

Suffrage, Activism, and Education in the Era of Chinese Exclusion: Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee

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The 19th Amendment was ratified on August 18, 1920, a year after being passed by Congress. It extended the right to vote to many women, but not all. Excluded from this landmark constitutional victory were women like Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, who was born in Guangzhou (then Canton), China, in 1896, but who immigrated to New York as a child.

New York State had long been a site of activism in support of women's rights, dating from the 1848 Seneca Falls Convention. In November 1917, New York extended the right to vote to women. Lee, however, was excluded from becoming a U.S. citizen under the restrictive Chinese Exclusion Act, and, as such, was not allowed to vote at either the state or federal level, even when the 19th Amendment was ratified.

From 1882 to 1943, Chinese immigration to the United States was severely limited under the Chinese Exclusion Act, "An act to execute certain treaty stipulations relating to the Chinese, May 6, 1882." Signed by President Chester A. Arthur, it was the first federal law that restricted immigration based on limiting an ethnicity or country of origin. The Chinese Exclusion Act inhibited rights of Chinese American laborers and prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens. Because of this act, Mabel Lee could not become a citizen, and therefore could not vote. Yet she and others still fought for universal suffrage and equality.

Under the 1882 Act, individuals of Chinese descent, both native-born and immigrants, were faced with significant

restrictions on their ability to enter and exit the country, and were prohibited from naturalizing. The Chinese Exclusion Act initially mandated a ten-year moratorium on Chinese immigration by laborers, but was ultimately extended by the Geary Act, and was later made permanent, in 1902.¹ By the 1920s, Congress adopted more comprehensive immigration restrictions, including quotas that applied to other Asian and European nations.

The 1882 Act required Chinese already in the United States to obtain certifications to insure they could re-enter if they traveled outside the country. These restrictive acts sought to limit the number of Chinese laborers at a time when nativist sentiment was stoked by white Americans' fears of losing professional opportunities to non-white immigrants. For its part, amidst fears that the Chinese scholars were becoming too Westernized, the Chinese government ended the Chinese Educational Mission in 1881, which sent Chinese students to study in the United States.² The changing laws and tensions between China and the United States served as a backdrop to this era.

Amidst this anti-Chinese senti-

ment, Mabel Lee settled with her family in New York City. Her father, Lee Too, founded the First Chinese Baptist Church and worked as an educator and leader of the Chinese Christian Center on Pell Street, run by the New York City Baptist Mission Society.³ Lee Too's proficiency in English and connections with the religious community, both acquired through his missionary school education, advanced his family's standing into what was considered the merchant class. This offered additional opportunities and somewhat fewer restrictions under the Chinese Exclusion Act.⁴

As a child, Mabel Lee attended public schools in San Francisco and New York City. She received a bachelor's degree from Barnard College in 1916 and a master's degree in 1917. She is believed to be the first woman to receive a doctorate from Columbia University. Her dissertation, "The Economic History of China, with Special Reference to Agriculture," was published in 1921. She later submitted this published work as evidence of her graduate studies for a supplementary statement to the Office of the Chinese Inspector during one of her immigration interviews.⁵

The importance of education was a strong influence from Lee's mother who was part of the upper class in Guangzhou. Lai Bek, Mabel Lee's mother, had learned English from an American Southern Baptist missionary in Guangzhou, who taught upper class

Teaching Activities

1. Provide students with copies of the Chinese Exclusion Act to the class (the first page of which is featured on page 358). The full document is available at www.docsteach.org/documents/document/chinese-exclusion-act. Guide students through a reading of the document and lead a discussion of its terms. Ask students to examine the effects of the immigration act. Can they think of other laws that excluded particular groups of people? Can they think of any contemporary examples?

2. Give students copies of the “Interview of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, 6/18/1937, Case File 12-943” (on p. 359). It can also be retrieved from the Records of Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85, via DocsTeach or the National Archives Catalog. Introduce the background of the Chinese Exclusion Act and why this document exists. Share details of Dr. Mabel Lee’s life, including her support of suffrage. Have students take turns reading the questions and Dr. Lee’s responses. Ask if they notice anything omitted from the interview based on their knowledge of her role in supporting the suffrage movement. Discuss whether they think this is because, at the time of the interview, women’s suffrage had already been passed (although it was still not open to Chinese Americans), or whether Dr. Lee may have omitted this information for other reasons. Why?

3. Have students research photographs of suffrage parades in the National Archives Catalog or DocsTeach. Review the images with the class. Who is represented in the images? Who is absent? Point out that Mabel Lee participated in suffrage parades. Did students see any Chinese American women in the photographs they found? If not, discuss why this might be.

Discuss the messages students found in the parade posters. Have students create their own suffrage posters based on the photographs they find. Did students choose to include any elements from historic protest signs in their own interpretations? Discuss why or why not with the class.

4. Point out that the struggle for women’s suffrage took many forms—protests, petitions, court cases, etc. Share examples of petitions from DocsTeach or the National Archives Catalog. Lead students through a document analysis of a petition: Who wrote it? Who received it? Where is it from? What is it about? Based on the examples discussed, have students work either individually or in small groups and create a petition arguing for woman suffrage—providing reasons they believe why the vote should be extended to women, and keeping in mind the questions previously discussed during the document analysis exercise.



Chinese women English in the home using the Bible.⁶

The information regarding Mabel Lee’s education and social work is well-documented in her Chinese Exclusion Act Case File, but there is no mention of her role in the suffrage movement, which began as a teenager. In 1912, she led a New York suffrage parade as part of a group of women on horseback, and was featured in a April 13, 1912, *New-York Tribune* article.⁷ Throughout her Barnard years, Lee wrote in support of equality in *The Chinese Students’ Monthly*. Around this same time, in 1917, she led Chinese and Chinese American women in a Fifth Avenue suffrage parade as part of the Women’s Political Equality League.⁸

Mabel Lee also believed women should be able to access economic power. In particular, she felt women should be able to benefit and contribute equally in

the male-dominated economic sphere of real estate; she eventually owned several buildings in Chinatown.⁹ In a 1914 piece in *The Chinese Students’ Monthly*, she wrote that democracy included four stages of development. “They are: first, moral, religious or spiritual; second, legal; third, political; and, fourth, economic.”¹⁰ Women could not contribute equally to democratic society in all its forms, including economic, unless represented and enfranchised wholly under the law through universal suffrage.

Lee’s involvement in the suffrage movement was just one aspect of her life’s work. After Lee Too’s death, Mabel Lee assumed her father’s mission work in New York’s Chinatown. Her leadership solidified the church’s position as an important focal point of community life, offering English lessons, trade skills, and other supports that aided parishioners.

Forty-seventh

Congress of the United States, At the First Session,

Began and held at the CITY OF WASHINGTON, in the DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, on Monday, the fifth day of December, eighteen hundred and eighty-one.

An Act

To execute certain treaty stipulations relating to Chinese.

Whereas, In the opinion of the Government of the United States the coming of Chinese laborers to this country endangers the good order of certain localities within the territory thereof: Therefore, Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled, That from and after the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and until the expiration of ten years next after the passage of this act, the coming of Chinese laborers to the United States be, and the same is hereby, suspended; and during such suspension it shall not be lawful for any Chinese laborer to come, or, having so come after the expiration of said ninety days, to remain within the United States.

SEC. 2. That the master of any vessel who shall knowingly bring within the United States on such vessel, and land or permit to be landed, any Chinese laborer, from any foreign port or place, shall be deemed guilty of a misdemeanor, and on conviction thereof shall be punished by a fine of not more than five hundred dollars for each and every such Chinese laborer so brought, and may be also imprisoned for a term not exceeding one year.

SEC. 3. That the two foregoing sections shall not apply to Chinese laborers who were in the United States on the seventeenth day of November, eighteen hundred and eighty, or who shall have come into the same before the expiration of ninety days next after the passage of this act, and who shall produce

Dr. Charles E. Tingley, associate secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society, stated in an immigration interview that Mabel Lee had been “in charge of the Chinese Mission Work in New York City since January, 1925...” and that her duties were “... largely teaching, social work among the Chinese people and conducting of religious services, including preaching.”¹¹ He also noted that she was a phenomenal public speaker, and that he had heard her give an address to more than 5,000, who were captivated by her speech.¹² Throughout the immigration interview process, greater credence was given to non-Chinese (Caucasian) witness testimonies.

It was not until 1943, when the Chinese Exclusion Act was ultimately overturned, that Chinese American women were enfranchised and able to vote. Immigration from China was still limited to a quota of 105 people per year, and quotas remained until Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1965.

There are no records, however, that confirm that Mabel Lee pursued that right and naturalized. Dr. Mabel Lee is one of countless women and men whose stories and documents are recorded in the holdings of the National Archives, and whose records illustrate a complex life of advocating for their beliefs and working to right wrongs they identified in order to achieve the American ideal and form a “more perfect union.”

Notes

1. Cheryl Davis and Mia Morrison, *The Chinese Exclusion Act: Researching in the National Archives* (The National Archives and Records Administration, 2015), www.archives.gov/publications/ebooks/chinese-exclusion.html.
2. Szu-yü Teng and John King Fairbank, *China's Response to the West: A Documentary Survey 1839-1923* (Harvard Univ. Press, 1982), 94.
3. Interview of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee, 6/18/1937, Case File 12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York City.
4. Timothy Tseng, “Dr. Mabel Lee: The Interstitial Career of a Protestant Chinese American Woman, 1924-1950.” Paper presented at the Organization of American Historians Annual Meeting, Chicago, Illinois, 1996). <https://timtsengdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/mabel-lee-paper-1996.pdf>.

U. S. DEPARTMENT OF LABOR
Immigration & Naturalization Service
Ellis Island, N.Y.H.

12/943 June 18, 1937.

In the matter of MABEL LEE, applicant for an Immigration Return Permit.

W.J.Zucker - Inspector
C.Binder - Stenographer.

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Applicant duly sworn testifies in English:

Q What is your name?
A Mabel Lee.
Q Have you any other names?
A Lee Ping Hua, Chinese given name. I have no other names.
Q You were never married?
A No.
Q State your age and birthplace.
A Age 42, born Canton, China.
Q You first came to this country through what port and when?
A San Francisco about 1900 or 1901, as the daughter of a teacher.
Q How many times have you been out of the United States since then?
A Twice. The first time was 1923 I think, I went to Europe and came back 1924. The last time I went in the Summer of 1929 and returned in the Fall the same year through Seattle with the return permit which I obtained the same year.
Q You now wish to go to China?
A Yes, departing through Seattle.
Q You expect to return through the same port?
A Yes.
Q Who was your father?
A Lee Too.
Q And your mother?
A Lai Bek.
Q They are both deceased?
A Yes.
Q You have no brothers or sisters?
A No.
Q How are you now employed?
A By the New York City Baptist Mission Society as Director of the Chinese Christian Center at 21 Pell Street, New York City.
Q That is your sole employment?
A Yes. (Presents letter on the stationery of the New York City Baptist Mission Society, dated June 16, 1937, signed by Charles H. Sears, General Secretary.)

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12/943

Q How long have you been Director of the Center?
A I have been engaged in the same work with them for twelve years and about a year ago they put up the Center and I have been director of the new building for the past year.
Q You have a Ph.D. degree from Columbia University?
A Yes.

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Certified correct-transcribed 6/18/37.

C.B. Binder
steno.

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5. Supplementary Statements Made by the Applicant, 3/12/1923, Case File 12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York City.
6. Bayer Lee, Personal Interview. 20 Aug. 2019.
7. "Chinese Girl Wants Vote," *New-York Tribune* (4/13/1912). Library of Congress; Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers. https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/data/batches/dlc_keady_ver01/data/sn83030214/00206531526/1912041301/0219.pdf.
8. "Beyond Suffrage: 'Working Together, Working Apart' How Identity Shaped Suffragists' Politics." *Museum of the City of New York*; www.mcny.org/lesson-plans/beyond-suffrage-working-together-working-apart-how-identity-shaped-suffragists.
9. Bayer Lee, Personal Interview. 20 Aug. 2019.
10. Mabel Lee, "The Meaning of Woman Suffrage," *The Chinese Student Monthly* (May 1914): 526–529; Accessed via Tim Tseng Blog, <https://timtsengdotnet.files.wordpress.com/2013/12/mabel-lee-the-meaning-of-woman-suffrage-1914.pdf>.
11. Applicant for an Immigration Return Permit—Mabel Lee, 6/8/1929, Case File 12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York City.
12. Applicant for an Immigration Return Permit- Mabel Lee, 6/8/1929, Case File 12-943.



Courtesy of the Library of Congress

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Documents

[Chinese Exclusion Act] An Act of May 6, 1882, Public Law 71, 47th Congress, 1st Session, 22 STAT 58, to Execute Certain Treaty Stipulations Relating to Chinese; 5/6/1882; Enrolled Acts and Resolutions of Congress, 1789 - 2011; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/chinese-exclusion-act>]

Interview of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee; 6/18/1937; Case #12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act case file for Mabel Lee (Ping Hua Lee); Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, ca. 1882 - ca. 1960; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York, NY [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/interview-mabel-lee, National Archives Identifier: 134982405]

Unidentified Newspaper Clipping of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee; ca.1923; Case #12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act case file for Mabel Lee (Ping Hua Lee); Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files, ca. 1882 - ca. 1960; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York, New York, NY. [www.docsteach.org/documents/document/mabel-lee]

Photograph 208-PR-14M-3; Photograph of Suffrage Parade; 1913; Photographs Used in Publications, 1943 - 1945; Records of the Office of War Information, Record Group 208; National Archives at College Park, College Park, MD. [Online Version, <https://www.docsteach.org/documents/document/suffrage-parade>]

Related Documents:

House Joint Resolution 1 Regarding the 19th Amendment; 5/19/1919; (HR 66A-B6); Bills and Resolutions Originating in the House, 1789–1974; Records of the U.S. House of Representatives, Record Group 233; National Archives Building, Washington, DC. [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/house-nineteenth-amendment]

Applicant for an Immigration Return Permit- Mabel Lee, 6/8/1929, Case File 12-943; Chinese Exclusion Act Case Files; Records of the Immigration and Naturalization Service, Record Group 85; National Archives at New York City.

Act of December 17, 1943, Public Law 78-199, 57 STAT 600, to repeal the Chinese Exclusion Acts, and for other purposes; 12/17/1943; General Records of the United States Government, Record Group 11. [Online Version, www.docsteach.org/documents/document/act-of-december-17-1943-public-law-78199-57-stat-600-to-repeal-the-chinese-exclusion-acts-and-for-other-purposes]