

CHINESE GIRL WANTS VOTE: TRAILBLAZER MABEL LEE

WRITTEN BY JINNA KIM. PRODUCED BY CURIOUS THEATRE COLLECTIVE  
(SUMMER 2021).

Characters:

Narrator

Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee (1896-1966), women's suffrage  
activist.

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SFX: Intro music

CTC INTRO

Welcome to "Chinese Girl Wants Vote: Trailblazer Mabel Lee,"  
written by Jinna Kim and produced by Curious Theatre  
Collective.

SFX: Intro Music

CTC INTRO

Voting has long been viewed by Americans as one of the most  
essential rights and privileges of our democratic society.  
However, gaining the right to vote for every American citizen  
has been a long and complicated struggle. Even well into the  
21st Century, efforts to suppress the right to vote persist  
in many communities across the country.

In this episode, we honor the women's suffrage activist, Dr.  
Mabel Ping-Hua Lee. Dr. Lee campaigned for equality and  
opportunity over 100 years ago, but her message is as timely  
as ever. We hope you are inspired by her example and by her  
eloquence. Enjoy!

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SFX: Different musical underscoring.

NARRATOR

Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee was born in  
China in 1896 and emigrated to the  
United States with her parents when  
she was a child. Even as a  
teenager, Mabel could see the  
injustice in the world around her.

(MORE)

## NARRATOR (CONT'D)

She spoke passionately about sexism and racial prejudice against Chinese people, and she believed education was vital to women's rights and to the strength of the nation.

## DR. LEE

Chinese women have been thought of as nonentities politically. Education and learning traditionally have been deemed unnecessary for their duties as wives and mothers. Only recently schools have been established for women and girls. What better proof can you have of change in the attitude of leaders towards their women, than the presence of Chinese girls like me in America?

## NARRATOR

Mabel always used her voice to advocate for what she believed in, and she and her parents believed in the right for women to vote! As a teenager, Mabel was already a well-known figure in the New York suffrage movement -- so much so that she was invited to ride in the honor guard at the front of a giant parade in New York City!

SFX: Crowd noises and cheering. The clip-clops of hooves and a whinny as Mabel Lee rides on horseback in the parade.

## DR. LEE

(to horse)

Whoa, girl. Easy.

## NARRATOR

The year was 1912, and Mabel sat proudly on horseback riding down Fifth Avenue advocating for women's rights, waving to huge crowds.

SFX: Horse whinny. Crowd noise continues.

## DR. LEE

(to horse)

Easy girl, easy.

NARRATOR

Newspapers across America reported on her participation and printed her picture.

SFX: Camera sounds. Someone calls, "Extra, extra read all about it." The crowd quiets a little.

DR. LEE

(in front of a crowd)

We all believe in the idea of democracy; woman suffrage is the application of democracy to women. The fundamental principle of democracy is equality of opportunity.

SFX: Crowd cheers.

DR. LEE

I cannot too strongly impress the importance of suffrage, for the requirement of women to be worthy citizens and contribute their share to the steady progress of our country towards prosperity and national greatness. The neglect and indifference to women's welfare in the past must be remedied. Prejudice must be removed, and a healthy public sentiment created to support the progressive movement.

SFX: Crowd cheers.

DR. LEE

To us girls especially, who are among the first to emerge, will fall the duties of pioneers and, if we do our share, ours will be the honor and the glory. 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.

It is a fact that no matter where we go, we cannot escape hearing about women's suffrage. Now it is our turn!

SFX: Biggest crowd hurrah. Swell of music. Cameras flash.

DR. LEE

What are we going to do in answer to the call of duty?  
I ask for all girls the open door to the treasury of knowledge, the same opportunities for physical development as boys, and the same rights of participation in all human activities of which they are individually capable.

SFX: Crowd cheers once more. Music and crowd noise fades.

NARRATOR

In 1920, after decades of organizing and mobilizing, the suffragists finally saw the passage of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. The 19th Amendment reads: "The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex."

Women could finally vote!

SFX: Musical underscoring.

NARRATOR

However, as impactful as the 19th Amendment was, a large number of women in America were still disenfranchised. Impoverished women and women of color were subject to poll taxes, literacy tests and other limitations. Many immigrant women were denied access to the polls due to restrictive citizenship laws.

For example, even after fighting so hard for women's suffrage, Chinese women, including Mabel Lee, could not vote until 1943. This was because of the Chinese Exclusion Act, a Federal law that was put in place in 1882, before she was born. The Chinese Exclusion Act limited Chinese immigration and prevented Chinese immigrants from becoming citizens.

Throughout her teens and college years, Mabel Lee was an outspoken suffragist leader despite knowing that her status as a Chinese immigrant would prevent her from voting even when American women were granted that right.

DR. LEE

I say again, the fundamental principle of democracy is equality of opportunity. It means an equal chance for every woman to show what her merits are.

NARRATOR

After graduating from Barnard College, Mabel Lee received a master's degree from Columbia Teachers College and continued her studies at Columbia University. In 1921, she became the first Chinese woman in the United States to earn a PhD in economics. After her father died in 1924, she took over his role as director of the First Chinese Baptist Church of New York City. She later founded a community center offering vocational and English classes, a health clinic, and a kindergarten.

Dr. Mabel Ping Hua Lee never married and devoted her life to the Chinese American community in the United States. She passed away in 1966, leaving a legacy of activism and service.

In recognition of her life and advocacy on behalf of women and Chinese immigrants in the United States, the U.S. Post Office around the corner from the First Chinese Baptist Church was re-named Mabel Lee Memorial Post Office in 2018.

At the dedication ceremony, Rep.

(MORE)

## NARRATOR (CONT'D)

Nydia Velázquez remarked that "At a time when women were widely expected to spend a life in the home, Lee shattered one glass ceiling after another. From speaking out in the classroom to organizing Chinese American women to secure the right to vote, Lee's bold vision for Chinatown is very much alive in our community today."

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SFX: Outro music

## CTC OUTRO

Thank you for listening to "Chinese Girl Wants Vote: Trailblazer Mabel Lee" written by Jinna Kim and produced by the Curious Theatre Collective -- Jessica Flemming, Julie Kaplan, Tamara Kissane, and Emma Nadeau.

Curious Theatre Collective tells the stories of remarkable women through original theater programming, inspiring young audiences to follow their curiosity, persevere through challenges, and believe in the power of their imagination.

For more information, please see our website:  
[curioustheatrecollective.com](http://curioustheatrecollective.com)

"Chinese Girl Wants Vote: Trailblazer Mabel Lee" was recorded in the summer of 2021. This audio play was generously supported by The Orange County Arts Commission.

It was directed by Jessica Flemming, with sound design by Emma Nadeau, featuring original music by Jessica Arce-Larreta, Jennifer Kallend, and Cristina "Trinity" Vélez-Justo.

Dr. Mabel Lee is played by: Rachel Kananui

Narrator is played by: Pimpila Violette

This piece was recorded and produced on the unceded ancestral lands of the Eno, Lumbee, Sappony, Shakori, and Tuscarora tribes.

For more information, please see the links in our show notes.

Thanks!