



VIA VIKING

The Revolutionary Chinese Suffragette Who Challenged

America's Politics

Mattie Kahn Tells the Story of Mabel Ping-Hua Lee

By Mattie Kahn

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Mabel Ping-Hua Lee blended in with her peers at the parade, just as Blatch had intended. She wore the same three-cornered hat and had it knotted with the same colored ribbons. She was “clad”—in the words of one newspaper commentator—just “like the rich and fashionable suffragettes around her, in a tight fitting black broadcloth habit.”

But compared with the white activists who were also leading the march, she did stand out. There were not a lot of Chinese girls on the front lines of the American battle for women's suffrage.

In the months before Blatch's parade, rumors spread that China had extended the vote to its women. The chattering classes in New York were horrified. For white women who were desperate to vote and who lived in a nation founded on the supposed ideals of freedom, it was a bitter pill. For those who harbored anti-Chinese sentiments, it was humiliating. With the Page Act of 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, the United States had barred most Chinese people from crossing its borders. Implicit in the bills was the racist conviction that their mere presence posed a threat.

News of the enfranchisement of women in China complicated the narrative. How was it possible America had failed to extend to its women a right that that nation had offered theirs? Activists raced to capitalize on the scandal. In cities like New York and

Boston and Cincinnati, advocates for women's suffrage joined up with Chinese activists to get the word out, contrasting American inaction on the issue with Chinese progress.

Prejudices ran so deep that even the fact of their meeting drew attention. In *The Oregonian*, in April 1912, a writer crammed the newsiest bit of the article into its five-word headline: "Chinese Women Dine with White."

In New York, three prominent white suffragists, including Alva Belmont, called for a similar summit. The women invited a handful of activists and Chinese leaders to discuss opportunities for collaboration. Lee and her parents, a minister and a teacher who'd been permitted to settle in the United States thanks to narrow exemptions to the nativist laws, attended. Mabel was given the floor.

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She was a well-rehearsed public speaker. The recent revolution in China had driven scores of Chinese American students in the United States—girls in particular—to get involved in local politics. Chinese nationalist leaders preached an ethos of self-improvement, which meant urging girls to pursue education, develop experience and expertise, and then pledge to give back to China.

Lee had become a fixture at local events, with impeccable credentials to match her rousing rhetoric. She had graduated from the famed Erasmus Hall High School, where she was the lone Chinese student in her class. She was headed for Barnard, where she would enroll in the fall of 1913.

But not all the women who had met to discuss the future of suffrage knew that, which must have made Lee's remarks much more jarring. Had some expected a pat on the back for their belated attempt at inclusion? Had some hoped to encounter a modest, grateful good girl? She didn't give them the satisfaction.

"All women are recognized in New York, excepting Chinese women," Lee said. Educational institutions were closed to them. Social hubs and recreational centers excluded them. Their marginalization was deliberate. Lee couldn't stand it. She invoked her proverbial Chinese sister and demanded an answer: "How can she learn!" Hers was not a private call to account. It wasn't a request. It was a barn burner.

We can't know whether the white women in attendance felt chastened. We do know that parade organizers took notice. Lee, who would later become the first Chinese woman to earn a doctorate from Columbia, was invited to ride in the march. Had her remarks moved her audience to revisit its biases? Had it motivated them to redouble their efforts to work with and elevate the voices of women like her?

Or was it a simpler calculation: In the fact of her being, Lee served as a taunt. Here was a girl whom China would allow to grow up and vote. How would America respond?

Newspaper articles profiled Chinese women who had come to support suffrage stateside. Some stories took credit for the supposed American roots of the recent Chinese revolution. Others expressed a newfound interest in the lives of Chinese students in the United States. Several marveled over the sudden reversal in the fortunes of Chinese women. Writers obsessed over the practice of foot-binding that rendered some women immobile. Reporters scrutinized their clothes. These women—these women!—would now be permitted to vote?

With a month to go before the march, *The New York Times* asked Lee to comment on the shift—how “these fair representatives of an old conservative nation” had become the kind of women who wanted to ride on horseback up the streets of Manhattan. Lee answered that their “great awakening” was a function of just how long Chinese women had been held back. “Is that not natural?” she said. “The accumulated need of centuries is bursting out. This is our recompense.”

That “accumulated need” did burst out on the morning of the march. *The New York Times* blared a reminder: “Chinese Women Will Ride.” The paper also made sure to mention that some parade participants would have to follow the marchers in cars because their feet had been bound.

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and in the public consciousness. She was adored—

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Lee's mother, Lai Beck, was one such woman. The paper couldn't help but sniff: Despite their historically poor treatment, "their men have enfranchised them." So much ado about the state of women in China. So little about the treatment of the Chinese in the United States.

Mainstream papers did not seem to see the contradictions in their coverage—not in how their stories fixated on the cause of Chinese suffrage but ignored the routine discrimination against Chinese immigrants in America, and not in how the organizing of disenfranchised girls like Lee was fetishized, but the large-scale activism of Black women was for the most part ignored.

Black women lined up to march in New York in 1912 and in Washington, D.C., in 1913, when Alice Paul planned her famed parade for the women's vote. Both times white leaders sidelined them. In 1912, white women were the face of the operation, with Lee serving as a notable and purposeful exception.

To placate Southerners in 1913, Paul and other leaders allowed states to decide whether to integrate their delegations. In several, this meant that Black women were made to stand behind hordes of white participants. The journalist and activist Ida B. Wells refused to be minimized. She marched with the white delegation from her home state of Illinois.

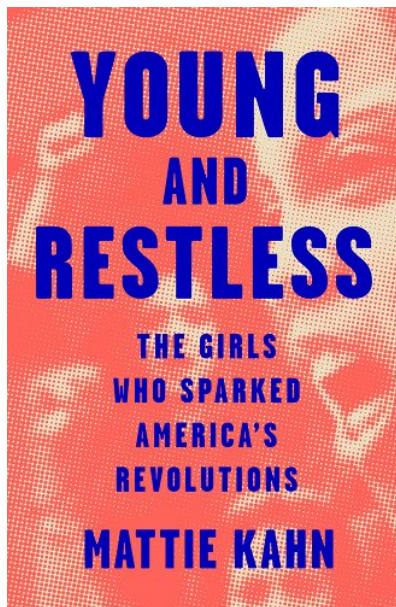
In the end, ten thousand people participated in the parade in 1912, per *The New York Times*. The *New York Herald* put the crowd closer to seventeen thousand, with at least four times that number in onlookers. It would take almost a decade for women to win their constitutional amendment, but each parade and demonstration and bill dented the opposition. That was the plan. *Optics*.

Several women who marched in the procession held up a banner emblazoned with a mother's battle song: "We prepare children for the world. We ask to prepare the world for our children."

The world was not prepared for their children.

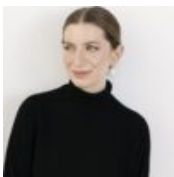
What had Blatch's obsessive focus on her girls—including Lee—netted? One reporter considered the turnout and concluded that there might no longer be a single person in New York "who does not now know the meaning of the word 'suffragette.'"

The parade had elevated Lee both on horseback and in the public consciousness. She was adored—at once famous and beloved, and foreign and unknown. Not unlike a child star, Lee was well spoken and charismatic, the picture of female promise, but not quite familiar. She captivated audiences. She spoke immaculate English. She retained a little magic. In 1914, an attendee at a conference where she had been asked to speak remarked that audiences left “Mabelized” from her talks.



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Mattie Kahn



Mattie Kahn is an award-winning writer and editor. She is the author of *Young and Restless: the Girls Who Sparked America's Revolutions*. Her work has been published in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *The Atlantic*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vogue*, *Vox*, and more. She was the culture director at *Glamour*, where she covered women's issues and politics, and a staff editor at *Elle*. She lives in New York with her husband.



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