

Light from China

In 1912, at the age of 16, Mabel Pin-Hua Lee rode her way into women's suffrage history. Wearing a "Votes-For-Women" sash, she was one of several women to lead the New York City Women's Suffrage march on horseback. She herself would not benefit from women winning the right to vote, due to racist policies against Asian Americans. But she knew that suffrage for women was a step towards equality for all.

Mabel came to the United States from China as a young child in 1900. Even though the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 banned most Chinese people from moving to the U.S, Mabel's family was allowed to immigrate because her parents were teachers in the Baptist church. They settled in Chinatown and Mabel got a scholarship to go to school.

Mabel's parents inspired her political activism. They taught her that women were equal to men and they refused to bind her feet as her mother's had been. Mabel worked at the community YWCA and raised money to help starving families in China.

In 1911, a revolution happened in China. The Republic of China was founded, and women gained some voting rights. Women in the U.S. who were fighting for the right to vote noticed this news about China. They reached out

to Chinese communities in America and invited Chinese women to their meetings. Mabel Lee, in high school at the time, was invited to participate.

At the suffrage meeting, Mabel impressed the women with her well-spoken strength. She shared her beliefs about equal educational opportunities for Chinese children. She spoke about the discrimination she and other Chinese women experienced in the United States.

On May 4th, 1912, ten thousand protesters started in Greenwich Village and marched up 5th Avenue to Carnegie Hall. Women from Chinatown marched with signs that said, “Women Vote in China,” and “Light from China.”

Mabel went on to attend Barnard College and Columbia University. She became the first Chinese American woman to earn a PhD in economics. Throughout her studies she continued to fight for women’s suffrage. She also presented a speech called “The Submerged Half” in which she talked about the need for gender equality in China. In 1917 she led another suffrage march focusing on Chinese Americans.

When the 19th amendment passed in 1920 and women earned the right to vote, Mabel was still not allowed to cast a ballot. She was prevented from voting because the Chinese Exclusion Act took away many of the rights of citizenship from Chinese Americans. Mabel did not vote until 1943, when the Exclusion Act was repealed.



After her father died, Mabel took over the leadership of his church. She devoted many years to helping the church community in Chinatown. She started a health clinic, kindergarten, vocational training center, and English language school. Throughout her life, Mabel fought for women on both sides of the globe and worked to improve opportunities for her own Chinese American community. She was truly a Light from China.



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Why was Mabel's family allowed to come to the U.S. despite the Chinese Exclusion Act?
 - a. Mabel had a scholarship to go to school
 - b. Her parents were teachers in the Baptist church
 - c. They were going to live in Chinatown
 - d. They were activists

2. What was "The Submerged Half"?
 - a. A speech Mabel gave about the need for gender equality in China
 - b. A paper Mabel wrote as part of her PhD in economics
 - c. A suffrage march that Mabel organized
 - d. A book that Mabel wrote about Chinese American discrimination

3. Why do you think the women suffragists invited Chinese women to their meeting?
 - a. Because they liked Chinese women
 - b. Because they thought Chinese women were strong and well-spoken
 - c. Because they hoped Chinese women could help them since China had just granted women voting rights
 - d. Because they wanted equality for Chinese women

4. Why couldn't Mabel vote in 1917?
 - a. Because she was a woman
 - b. Because she was Chinese
 - c. Because she was a woman AND because she was Chinese
 - d. None of the above

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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