

"IN THE COUNTRY OF WOMEN"
By Li Ju-chen

Introduction

The Qing dynasty is known for authors specializing in tales of ghosts and fantasies. Li Ju-chen (ca. 1763-ca. 1830) is representative of this fantasy genre. In *Flowers in the Mirror* (Jing hua yüan), the hero, Lin Zhiyang (Lin Chih-yang), travels to many strange lands. In the excerpt below, Lin finds himself in the "Land of Women." The palace maids of the country of women have captured Lin and are preparing him to become a male "concubine" for their female ruler. He is, accordingly, bathed, dressed in skirts, his face powdered, lips reddened, his arms decorated with bangles and his fingers with rings. He has just had his ears pierced by a formidable white-bearded palace maiden when the procedure described in the excerpt below takes place.

Selected Document Excerpt with Questions (Longer selection follows this section)

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When the white-bearded maiden had finished her task she withdrew, and another maiden, this time with a black beard, came up. This one had in her hand a roll of thin white silk. Kneeling before the bed, she said, "Gracious lady, with your permission, I have been ordered to bind your feet." Two more maidens approached, and kneeling on the floor to support his dainty feet proceeded to take off the silk socks. The black-bearded maiden seated herself on a low stool. Tearing off a strip of silk, she first set Lin Chih-yang's right foot on her lap and sprinkled alum between the joints of the toes. Then she drew all five toes tightly together and, forcibly bending the whole foot over till it took on the shape of a drawn bow, swiftly bound it up with the white silk. When she had wound the silk round a few times, another of the palace maidens brought a needle and thread and began to sew up the ends tight, and so they continued, one binding while the other sewed.

With the four palace maidens pressing closely against him and the two others holding on to his feet, Lin Chih-yang could not move an inch. When the bindings were in place he felt his feet burning like a charcoal brazier. Wave upon wave of aching swept over him, and soon sharp pains began to shoot and forced out a loud cry: "I am dying in a fiery pit!"

[Translated by Cyril Birch]

Questions:

1. What is the author’s likely view of foot-binding?
2. Aside from that described, what other transformations would a man have to go through in order to experience the status of a concubine?
3. The author is satirizing women’s status and the practice of concubinage — but why did Chinese emperors take large numbers of concubines? What practical interests might have been served by the practice?

Longer Selection

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The palace maidens were all immensely strong, and seized hold of Lin Chih-yang as a hawk seizes a sparrow — there was no question of his being the master. As soon as they had taken off his shoes and undressed him, fragrant water was brought for his bath. They changed his coat and trousers for a tunic and skirt, and for the time being put socks of thin silk on his dainty great feet. They combed his hair into plaits, pinning it with phoenix pins, and rubbed in scented oils. They powdered his face and smeared his lips with bright red lipstick. They put rings on his hands and bangles on his wrists, and arranging the curtains of the bed invited him to take his seat upon it.

Lin Chih-yang felt as though he were dreaming or drunk, and could only sit there in misery. Closely questioning the palace maidens, he discovered for the first time that the ruler of the country had chosen him to be a royal concubine, and that he was to enter the palace as soon as an auspicious date had been picked.

As he was reflecting on this alarming news, more palace maidens came in. These were of middle age, all tall and strong, and with jowls covered in hair. One of the maidens, who had a white beard and held in her hand a needle and thread, advanced before the bed and there knelt and said, “Gracious lady, with your permission, I have been ordered to pierce your ears.” Already four maidens had come forward and were gripping him firmly. The white-bearded maiden approached and took hold first of his right ear. She rolled a few times between her fingers the lobe where the needle was to go, and then straight away drove the needle through. Lin Chih-yang shrieked out, “The pain’s killing me,” and would have fallen over backwards had the maidens not been supporting him. She then got hold of his left ear, rolled it a few times and stuck the needle through. The pain brought continuous shouts and cries from Lin Chih-yang. Both ears pierced, white lead was smeared on them and rubbed in, after which a pair of golden earrings of the “eight jewel” design was fixed to them.

When the white-bearded maiden had finished her task she withdrew, and another maiden, this time with a black beard, came up. This one had in her hand a roll of thin white silk. Kneeling before the bed, she said, "Gracious lady, with your permission, I have been ordered to bind your feet." Two more maidens approached, and kneeling on the floor to support his dainty feet proceeded to take off the silk socks. The black-bearded maiden seated herself on a low stool. Tearing off a strip of silk, she first set Lin Chih-yang's right foot on her lap and sprinkled alum between the joints of the toes. Then she drew all five toes tightly together and, forcibly bending the whole foot over till it took on the shape of a drawn bow, swiftly bound it up with the white silk. When she had wound the silk round a few times, another of the palace maidens brought a needle and thread and began to sew up the ends tight, and so they continued, one binding while the other sewed.

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Having finished binding his feet, the maidens hurriedly made a pair of large red slippers with soft soles and put them on for him. Lin Chih-yang's tears flowed for a long time. His thoughts flew back and forth, but he could think of no plan, all he could do was entreat the palace maidens: "My brothers, I beseech you, put in a word for me before your ruler: I am a married man, I have a wife, how can I become a concubine? And these big feet of mine are like a wandering student who has spent years without presenting himself for examination and has grown accustomed to a life of abandon — how can they bear restriction? I beg you, let me go, and then my wife as well will be filled with gratitude."

But the maidens replied, "Our ruler has just now given us the order to bind your feet and then invite you into the palace. Who then would dare to raise her voice in protest?"

[Translated by Cyril Birch]