



BEING & BELONGING

MABEL PING-HUA LEE (1896-1966)

“Overlooked No More: Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, Suffragist With a Distinction”

By Jia Lynn Yang, NEW YORK TIMES, Sept. 19, 2020



In the late-afternoon sun on May 4, 1912, a brigade of women on horseback cast long shadows on the grass of Washington Square Park in Manhattan as they set off leading 10,000 people on one of the biggest marches for women’s suffrage that the nation had ever seen. One of the women was Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who directed her white horse around the east side of the park’s grand arch and up Fifth Avenue. Like the other women, she wore a black three-cornered hat and a sash bearing the words “Votes for Women.” But she was different from her fellow suffragists: She was a Chinese immigrant.

At a time when Chinese migration to the United States was largely banned under the Chinese Exclusion Act, Lee, who was just a teenager at the time, refused to blend into the background. She published articles in a monthly magazine for Chinese students in America and gave speeches in which she articulated a bold, transnational vision for democracy based on Christian values of equality. **In 1914, she wrote that giving women the right to vote was “nothing more than a wider application of our ideas of justice and equality,” and that suffrage was extending “democracy to women.”**

Lee is believed to have been born around 1895 in Guangzhou, China. She moved to the United States around 1905 to join her father, the Rev. Lee To, a Christian missionary who had been assigned to a church in Chinatown. She lived with her parents there on Bayard Street. The Lees were among the rare Chinese immigrants who were allowed into the United States at the time under federal legislation that had sharply restricted their entry since 1882, when Congress passed the Exclusion Act, banning Chinese laborers to appease white nativists who had resented an influx of Chinese-immigrant prospectors and railroad workers in the West.

Chinese teachers, diplomats, merchants and missionaries were still allowed to enter the country, but only in small numbers and only with proper certification. Naturalization was banned. Later, in 1924, nearly all Asian immigration was cut off when the United States imposed ethnic quotas to keep the country largely white and Protestant.

The Chinatown of Lee’s childhood was an unusual place for a Chinese girl to grow up in. A dense area of roughly eight city blocks, the neighborhood was largely closed to an outside world that viewed Chinese immigrants as exotic and strange, save for the occasional tourist who ventured in to gawk. Lee’s mother seldom left their home in New York because her feet, bound as a young girl according to tradition, were only a few inches long.

For the residents, the community offered protection from racism. Most of Lee’s neighbors were men who had come to Chinatown seeking work either as bachelors or after leaving their families behind in China; in 1910, historians have said, the gender ratio of Chinese men to Chinese women in America was more than 14 to 1.

Lee attended Erasmus Hall Academy in Brooklyn, where she was surrounded by other immigrant children — mostly Jews and Italians who had arrived in a wave of migration that transformed New York. She went on to graduate from Barnard College and earn a Ph.D. in economics from Columbia University.



Since high school, Lee had been desperate to return to China, where revolutionaries had ended imperial rule and [established a republic](#) after overthrowing the Qing dynasty in 1911. She wanted to take back home what she had learned from the American suffragist movement and help liberate Chinese women, who were locked out of educational opportunities, as her mother had been.

“The welfare of China and possibly its very existence as an independent nation depends on rendering tardy justice to its womankind,” Lee said [in a speech](#). “For no nation can ever make real and lasting progress in civilization unless its women are following close to its men, if not actually abreast with them.”

Her plan was thwarted when her father died in 1924. Suddenly she was taking care of her widowed mother and steering her father’s church, despite not being a minister herself. The plan was further scuttled by events in China: The country was soon torn by civil war between Nationalists and Communists. By 1936, Lee’s close friend [Hu Shih](#), a Chinese intellectual, was asking her what had become of her dreams. **“Frankly speaking,” he wrote in a letter, “it is strange that you should spend your life on a thing that is merely a Baptist church in China Town.”**

But Lee remained hopeful that Protestant Christianity held the keys to a moral democracy. In 1943, during World War II, the Exclusion Act was repealed, and a small quota of roughly 100 immigrants of Chinese descent were allowed to enter the country annually. Naturalization was also permitted. Slowly, the Chinese population in America began to grow again.

After the war, membership in Lee’s church dwindled as the popularity of her religion waned in Chinatown. Lee never moved back to China. She spent the rest of her life in New York and died there around 1966. Just six months after the 1912 suffrage march in New York, another one was organized, this time held after dark so that women who worked during the day could participate. The women carried thousands of lanterns through the streets, lighting up the city. What once seemed radical — a woman appearing in public to demand political rights — became a regular occurrence. It is not clear if Lee ever became a U.S. citizen so that she could exercise what she had marched for as a proud young woman on horseback so long ago: the right to vote.

“Let us therefore not forget the significance of our work in the mission. It may seem very small, but the influence is very vast. Every little we put in counts. [Let us] rededicate ourselves to our tasks, that every child who comes into the Mission will be made to know Christ. Christianity is the salvation of China, and the salvation of the whole world.” – Mabel Ping-hua Lee

MABEL & ME?

Pick & choose from among these prompts, reflecting upon questions that prompt your curiosity!

- In what ways might your own story be like Mabel’s story?
- In what ways might your story be unlike Mabel’s story?
- Think about the academic path you are on, your own sense of what you might be made for, meant to do. In your best dream, how do you imagine yourself in 5 years?
- What one thought or idea from Mabel’s story especially intrigued, provoked, disturbed, challenged, encouraged, warmed, warned, helped, or surprised you?
- What clues do you have to Mabel’s spiritual perspective on life? Her view of God? Of her own calling and purpose?
- If you were faced with Mabel’s life-changing interruption, what choices might you consider? How could your faith inform those decisions?
- Where has disappointment or interruption appeared in your own life?
- How have you come to terms with that?
- Have you come to any new understandings of God?
- If you could ask Mabel one question, what would it be?