

Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee

“Advocated for women’s suffrage, excluded from citizenship”

October 7, 1897 – 1966



Dr. Mabel Ping-Hua Lee was born in Guangzhou near Hong Kong in 1896. At the age of four, her father moved to the United States to become a missionary, leaving Dr. Lee with her mother and grandmother. While still in China, Dr. Lee learned English at a missionary school and eventually won an academic scholarship that earned her an American visa, leading her family to settle in New York City’s Chinatown in 1905, where Dr. Lee attended Erasmus Hall Academy. By age sixteen, Dr. Lee was well-known within New York’s suffrage movement.

In 1912, New York suffragists held a parade to advocate for women’s suffrage that had ten thousand people in attendance. Dr. Lee helped lead the parade through the city on horseback and the *New York Tribune* wrote an article highlighting her before the parade. The piece discussed her academic achievements as well as her desire to help improve the lives of women and girls, also earning mention in the paper’s coverage of the parade.

Dr. Lee began studying at Barnard College in 1912. In her time there, Dr. Lee joined the Chinese Students’ Association and wrote feminist essays for *The Chinese Students’ Monthly*, remaining very involved in the suffrage movement throughout her entire time at Barnard. In a May 1914 essay titled “The Meaning of Woman Suffrage,” Dr. Lee argued that suffrage was necessary for a democracy to be successful. The Women’s Political Union began a Suffrage Shop in 1915 and invited Lee to give a speech, which was covered by the *New York Times*, again earning her more notoriety and acclaim within the movement.

In 1917, New York granted women the right to vote and the 19th Amendment granted the right to vote nationally in 1920, but not all women were included in these pieces of legislation. Chinese women could not vote until 1943 due to the Chinese Exclusion Act, a federal law enacted in 1882 that both limited Chinese immigration and prevented Chinese immigrants from obtaining citizenship. Without citizenship, one could not be eligible to vote. Despite this, Dr. Lee and other Chinese suffragists still advocated for women’s suffrage despite their own inability to benefit from legislation granting women the vote.

Upon her graduation from Barnard College, Dr. Lee attended Columbia University where she earned a PhD in economics, becoming the first Chinese woman to do so. In 1921, Dr. Lee published her academic research in a book titled *The Economic History of China*. As a teenager, Dr. Lee’s dream was to move back to China and create a girl’s school, but upon her father’s death in 1924, she assumed his role as director of the First Chinese Baptist Church of New York City. Later, Dr. Lee founded the Chinese Christian Center, which operated as a community center and offered vocational and English classes, a health clinic, and a kindergarten. Dr. Lee never married, devoting the entirety of her life to bettering the Chinese community and fighting for women’s rights. Dr. Lee died in 1966, and there is no confirmation of whether she ever became an American citizen or voted in the United States.

Sources

<https://www.nps.gov/people/mabel-lee.htm>

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