps more than most Chinese immigrants in America and obviously more than Kingston. People familiar With Eliot's essay (almost all of those trained in the New Criticism) would also smile at Wakeman's capturing Kingston in the act of claiming Chinese high culture "as her birthright," for they know that a cultural tradition "cannot be inherited, and [that] if you want [the tradition] you must obtain it by great labor.'" In Eliot's model, in order to belong to the high culture, either European or Chinese, you must be a member of the cultured class first. You must have the leisure to read the "whole of the literature.'" A daughter of Cantonese peasants doesn't seem to belong here.

Nevertheless, in a sense, Wakeman is right: in *ChinaMen* Kingston's version of the Chinese classics is by no means accurate She takes liberties with the classics in every episode, from Tang Ao's discovery of the Land of Women to the life and death of Chu Yuan. Yet, Kingston may have labored harder with Chinese literature than Wakeman believes; her deviation from the Chinese originals is the consequence of deliberate revision rather than, as Wakeman suggests, inaccurate reading of the sources Indeed, I read her treatment of Chinese sources as a carefully planned move rather than "self-indulgent fantasy" This is supported by Kingston's response to Professor Wakeman: "In actuality, I am writing in the peasant talk-story Cantonese tradition ('low,' if you will), which is the heritage of Chinese Americans. Chinese Americans have changed ancient, scholarly ones from the old country." Here Kingston accepts her status as a Chinese American writer and exposes the hidden "lowness" associated with that term. However, the rhetorical structure in which she announces the acceptance reveals a more subtle denial: first, she acknowledges that she deliberately writes in the Chinese American tradition; next she suggests that to label (explicitly or implicitly) It as low is the consequence of someone else's will. Thus, Kingston's apparent acceptance of the low estate works as a strategy to resist marginalization, not by forthrightly rejecting the "low" status of a Chinese American author, as Jen and Tan do, but by suggesting that the high-low binary opposition is originally a hegemonic construct imposed on Chinese Americans. The economy and effect of this strategy can be better illustrated with a close reading of *China Men,* especially the opening short episode, "On Discovery," where Kingston makes her boldest experimental reconstruction of an early nineteenth-century Chinese novel, *The Romance of Flowers in Mirror.*

"On Discovery" adapts chapters thirty-two through thirty-seven of *ling Hua Yuan (The Romance of Flowers in Mirror),* a novel of a hundred chapters by Li Ru-zhen, written before 1820 and first published in 1828. A summary of the Chinese original prepares us for an in-depth examination of Kingston's reconstruction of the adventures of Tang Ao, the protagonist of the novel:

The story is set in the twenty-one years' reign (684705) of the usurping Empress Wu winch Interrupted the continuity of the great T'ang dynasty-an era of the ascendancy of women, or rather of one woman. Being of indomitable will, the Empress commanded the hundred flowers in the Imperial Shang-hn Park to blossom on a winter's day' they obeyed, thus disrupting the harmony of the seasons, and for their pains the hundred fames in charge of the flowers were banished from the heaven, to be born as girls in families all over the empire and even in lands across the seas (chapters 3-6, chapters I and 2 take place in heaven) T'ang Ao, a graduate recently deprived of his hard won title of "T'an-Hua" (literally, Seeker of Flowers) because of his earlier association With the empress's political enemies, decides to join Ins brother-in-law, Lin Chih-yang, on a voyage, being advised by a temple god in a dream to search for twelve famous flowers and transplant them back to China. .

In the Original novel Tang Ao, the unhappy scholar, is a "T'an Hua" (a Chinese word with a literal meaning, the seeker of flowers, and a cultural meaning, the official title for the scholar who scores the third highest in the imperial examination). Li Ru-zhen's novel plays on both meanings of the title As an extraordinarily talented scholar of "high" culture, Tang Ao wins an elite third-place in the imperial examination in which tens of thousands of talented scholars participated; with the mandate of heaven, he travels over the oceans with the "high" romantic purpose of finding and saving the incarnations of a dozen flower fairies, "high ladies" banished from the Heavenly Court. In Kingston's reconstruction, however, Tang Ao' s high estate codified in both meanings of his title disappears as he is transformed into a seeker of the Gold Mountain, a Chinese stereotype of the rough and mundane forty-niner. By making this general change in the character of Tang Ao, Kingston suggests a social stepping down that accompanies the geographic movement of a Chinese scholar from China to North America.

The few chapters on which Kingston particularly draws to Write "On Discovery" further reveal the purpose of her rendition. In Li Ru-zhen's Kingdom of Women, Lin Zhi-yang, Tang Ao's brother-in-law, planned to make a fortune by selling cosmetics to the queen and her "royal concubines." Impressed by Lin's "beauty," the queen decided to make him her new "concubine." Suffering so much from the ear-puncturing and footbinding and many other humiliating preparations for the marriage, Lin almost killed himself before the queen installed him as a new concubine in her harem. When Tang Ao learned of his brother-in-law's miserable predicament, he decided to risk his life to save Lin Zhi-yang. He made a deal with the queen: if the queen would release his brother-in-law, he would subjugate the flooding rivers that were devastating the country, knowing, though, he would lose his life if he failed to tame the waters. However, because of his superior knowledge and command of advanced technology, Tang Ao finally succeeded in his river project, saved his brother-in-law, and left the land for new adventures.

In the classic novel, it was Lin Zhi-yang, the low merchant, not Tang Ao, the high scholar, who was almost turned into a royal "concubine." As the queen's new favorite, Lin Zhi-yang did not do any of his own washing-all his things were washed by the maids. Thus Tang Ao's humiliating foot-bandage washing is Kingston's invention added to underscore the low estate of the fallen scholar. Similarly, in the original, Tang Ao achieved high heroic deeds, saving the life of his brother-in-law and creating engineering wonders to control the flooding rivers; whereas in Kingston's version, Tang Ao was frustrated, humiliated, and forced to do work traditionally assigned to women, washing his foot-bandages and serving at the queen's banquet table.

In a sense, the original novel was an early nineteenth-century version of Chinese colonialist discourse about conquering overseas colonies with superior technology and knowledge. It is interesting to note that the land of women does not exist in actual geography but reflects the Chinese imperialist fantasy of subduing an "other," a "low" culture whose danger lies in its overwhelming sexuality symbolized by the flood. Tang Ao, the exile from the "high" culture of the "central empire," partially regains his elite status by subjugating the dangerous sexuality and by saving the "low" merchant Lin Zhi-yang. However, the irony of history ushered in the decline of the Celestial Empire within two decades of the publication of the novel. Paced with the faster ships and bigger guns of the West, the traditional Chinese high culture represented by Tang Ao is rendered powerless, the boundary between Tang Ao the high scholar and Lin Zhi-yang the low entrepreneur erased; with the fall of the Chinese scholarship, the fall of the Chinese scholars becomes the rule rather than the exception. Kingston's father, for instance, falls neatly into this pattern as his emigration transforms him from the privileged scholar in China into the illiterate laundry-man in the United States. Kingston's literary reconstruction is an imaginative representation of a social phenomenon: politically constructed opposition between a high scholar and a low laborer can be politically deconstructed or displaced over time (a couple of decades in this case) and space (the Pacific Ocean). By dramatizing the fall of the "high" scholar, Kingston rejects the high-low binary structure constructed by both Chinese and American imperialist discourses.

Kingston's problematization of the high-low opposition is not only demonstrated through her thematic reconstruction of an older text, but also highlighted through an apparent stylistic tension in her own text. "On Discovery" begins with the phrase "Once upon a time" and ends with "A.D. 441. . . in North America." Placed in between the discourses of fairy-tales and history, is Kingston's story of the humiliating feminization of a Chinese scholar-traveller Since in the Confucian tradition, as in the Platonic tradition of Western metaphysics, history as the "representation" of facts and truth is always given higher status over fairy-tales, over fiction and fantasy, the genre of Plato' s lying poets, it appears justifiable for us to read the tension between the discourses of history and fairy-tales as an appropriate stylistic reflection of the high-low dichotomy. Thus, Kingston seems to begin her story of the American discovery as a fairy-tale, a vivid yet perhaps unreliable account of a Chinese Columbus, and then she switches her tone and confirms the "truth" of her story by appealing to a "high-culture" genre. If this generic transformation is at work, then Kingston's style seems to reinforce the binary opposition between high and low cultures that her thematic revision undermines. However, this apparent contradiction between style and content vanishes when readers examine

closely Kingston's historical discourse at the end of the episode: "Some scholars say that that country was discovered during the reign of Empress Wu (A.D. 694-705), and some say earlier than that, A.D. 441, and it was in North America."

Two of the three dates that Kingston cites here are inaccurate, and deliberately so. The first timeframe Kingston offers for the discovery of Wom en's Land is a half truth: it is true that Empress Wu died in A.D. 705, but Kingston's date for the start of Wu's reign is a fiction. In his late years, Emperor Gao Zong, Wu's husband, was too ill to run the government, and in his stead Empress Wu made important national policy decisions. Immediately after Gao Zong's death in 683, the Empress set up her third son as Emperor Zhong Zong in 684, only to banish him in a few months; in the same year, she crowned and then again banished her fourth son, Emperor Rui Zong. Finally, before the year 684 expired, she announced herself the official ruler of the Tang Dynasty, but she ruled the empire under the old title of Empress. In 690, she announced herself the Emperor of China, changed the name of the country into the Zhou Dynasty, and relocated the imperial capital from Chang An to Luo Yang. In the actual sense, Wu started her reign in 684; in the formal sense, her own dynasty began in 690. Kingston's date 694 is a fictional construct that not only blurs the boundary between fiction and history, but also challenges the distinction between content and style.

In addition to the half truth, Kingston invents a fictional date for her discovery story. The source of her earlier date, A.D. 441, is impossible to identify. The only clue we have is that it is earlier than Wu's reign, and the only known pre-Tang text that mentions the Land of Women is *Shan Hai ling (The Classic of Mountains and Seas),* a book of mythology and rituals compiled over an incredibly long period ranging from the East Zhou Dynasty (770 B.C.-256 B.C.; much earlier than Wu's Zhou) all the way through the Warring States Period and the Qin Dynasty to the West Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-25 A.D.). Many episodes from Li Ru-zhen's novel, including the story of the Women's Land, are based on the sketchy legends in *Shan Hai ling.* Obviously, Kingston's date is much too late for that book, yet there is no other identifiable source for the legend of Women's Land before Wu's time.

Even if Kingston does provide accurate dates for Empress Wu's reign and the production of the earlier Women's Land text, the authority of Kingston's historical discourse is still questionable. The source for her discovery story is a novel, and that Empress Wu could order the flowers to bloom in winter is exactly the stuff of fairy-tales. Dates drawn from a romantic novel based on a mythical book which itself is a marvelous mixture of myths and facts accumulated over a millennium in an obscure past, even if Kingston cites the dates faithfully from them, would not lend historical authority to her book. Yet Kingston deliberately mixes the dates from unreliable sources and dresses them up in a seemingly authoritative discourse to make them sound historical. Furthermore, neither *The Classic of Mountains and Seas* nor *The Romance of Flowers in Mirror* places the Land of Woman in North America, but readers somehow assume it to be in North America simply because Kingston says so in a factual tone. The interesting thing here is that although many readers know that both historical texts and fairy-tales are language-mediated interpretations of an irretrievable past, some still seem unwilling to take Kingston's exaggerated form of fictional history itself as a parody

exposing the groundlessness of another binary opposition, the binary between high history and low fairy tale. Thus, despite Wakeman's concern With Kingston's use of the Chinese "high culture," what is really important for us is not to challenge Kingston's "inaccuracy" in using sources, but to identify and discuss the rhetorical effect of her deliberate revision. . . .

Source: Ning Yu, "A Strategy Aga1OstMarginalization' The 'High' and 'Low' Cultures in Kingston's *China Men,"* 10 *College Literature,* Vol 23, No.3, October, 1996, pp 73-87.

Critical Essay #3

Slowik teaches literature and writing at Pacific Northwest College of Art in Portland, Oregon. She has published critical essays on Leslie Marmon Silko, Adrienne Rich, and Robert Bly. In the following essay, Slowik compares Kingston's stories "On Discovery" and "On Fathers, " noting the difficulties inherent in writing on immigrant history and how they become apparent in the stories' narratives.

Maxine Hong Kingston begins *China Men,* her history of the Chinese immigration to America, with two peculiar chapters that suggest such a book is not easily written. The first chapter, "On Discovery," is the legend of Tang Ao, a Chinaman who sets off for America, the Gold Mountain, the land of infinite riches. Instead of finding America, he discovers rather the "Land of Women" where, in a grotesque parody of Chinese traditions, his feet are broken and bound, his ears are pierced, he is fed nothing but rice cakes and he enters into female enslavement So much for discovery. For the Chinaman who thinks he can leave China, any sailing away from China is a sailing into China, its tradition enforced with a vengeance. . . .

Maxine Hong Kingston places *China Men* in the middle of this gap between generations and countries. Her opening chapters ask two questions:

Did the Chinese ever leave China culturally, and if so, can we ever know their story? The way these chapters are written, however, suggests even more difficult problems. At issue is not only a serious break in historical continuity, but the possibility of writing immigrant history at all. "On Discovery" is a folktale, evoking the authority of oral tradition, as it is revered, remembered, passed on, but also as it imprisons and ultimately destroys its characters.

Let us look more closely at the narrative problems posed by Kingston in the opening chapters of *China Men.* "On Discovery" is not only a story about an aborted emigration, it is also a parable of fixed meanings. In a time outside of time, an omniscient voice speaking with the authority of fairy tale ("once upon a time"), historical document ("in the Women's land, there are no taxes and no war "), and scholarship ("some scholars say. . .") recounts the story of Tang Ao. There is an acknowledged agreement between narrator and audience. Everyone accepts without question the story to be told. The heroes and victims are unchanging in an unchangeable world. Their lives are fated as the story drives them unerringly to their pre-conceived ends. There are no alternatives to this story-for its characters or for its audience. Not only is "On Discovery" about a cultural paradigm gone tyrannical, it is also about a narrative form as enclosed and imprisoning as the story it tells.

On the other side of the self-enclosed omniscience of "On Discovery," however, is the self-enclosed subjectivity of "On Fathers." Although this chapter is particular, personal, and surrounded by the mystery of movement and flux (participles, "waiting," "hastening," "pressing," replace the tense-less "once upon a time," of "On Discovery. "), the story nonetheless doubles back on itself; its ending is its beginning-the children are

forever running out to meet the father who retreats from them only to approach again in another guise, only to retreat another time. Despite the particularity of the story and the idiosyncrasy of the speaker, the story's subject is as condemned as the fated heroes of the legends. If all beginnings and endings are known to the omniscient voice, there are no beginnings or endings for the first-person speaker of this father's story, only a condemned "in medias res." And what authority can the child/first person command in order to grab that approaching man by his lapels and ask him who he is? Apparently none, for the mother in the story only concurs that the man was that kind of father easily mistaken and the children can only return to waiting.

The story of Tang Ao and the little girl could be taken as two conflicting but typically post-modern versions of history, both fatally self-enclosed, both representing the polarities of relativity and objectivity. "The formulations," Clifford Geertz tells us, "have been various: 'inside' versus 'outside,' or 'first person' versus 'third person' descriptions; 'phenomenological' versus 'objectivist' or 'cognitive' versus 'behavioral' theories; or, perhaps most commonly, 'emic' versus 'etic' analyses." Kingston, however, explores the problem narratively. "On Discovery" is in the hands of an omniscient authority, understanding the full patterns of life and condemning all characters in the story to pre-ordained fates and the audience to silent complicity in the tale. Such authority represents a radically objective point of view. "On Fathers," on the other hand, is the stuff of radical historical and cultural relativism where the ephemeral motion of a present moment and the rich though self-limited "I" preclude any transcendence. There are no larger structures beyond the self-constructed one, so there is no way of seeing above and beyond the present moment into a past radically different from the present. Tang Ao, the prisoner of omniscience, needs freedom from stories with fixed beginnings and endings. The little girl and her sisters, the prisoners of solipsism, need the means to discover these new stories. Both need a history that will connect them. *China Men* is just that history. By overlaying post-modern and pre-modern methods of storytelling, Kingston makes the connections for Tang Ao and the little girl. She also discovers the connections our forefathers have made for us.

The first thing Maxine Hong Kingston does to release both Tang Ao and the young girl from their respective isolations is to take their stones out of the hands of singular narrators and make those stones the possession and invention of the audience. Retold by many different speakers, stories can carry people like Tang Ao of "On Discovery" back into time with all its unpredictability and introduce the lonely first person, the little girl of "On Fathers," to a group of people to whom she can listen and from whom she can speak. To use the term from oral history (and with apologies to auto mechanics), audience-generated tales can re-link the first person speaker to a "chain of transmission." Thus, Kingston opens the post-modern story's dilemmas to the pre-modern methods of storytelling. . . .

Kingston, the twentieth-century writer, is not simply a child in the rice field frightened by the story, however, nor is she a distant relative at the end of the generational line. She is now an adult retelling that story, making it again immediate alternating the language With the whip strokes, noting the sap still fresh in the branch, and then placing all the subsequent generations in a dramatic final present moment of the story Thus,

intertextual reading, for Kingston, is not a kind of sophisticated source study that starts with the last version of the story and works backward. Rather, she recalls the story With urgency, as if witnessing it for the first time. We are once again at the moment of the Original event looking forward in time through all its subsequent re-tellings. In this story we are momentarily meeting all fathers, mothers, sons and daughters at once.

Bringing the past into such immediacy is possible for Kingston because, for all the self-consciousness of her story, she, nonetheless, takes on the storytelling mentality of her ancestors. A story is told and remembered only in relation to the immediate demands of life. A story is a moral tale intended to teach a lesson not only with ethical content, but With practical content about family and livelihood crucial to physical and cultural survival. Bibi's story, for instance, tells us how to grow rice, how to organize a family, and how to raise children. It is called forth not simply by literary or ethical concerns, but by immediate, physical concerns. Although the story will not be written down, "published," housed and passed on by bookstores and library systems, it will be remembered and re-told by family members as each generation teaches and learns the art of survival. Even though rice has disappeared and children are allowed more rebellious thoughts, the basic narrative frame will still house our ancestor's voices giving us advice on livelihood and children. Thus, a story breaks out of omniscient self-enclosure because an audience, whose lives are never as final as any story's, continually re-tells and re-interprets the tale, connecting their limited, "first person" experiences to the directives of the oral tradition. . . .

Kingston, however, does not deny the fact that she lives in late twentieth-century America. She is not a grandfather. Invoking an oral narrative authority is not easy. As a historian, she is faced with the breaks in continuity between her time and her grandfather's time. Many of the old stories have been lost, the old China inaccessible, the immigrant Chinese dispersed (in many instances forcibly) once the railroads have been constructed, the mining camps closed. Kingston faces the end of overlapping generations, the death of the listening performer/audiences we have been speaking of.

Furthermore, as a late twentieth-century historian, Kingston approaches her fathers with a faith in language and history more fragile and vulnerable than their own. The two hundred dollar suitcoat and wing-tip shoes are as elusive for Kingston, the historian, as they are for the little girl waiting at the gate in the opening chapters of *China Men.* Unlike her pre-literate fathers, Kingston is trapped by a literate cultnre. She is *writing* her story, not *telling* it. Pages of type not the sets of a world-encompassing stage make up her novel. Already distanced by a 1977 copyright, Kingston, the author, is indeed removed from her text in the same way her fathers are "removed" from their history. '"Writing,' Jacques Derrida says, '"in the common sense is the dead letter, it is the corner of death because it signifies the absence of the speaker. . .'". So, too have the fathers long abandoned the slim pieces of evidence they have left behind. . . .

Source: Mary Siowik, "When the Ghosts Speak: Oral and Written Narrative Forms in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men,"* in *MELUS,* Vol. 19, No.1, Spring, 1994, pp 73-88

Critical Essay #4

In the following excerpt from a longer essay, Shu mei Shih discusses the "intertext" of "On Discovery, " which concerns the exile of the Chinese from China and their emasculation in the West.

In this first intertext which begins *[China Men],* Kingston relates a tale about a certain Tang Ao who finds himself banished to a world where sex roles are reversed, where he is forced to become a woman. This poignant fable about Tang Ao's forced feminization in the Land of Women is taken from the Ch'ing Dynasty novel *Flowers in the Mirror* by Li Ju-chen (c. 1763-1830). The book is commonly read as a social and political allegory; the chapters which deal with the trips of the protagonists (Tang Ao and Lin Chih-yang) to the Land of Women present a satire on social injustice in general and the suppression of women in particular. In Li Juchen's version, genders are reversed in the Land of Women: men are called women and play the roles of women, and women are called men, wear men's clothes and act like men. It is a women-centered society. The King (who is a woman) becomes infatuated with Tang Ao's companion, Lin Chih-yang, because of his "face lIke peach blossoms, waist like slender willows, eyes that contain autumn waters and eyebrows like distant mountains" and proceeds to make him a concubine. After Lin is subjected to a series of physical tortures normally required of women (his ears are pierced, his feet bound and all the hair on his face plucked out), he is proclaimed ready to become an imperial concubine. But at the crucial moment on the nuptial night, he pretends that he has lost his virility and thus dissuades the King from consummating the marriage. The epIsode ends with Lin's final rescue by the ingenious Tang Ao and Lin' s reunion with his family.

Kingston makes various changes in the original fable. In her version, it is Tang Ao, not Lin Chihyang, who is taken captive in the Land of Women when he is searching for "the Gold Mountain," which is the name early Chinese immigrants gave to San Francisco. He is put into chains, unlike Lin Chih-yang who is confined to a well-furnished room in *Flowers in the Mirror,* but like early

Chinese laborers who were locked below decks in the ships on route to America as described in "The Great Grandfather of the Sandlewood Mountains," another section of the book. Again different from Lin Chili-yang in *Flowers in the Mirror,* Kingston's Tang Ao is turned into a woman to serve meals at the queen's court. In Tang Ao's case, there is no heroic friend to save him, and escape from this woman's land is not feasible at all.

Kingston's fable is an allegorical rendering of the exile situation of China Men in America. Tang Ao is the representative China Man who comes to America in search of the "Gold Mountain" during the Gold Rush in the nineteenth century. But instead of reaching the "Gold Mountain," he is captured and deprived not only of his freedom (enslaved in chains) but also of his manhood (he is turned into a woman and forced to do woman's work-serving meals). Kingston is clearly commenting on the effeminization of China Men by the dormant American culture that has created the stereotype of the

Asian man as feminine and submissive, and she thereby echoes the critiques of such stereotypes by male Asian-American writers such as Frank Chin and Jeffery Paul Chan.

Kingston further reinforces her fictional elaboration of China Men's emasculation with historical evidence in "The Laws" section of the book. It is a factual account of Chinese American legal history, a history of segregation and discrimination which witnessed the enactment of such laws as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the anti-miscegenation laws of 1924, according to which Chinese men were banned from becoming citizens of the United States and barred from marrying white women. In this way, Chinese men were symbolically castrated and emasculated. They were not allowed to be men since most of them came to America without women. Denied the right to marriage and the legal status of residency, they were relegated to "womanly" professions such as laundry and restaurant work

Tang Ao' s forced effeminization is thus a direct commentary on that of the China Men, simultaneously victimized by the mechanisms of racism and sexism. social, economic, and legal circumstances beyond their control forced them to do womanly work and in turn they were looked down upon even more because of this involuntary femininity. Sexism saw femininity as a negative quality and racism imposed that negative quality on them.

Alongside Kingston's condemnation of the dominant society's racism and sexism is also her ironic treatment of the issue of sexism in the Chinese context. The physical tortures that Tang Ao must endure are the same ones traditionally suffered by Chinese women in order to enhance their "beauty." Traditional Chinese standards of beauty were defined by men and helped to ensure the subservient positi0n of women in society and the family. The bound feet that epitomized women's imprisonment and subservience in traditional China become the fate of China Men in America. Kingston ironically observes how China Men have become objects of the same kind of sexism, which they themselves practiced on their own women at home. Here we see Kingston's characteristic feminist touch. Although she sympathizes with the emasculation of China Men, she at the same time protests against their oppression of Chinese women. In this double-edged criticism, one side turned against racism, the other against traditional patterns of patriarchy, Kingston again operates in a double reality befitting our characterization of her exilic imagination.

Kingston's first book, *The Woman Warrior,* explores the ramifications of female marginally in the male-centered societies of both China and America; but *China Men,* as exemplified by this opening section, investigates the meaning of China Men's marginality in white-centered America, while at the same time retaining a feminist perspective. In the sections that follow, Kingston writes of the various contributions China Men made to the welfare of the country that denied them, and how their blood and sweat enriched the American soil. Arguing against the essentialism of the white-centered discourse which defines China Men as feminine and thus marginalizes them, Kingston complements Julia Kristeva's view that marginality is not a matter of essence, but one of positionality in a given society. Like Kristeva, Kingston is concerned with the Imposed marginality of women in patriarchal societies, but she goes a step further by

describing how men of a different race can become victims of the same Center/Margin bifurcation that they themselves perpetuate in their treatment of women. Kingston's appropriation of the fable from *Flowers in the Mirror* drives this point home. By revealing the politics of Center and Margin, Kingston shows how being exiled in America has created a common fate for both Chinese men and women. We may call this the moral of the fable. It is the discovery of a true knowledge of the politics of the self and the Other, and the mechanism of subordination and imprisonment. . . .

Source: Shu mel Shih, "Exile and Intertextuality in Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men,* in *Studies in Comparative Literature. The Literature of Emigration and Exile,* No 23, Texas Tech University Press, 1992, pp 65-78.

Adaptations

Maxine Hong Kingston Reading "The Woman Warrior," "China Men," was released as an audiocassette in 1987 by American Audio Prose Library.

. *China Men* was recorded unabridged as a series of nine audiocassettes by Books on Tape in 1995. It is performed by Kay Reading and is available through Books on Tape.

Topics for Further Study

Kingston has said that "On Discovery" is the introduction to an epic novel. What connections do you see between "On Discovery" and the other stories in *China Men?* Do you agree With Kingston that *China Men* is an epic?

Do some research on popular stereotypes of Asian Americans in twentieth-century America. How and why do you think stereotypes get started? Do you think Kingston deals with stereotypes effectively in "On Discovery," or do you agree with Frank Chin that her story allows readers to believe these stereotypes?

The Woman Warrior is characterized as "autobiography" and *China Men* is characterized as "history." Read both works and think about whether you would put them in different categories. What do you think the necessary qualities of a history are? An autobiography? A novel? How can these genres overlap?

Kingston's work is often discussed in the context of Asian-American literature. Read some fiction by other Asian-American writers and compare it to Kingston's, looking for similarities and differences. Are there many similarities among the stories? Are there just as many differences? Do you think that Asian Americans share a culture, or are there are many different Asian-American cultures?

Kingston has said that she wrote "On Discovery" to tell the stories that her father would not tell. Why do you suppose Kingston's father would choose not to tell his stories? What good comes from telling stories of the past? Might there be a good reason to keep silent about the past?

Compare and Contrast

1980s: Vincent Chin, a Chinese American, is murdered in Detroit in 1982 by two unemployed white men who, enraged over the influx of Japanese automobile Imports and the depressed state of the American economy, mistake Chin for a Japanese man.

1990s: Millions of Americans admire the accomplishment of Maya Ying Lin, a Chinese-American sculptor, who designed the Civil Rights Memorial for the Southern Poverty Law Center in Montgomery, Alabama and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Both of these huge public sculptures are noted for their emphasis on healing past wrongs.

1890s: The Chinese in America are, economically and politically, among the weakest and poorest of the nation's minorities.

1990s: In 1997, President Bill Clinton comes under attack for allegedly accepting large campaign donations from wealthy Asian businessmen in exchange for influence in the administration's policies. Spokesmen for Clinton respond by denying any wrongdoing and hinting that the president's critics are simply anti-Asian bigots. At the end of 1997, Clinton appoints Bill Lann Lee, an Asian American, to serve as interim head of the U.S. Justice Department's Civil Rights Division.

1980: In *Fullilove* v. *Klutznick,* the Supreme Court rules that Congress has the right to instill affirmative action quotas in awarding government contracts as a way to redress generations of racial discrimination against minorities.

1990s: In a public referendum in 1996, the citizens of the State of California vote to approve Proposition 209, which bans public-sector affirmative action programs for women and minorities in favor of color-blind admission and hiring policies. Since the passing of Proposition 209, the number of African-American and Latino students admitted to state universities has decreased significantly. The number of Asian-American students admitted has risen slightly.

What Do I Read Next?

The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts (1976), by Maxine Hong Kingston. In her first book, considered a companion book to *China Men,* Kingston writes about a young Chmese-American woman's coming to terms with herself, her mother, and her cultural heritage. Winner of the 1976 National Book Critics Award for nonfiction.

Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book (1989), by Maxine Hong Kingston. In Kingston's first non-biographical novel, Wittman Ah Sing, a beatnik fifth-generation Chinese American in San Francisco in the 1960s follows through on his namesake Walt Whitman's goal of creating a lively, raucous, inclusive, truly multicultnral American literature.

Flowers in the Mirror (1828), by Li Ru-zhen. TIns classic Chmese novel contains the original adventures of Tang Ao and is a source for Kingston's short story, "On Discovery."

Gulliver's Travels (1726), by Jonathan Swift. In this classic allegory, a source for "On Discovery," Lemuel Gulliver travels to the lands of the Lilliputians and Brobdingnags, Laputans, Yahoos, and Houyhnhnms as Swift mercilessly and wittily skewers the faults of the British-and humanity at large.

Orlando (1928), by Virginia Woolf. A fantastical "biography" of a young nobleman whose life encompasses several centuries. Born a man during the European Renaissance, Orlando later is transformed, like Tang Ao, into a woman and thus learns compassion and empathy for women. Kingston has said that the historical sweep and mix of fantasy and history in Woolf s novel influence her own works.

The Joy Luck Club (1989), by Amy Tan. This novel of four Chinese-American women and their complex relationships with their Chineseborn mothers has been compared to Kingston's work

Yankee Dawg You Die (1991), by Philip Kan Gotanda. Two Chinese-American actors confront stereotypical roles in Hollywood in tills hilarious yet pointed play.

M. Butterfly (1988), by David Henry Hwang. A subtle exploration of the orientalist themes in Puccini's opera *Madame Butterfly.* This play is based on a true account of a French diplomat who is so blinded by his prejudices he cannot see what is really going on around him.

Obasan (1981), by Joy Kogawa. A poetic novel about the internment of the Japanese Canadians during World War II, this novel resembles Kingston's both in its mixture of historical documents, poetic images, and personal experiences and in its exploration of different kinds of silences.

Further Study

Cheung, King-Kok *Articulate Silences: Hlsaye Yamamoto, Maxine Hong Kingston, Joy Kogawa,* Cornell University Press, 1993.

A literary study of Kingston' s work that compares her to a Japanese-American and a Japanese-Canadian writer, Cheung's analysis focuses on the themes of silence in all three women's novels.

Foner, Philip *S.,* and Daniel Rosenberg, eds. *Racism, Dissent, and Asian Americans from 1850 to the Present. A Documentary History,* Greenwood Press, 1993.

Contains copies of anti-Asian legislation from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, along With documents about ASians in America from the perspectives of African Americans, labor organizers, and sympathizers of Asian Americans.

Hagedorn, Jessica, ed *Charlie Chan Is Dead' An Anthology of Contemporary Asian-American Fiction,* Penguin, 1993.

A hip, well-reviewed anthology of fiction by the younger generation of Asian-American writers, edited by the Filipino-American Writer of *Dogeaters.*

Kim, Elaine. *Asian American Literature: An Introduction to the Writings and their Social Contexts,* Temple University Press, 1982.

The first academic study of Asian-American literature, Kim's book focuses on images of Asians in Anglo-American literature, early Asian immigrant writers, the second generation, and contemporary writers.

Takaki, Ronald. *Strangers from A Different Shore' A History of Asian Americans,* Penguin, 1989.

Takaki's comprehensive look at Asian Americans in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries covers those of Japanese, Korean, Filipino, Vietnamese, Indian, and Chinese descent. Takaki takes special care to consider the ways in which, for example, Korean-American experiences differ from Filipino-American experiences.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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