“China’s Submerged Half” (1915?) Speech by Mabel Lee

Note: I found this document in the New York Chinese Baptist Church. Mabel Lee’s feminism assumed that Christianity – especially Christian missionaries – was largely responsible for opening the door to educational access for women in China. This speech, given while she was a student at Barnard College (or possibly when she was studying for her Ph.D. at Columbia University), attracted a Chinese male suitor! The speech reflects the optimism and hope for a modern (and Christian-influenced) China among young adults Chinese students at the time. According to Lee and other Chinese feminists, gender equality was a necessity in the new China. The connections between mainline Protestantism, feminism, and modern nationalism among Chinese Christians sustained itself throughout the 1920s and 1930s, only to be severed by the Communist triumph by mid-century. By then, mainline Chinese Protestants were losing their social influence as Chinese evangelicals became increasingly dominant. — Tim Tseng (Nov. 26, 2013)

I plead for a wider sphere of usefulness for the long submerged women of China. I ask for our 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.

By the beginning of the 20th century the conditions of the great masses of Chinese women may be thus briefly summarized. Politically, of course, they were nonentities. The scheme of education left them out of consideration because learning was deemed unnecessary for the discharge of their duties as wives and mothers. Those who obtained the rudiments of learning were so rare as to attract notice. The custom which dictated the seclusion of women forbade social intercourse with the other sex. The custom of foot-binding robbed them of freedom of movement and crippled them from their girlhood to the time when earthly sufferings end.

Except in rural communities where they worked like the men and alongside of them, the Chinese women’s sphere was enclosed by the walls of their homes.

In China the female of the species never could be deadlier than the male because at all times she was under control. According to a famous writer “At home, the girl follows her parents; after marriage she follows her husband; and at his death, she follows her son.” [Mabel Lee handwritten note: “to cut out” this paragraph]

An old custom based on a false philosophy deprived her of the choice of her mate. An iniquitous law made it easier for the husband to divorce his wife than for her to divorce him. In no country is the double standard of morals so deeply entrenched as in China.

This is a sombre picture indeed --- not pleasant to contemplate, but it is necessary to present it first in order to show the improvement made in recent years.
I have not mentioned the blighting effects of the institution of polygamy, for, with enlightenment and bodily freedom of women the custom of annexing extra wives will be “more honored in the breach than the observance.” A drastic law forbidding the practice will go far towards its abolition. But the solution of the question is largely in women’s hands as this story will show:

An American missionary in China was taking tea with a mandarin’s eight wives. The Chinese ladies examined her clothing, her hair, her teeth, and so on, but her feet especially amazed them.

“Why”, cried one, “you can walk and run as well as a man.”

“Yes, to be sure”, said the missionary.

“Can you ride a horse and swim, too?”

“Yes”.

“Then you must be as strong as a man!”

“I am.”

“And you wouldn’t let a man beat you --- not even if he was your husband --- would you?”

“Indeed, I wouldn’t”, the missionary said.

The mandarin’s wives looked at one another, nodding their heads. Then the oldest said, softly:

“Now I understand why an American never has more than one wife. He is afraid.”

Any picture showing the condition of Chinese women throughout the by-gone past, though dark in the main, must be a moving picture to be strictly truthful. Glimpses of light run through every scene. Women of learning, women versed in statecraft, women of commanding intellect and heroines in every walk of life emerged from cramping surroundings and played their parts in the long drama of Chinese history.

The first book on the subject of education for women was written in China, and by a Chinese woman. The subject has often been treated by Chinese writers, and Luhchau, one of the most distinguished essayists of the last century, says in his “Female Instructor,” “The basis of the gov’t likes in the habits of the people --- which last depends chiefly upon the females.”

But after all, the true status of women cannot be determined merely by studying the theories advanced on the subject in a nation’s literature. [Theory and practice are
too often at variance] We know only too well that in China there is a big gap between the cherished ideals regarding women which are found in our literature and the everyday practice which has prevailed for centuries in our society. There are famous books of instruction about women, and especially addressed to them such as “The Four Books for Girls”; The Classics for Women”; as well as “The Records of Illustrious Women of Ancient Times”: but how many women in a thousand have ever read them? Seventeen centuries had elapsed from the time of the publishing of the first book on the education of women in China to 1877, when Dr. Martin, an American missionary, said that not one in ten thousand women could even read? So much good had the theories of our great thinkers done for Chinese women!

After China opened five ports under the treaty with England in 1848, the education and uplift of Chinese women was taken up by missionaries. After they had devoted 55 years of patient and persevering labours to this noble cause, the work was undertaken by the Chinese themselves, who established the first school for girls in Foochow in 1897. Need we wonder that this new school was considered by our missionary friends as the greatest achievement of the age, and that Dr. Young J. Allen, one of the venerable workers invited to speak at the first commencement exercises, declared, as he stood before the assembled students and guests, that he felt inclined to say, “Lord, now lettest Thou Thy servant depart in peace.”?

A new day has dawned [for the hitherto secluded and uneducated women of China] and no patriot or friend of China can fail to rejoice at the change. Hampered by crippling foot-bandages and the ever more rigid bonds of old social customs, our women have know no horizon beyond the four walls of their houses. They have received so little education, if any at all, that even in thought they have been practically limited to the area within these walls. That they, in spite of these limitations, have exercised such undeniable influence from time to time, is significant of the power which will be exercised by the Chinese women of the future, who with unbound feet and untrammeled minds, will face a new and dazzling era in the history of her sex.

Edicts have been issued against slavery and foot-binding, schools are being established for women and girls, and polygamy has been condemned as incompatible with modern civilization. These are evidences of the change of attitude toward women and her place in life. In the past she had no recognized place in society. To-day, not a few appear as equals in social and public gatherings and voice their sentiments.

The wives and daughters of leading Chinese officials attended with their husbands or fathers the inauguration ball given by President Yuan Shin Kai and there met the foreign diplomats and members of their families. Truly, the worm had burst its chrysalis; the women of China had taken their rightful place in society.
One of the most striking signs of the times is a daily newspaper for women edited by Mrs. Chang and published in Peking. This newspaper has been a power for good ever since it was started in 1906.

Mass meetings of Chinese women are now of such common occurrence as almost to have lost their novelty. A public meeting for women was called in Kiukiang some months before the opening of the National Industrial Exposition at Nanking for the purpose of urging the women to send thither specimens of their work “and so widen their interests and at the same time promote a worthy enterprise.”

What better proof can you have of the change that has come over the country in the attitude of its leaders towards their women than the presence of these Chinese girls in the educational institutions of America?

As patriots and workers for China we cannot but be happy in our hearts to hear of the facts and know that Chinese women have proved themselves able to receive and wisely use their education. It is practically an established fact that every Chinese student is wishing God-speed and success to the nation-wide propaganda for the uplift and betterment of our women. But is this wish alone sufficient to bring its realization? To hope success and to achieve success are entirely different propositions.

Our statesmen for century back have felt the need for female education and must have wished for it. But what was the good of their mere wishing?

The missionaries came in their turn. They not only wished and prayed, but they labored. And it is largely due to their untiring efforts in the face of obstacles well-nigh insurmountable, that the present interest in women’s education owes its existence.

Now it is our turn. What are we going to do in answer to the call of duty?

What good are laws and edicts if they are not enforced? Who of us does not know that at this very day foot-binding is still going on unhindered, that educational opportunities for girls are few and far behind those for boys, and that polygamy is an everyday practice even among some officials.

The Great Charter was wrung from King John 700 years ago --- but the fight for freedom and human rights is still going on in English itself. How many years will it take for us to fully raise the submerged half of our country? [Mabel Lee note: “out”]

Friends and fellow-students: China’s submerged half has begun to emerge and when you recall that a battalion of Chinese young women was organized and drilled for service in the late revolution, and that a militant woman suffragist used violence towards a deputy of the Nanking Assembly for refusing to vote for woman suffrage, you will agree with me that a part of that half has emerged with a vengeance.
Still, all that is but a beginning. The great mass of the people has yet to be aroused to the necessity for action. The neglect and indifference to women’s welfare in the past must be remedied --- Not only laws must be passed in the interest of the future mothers of the new Republic, but they must be religiously enforced. Prejudice must be removed and a healthy public sentiment created to support the progressive movement.

In furtherance of such a cause we students should take a leading part. 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.

The welfare of China and possibly its very existence as an independent nation depends on rendering tardy justice to its womankind. 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.

In the fierce struggle for existence among the nations, that nation is badly handicapped which leaves undeveloped one half of its intellectual and moral resources.

If, according to President Lincoln, the Federal Union could not endure half free, half slave, how can China maintain her position among independent nations half free and taught, half shackled in body and in mind?