Instructions: Read Address to Two Hundred Millions Fellow Countrywomen by Qiu Jin and then write a brief essay that (1) summarizes the document and (2) answers the “Questions to Consider” at the end. Your goal is to develop a well-supported response to the questions based on the facts you have learned about the topic.

An “editor’s note” has been included to help you place the document in historical perspective. It is not part of the original document and should not be commented upon in your paper.

Editor’s note:

Among those seeking to change China, the question of women’s roles in society frequently arose. The most well-known advocate for women was Qiu Jin (1875–1907). Born into a well-to-do family with liberal inclinations, she received a fine literary education, developing a passion for reading as well as for swordplay, horseback riding, and martial arts. Married to a much older man at age eighteen, she was distinctly unsatisfied in such a conventional life and developed a growing feminist awareness, sometimes dressing in men’s clothes and Western styles. In 1903, Qiu Jin did something even more unthinkable for a Chinese woman when she left her husband and children to pursue an education in Japan. Returning to China in 1906, she started a women’s magazine, the Chinese Women’s Journal, which was a strong advocate for women’s independence and education. Soon Qiu Jin became active in revolutionary circles. For her role in an abortive plot to overthrow the Qing dynasty, she was arrested, tortured, and beheaded in 1907 at the age of thirty-two. The selection that follows comes from her most famous appeal for the rights of women.

Address to Two Hundred Millions Fellow Countrywomen

Alas, the most unfairly treated things on this earth are the two hundred million who are born as Chinese women. We consider ourselves lucky to be born to a kind father. If we are unlucky, our father will be an ill-tempered and unreasonable person who repeatedly says, “How unlucky I am, yet another useless one,” as if at any instant he could pick us up and throw us to our death. He will resent us and say things like “she’s eventually going to someone else’s family” and give us cold and contemptuous looks. When we grow a few years older, without bothering to ask us our thoughts, they will bind our tender, white and natural feet with a strip of cloth, never loosening them even while we sleep. In the end, the flesh is mangled and the bones broken, all so that relatives, friends and neighbors can say, “the girl from so and so’s family has tiny feet.”

When the time comes (for the parents) to select a husband, everything is based on the promises of two shameless matchmakers. The daughter’s parents will go along with any proposal as long as his family is rich and powerful. Her parents do not bother to ask if the man’s family is respectable, or inquire about the groom’s temperament and level of education. On the wedding day, one will sit in the brightly decorated bridal sedan chair...
barely able to breathe. When we arrive at the new home, if the husband is found to be unambitious but even tempered, her family will say we are blessed with good fortune from a previous life. If he is no good, her family will blame it “on our wrong conduct in a previous life,” or simply “bad luck.” If we dare complain, or otherwise try to counsel our husbands, then a scolding and beating will befall us. Others who hear of the abuse will say: “She is a woman of no virtue. She does not act as a wife should!” Can you believe such words? These aspersions are cast without the chance for an appeal! Further inequities will follow if the husband dies. The wife will have to wear a mourning dress for three years and will not be allowed to remarry. Yet, if the wife dies, the husband only needs to wear a blue (mourning) braid. Some men find even that unbecoming and do not bother to wear it at all. Even when the wife has only been dead for three days, he can go out and cavort and indulge himself. A new wife is allowed to enter the household even before the official seven weeks of mourning is over. In the beginning, Heaven created all people with no differences between men and women. Ask yourselves this, how could these people have been born without women? Why are things so unjust? Everyday these men say, “We ought to be equal and treat people kindly.” Then why do they treat women so unfairly and unequally as if they were African slaves?

A woman has to learn not to depend on others, but to rely on herself instead.... Why can’t we reject footbinding? Are they afraid of women being educated, knowledgeable, and perhaps surpassing them? Men do not allow us to study. We must not simply go along with their decision without even challenging them....

However, from now on I hope we can leave the past behind us and focus on our future. Assuming we have died in the past and are reincarnated into our next life, the elders should not say “too old to be of any use.” If you have a decent husband who wants to establish a school, do not stop him. If you have a fine son who wishes to study abroad, do not stop him. The middle-aged wife should not hinder her husband by causing him to have no ambition and achieve nothing. If you have a son, send him to school. Do the same for your daughter and never bind her feet. If you have a young girl, the best choice would be for her to attend school, but even if she is unable to attend schools, you should teach her to read and write at home. If you come from a family of officials that has money, you should persuade your husband to establish schools and factories and do good deeds that will help common people. If your family is poor, you should work hard to help your husband. Do not be lazy and do nothing. These are my hopes. All of you are aware that we are about to lose our country. Men can scarcely protect themselves. How can we rely on them? We must revitalize ourselves. Otherwise all will be too late when the country is lost. Everybody! Everybody! Please keep my hopes alive!

Questions to Consider

1. How did Qiu Jin describe the difficulties that faced Chinese women? How did she account for these sad conditions?

2. What did she advocate as a remedy for the problems she identified? Did she seem to have a political agenda?

3. To what extent do you think she was writing from personal experience?