

China Men



Maxine
Hong
Kingston



VINTAGE INTERNATIONAL

VINTAGE BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.

NEW YORK

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ALSO BY MAXINE HONG KINGSTON

The Woman Warrior

Tripmaster Monkey

FOR

Tom, George, Norman, and Joe Hong

AND

Earll and Joseph Kingston

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China Men

Father, I have seen you lighthearted:

"Let's play airplane," you said. "I'll make you a toy airplane." You caught between your thumb and finger a dragonfly. You held it by the abdomen. Its fast wings blurred; but when its motor paused, I saw that the wings were networks of cellophane. Its head bulged with eyes, below which the rest of its face was crowded. "You hold it," you said. Around its belly you slipped a lasso of thread, which you tightened, crinkled its shell, pinched a waist, and the tail bent downward slightly. Then you tied the other end of the string around my finger, and said, "Let go." The tying hadn't hurt it one bit; the dragonfly whirled up and flew in circles at the extent of the string, which I pulled toward me and cast away, controlling my pet airplane. It flew lower, and I turned with it not to get entangled. Suddenly the dragonfly dropped and dangled, but all we had to do was shake it, and it flew again. After a while, though I poked and prodded, it did not go any more. You watched for five

On Discovery

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

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

A door opened, and he expected to meet his match, but it was only two old women with sewing boxes in their hands. "The less you struggle, the less it'll hurt," one said, squinting a bright eye as she threaded her needle. Two captors sat on him while another

held his head. He felt an old woman's dry fingers trace his ear; the long nail on her little finger scraped his neck. "What are you doing?" he asked. "Sewing your lips together," she joked, blackening needles in a candle flame. The ones who sat on him bounced with laughter. But the old women did not sew his lips together. They pulled his earlobes taut and jabbed a needle through each of them. They had to poke and probe before puncturing the layers of skin correctly, the hole in the front of the lobe in line with the one in back, the layers of skin sliding about so. They worked the needle through—a last jerk for the needle's wide eye ("needle's nose" in Chinese). They strung his raw flesh with silk threads; he could feel the fibers.

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

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

One day his attendants changed his gold hoops to jade studs and strapped his feet to shoes that curved like bridges. They plucked out each hair on his face, powdered him white, painted his eyebrows like

a moth's wings, painted his cheeks and lips red. He served a meal at the queen's court. His hips swayed and his shoulders swiveled because of his shaped feet. "She's pretty, don't you agree?" the diners said, smacking their lips at his dainty feet as he bent to put dishes before them.

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

On Fathers

Waiting at the gate for our father to come home from work, my brothers and sisters and I saw a man come hastening around the corner. Father! "BaBa!" "BaBa!" We flew off the gate; we jumped off the fence. "BaBa!" We surrounded him, took his hands, pressed our noses against his coat to sniff his tobacco smell, reached into his pockets for the Rainbo notepads and the gold coins that were really chocolates. The littlest ones hugged his legs for a ride on his shoes. And he laughed a startled laugh. "But I'm not your father. You've made a mistake." He took our hands out of his pockets. "But I'm not your father." Looking closely, we saw that he probably was not. We went back inside the yard, and this man continued his walk down our street, from the back certainly looking like our father, one hand in his pocket. Tall and thin, he was wearing our father's two-hundred-dollar suit that fit him just right. He was walking fast in his good leather shoes with the wingtips.

Our mother came out of the house, and we hung on to her while

she explained, "No, that wasn't your father. He did look like BaBa, though, didn't he? From the back, almost exactly." We stood on the sidewalk together and watched the man walk away. A moment later, from the other direction, our own father came striding toward us, the one finger touching his hat to salute us. We ran again to meet him.

The
Father
from
China



