

Meng Jiang Nyu Questions

Please write the answers in complete sentences.

1. Describe what happened when the stranger came to Meng and Chi liang's door.
2. In paragraph 4 the word "nomads" is used. Based on the context of the sentence, what does this word mean?
3. What is the problem in China that caused the emperor to want to build a wall around the country?
4. Once Meng completed her sewing project, what did she set off to do?
5. Describe the two ways that Meng fed herself on her journey.
6. Discuss in several sentences what happened to Meng while trying to cross the Yellow River.
7. When Meng meets up with workers building the wall, what news is she given about her husband?
8. On page ⁴/~~3~~ the word "mingle" is used. Based on the context, what do you think this word means?
9. How did Meng eventually find the bones of her husband?
10. Why did it matter so much to Meng that she find his bones?

Meng-Jiang Nyu

①

Meng-Jiang Nyu was married to Wan Ch-liang on her eighteenth birthday. The wedding was beautiful and Meng glowed with happiness in her red wedding dress. The entire village was invited to witness the ceremony and join in the feast that lasted for several days. After the wedding, the young couple settled down to the routines of village life. They thought themselves lucky for they never suffered from hunger or cold. And, they were deeply in love.

One summer day their peaceful life was shattered when a stranger appeared at their door. He was dressed in an official's gown and was accompanied by two army officers. The stranger ordered the army officers to grab Chi-liang and bring him with them. Meng watched in horror. Her pounding heart made it hard to breathe. As she approached the villagers outside, she heard a woman ask, "Could the emperor be taking men again to work on one of his projects?"

An older man who had lived in the village for many years said, "Probably. He has done this before and nothing good has ever come of it."

Children cried as their fathers, uncles, brothers and cousins were roughly gathered in the center of the village. "Silence!" shouted the stranger. "I bring orders from the emperor. Wild horsemen, nomads from the north, are stealing, killing and burning whole villages to the ground. The emperor has called for all men of able body to build a great wall to keep out all enemies and we shall all live in peace. It is the duty of every man to obey the emperor; refuse and you will do so on the pain of death!"

"Forward!" he commanded to the confused men. They marched off as the villagers cried in sorrow.

A few months passed since that terrifying day, but for Meng it seemed a lifetime. Without her husband life seemed unbearable. She prayed to be spared from hunger and thirst. She worried about Chi-liang as the winter months approached - how would he survive without a warm coat and cotton quilted shoes?

Meng worked like crazy to sew a cotton padded coat for Chi-liang and designed thick-soled shoes, sewing them with extra strong thread. Time was her enemy as she worked to finish the task she set for herself. She promised herself that Chi-liang would not do without winter clothes. No matter how long it would take her to find him, or how dangerous it may be for a woman to travel alone on foot, she vowed to get to her husband.

2

Meng carried with her a small bag of rice and millet to eat while on her trip. She also packed Chi-liang's new coat and shoes and before daybreak, left her home. No one was yet awake and the narrow streets of the village were deserted. It was still dark but Meng noticed that the sky had a rosy glow, announcing the beginning of a new day. "That must be a good sign," she told herself.

Word had come back to the village that the part of the wall that Chi-liang was working on was far away. If the snows came early, there was no telling how long it would take to arrive. Meng had never gone further than a few miles from home. She could imagine how huge the country really was and could not picture a wall thousands of miles long that climbed mountains, valleys and crossed deserts. As the days wore on, Meng had to rest more and more often. She passed through some villages on her way and begged for food since her supply had run out. People who spoke to her learned of where she was headed and praised her devotion to her husband. From sunrise to sunset she trudged on; sometimes at night her bed was just a pile of straw.

The day Meng reached the Yellow River, her strength was fading. She knew she had to cross it to continue; she had not come this far to give up now. She inched her way out, holding Chi-liang's clothes over her head. A few yards out she could no longer touch the bottom, and she tried to swim. Finally she could not stay afloat because the power of the river was too strong. She gave up the struggle and let the river claim her. The cold water dragged her to the murky bottom, down into darkness.

Meng's distress did not go unnoticed. A river god came to her rescue, pulling her from the deep water onto the opposite shore. When she opened her eyes, the spirit was above her. "My brave child, do not lose hope," it said to her. "All the spirits along the way will help you to the end of your journey." The spirit faded away and melted into the sky. Meng was alone again, but on the correct side of the river. She shook her head in wonder, questioning what just happened.

Sadly, she discovered that Chi-liang's jacket was soaked through. She spread it on the ground to dry and reached for the shoes. Suddenly a miracle occurred. She watched as the shoes turned into two blackbirds. From then on, the blackbirds led her, day after day, in the direction to find Chi-liang. When she tired, they settled on the ground to wait. At night they rested in a nearby tree while she slept. One morning she awoke to find Chi-liang's shoes on the ground, neatly placed side by side. Her blackbirds were gone because they had led Meng to her destination.

②

Meng dragged her swollen feet along the dusty road. At first it was flat, but then it began to climb. As she reached high ground, her eyes took in an amazing sight. The figures she saw, busy at work, looked as small as ants. Getting closer, she realized it was men, backs bent under the weight of stones, struggling to the top of the unfinished wall. Others carried buckets with mortar (cement) which was poured to fill in the spaces between the rocks. How would she ever find her Chi-liang among so many men?

Meng approached one of the men and told him her story. "I am sorry I cannot help you," he said. "We have little food and no warm clothes. Every day we see good men fall and many die. Hundreds are already buried inside the wall. We admire your loyalty to your husband, but do not risk your own life trying to find him. Better that you return home. You will never find him."

But Meng was determined to continue her search. The wind in her face, very little food in her stomach, she asked worker after worker about her husband. Soon her body just wore out and she fell asleep on the frozen ground. She did not know how long she lay there before she became aware of someone tapping her. "You must not lie here or you will freeze to death," the man warned.

Shaking from the cold she said, "I am looking for my husband. His name is Chi-liang."

"Yes, I know your husband," the stranger said. "I remember him well. We were assigned the job of making bricks and he was the best worker. It pains me to tell you that we found him one morning covered by snow, lifeless. With many others, he lies buried within the wall."

Meng could not hold back her grief and sorrow. Tears poured down her face and stung her cold cheeks. She blamed herself for his death. She had come too late.

Wailing bitterly, Meng cried out to heaven. The sun vanished behind clouds. Rain fell in icy sheets. Bolts of lightning streaked through the sky and a clap of thunder caused a section of the wall to collapse, bricks and stones spilling out with human bones and skulls.

"Do not be scared, wife of Chi-liang. Heaven has seen your sorrow. You will look for your husband's bones from among all others." The words were clear, but there was no one in sight. Meng stood staring at the pile before her.

"But how will I know which among these are his?"

"Have no fear. You will succeed, for when love is true, two people become as one. They share thoughts, hopes, feelings. Their blood and bones mingle. Do not worry, you will find a way."

"Oh, mountains, hills, desert," she begged, "give me a sign so I might know." Not realizing, Meng bit down on her thumb in her despair. She caused blood to drop upon a bone. The drop slipped off the surface and reached the ground. Suddenly the words she just heard took on meaning. "If the bones are Chi-liang's, my blood will mix with his and sink into the bones. If the bones belong to others, the blood will remain apart."

This time she bit down harder on her thumb and shook her hand. She spattered the blood, but had no luck. Again and again she tried, but each time the blood spilled off the bones. "One last time," she told herself. She bit down with all her might. The blood flowed freely and she flung it far and wide. One red dot landed on a bone and began to sink into its chalky whiteness. This bone must belong to Chi-liang. She continued to search and soon she recovered the rest. Now Chi-liang would receive a proper burial and his soul would not have to wander around in search of peace.

Meng turned to the south and began her sad journey home.