FEBRUARY 13 - MARCH 24, 2019 | STIEMKE STUDIO

A **John (Jack) D. Lewis** *New Play Development Program Production*

THE CHINESE LADY

By **Lloyd Suh** | Directed by **May Adrales**

Play Guide

The Stiemke Studio Season is presented by:
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The Rep MILWAUKEE 65TH ANNIVERSARY

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BRIEF SUMMARY

The Chinese Lady begins in 1834, when we meet Afong Moy, a fourteen-year-old Chinese girl who is on display as an exotic oddity at Peale's Museum in New York. She is accompanied by her attendant, Atung, who translates for her and serves her as part of the act. The play follows Afong throughout her life, as she tells her story to different audiences around America. In each scene, we see Afong in her exhibition room, reciting her script, and then elaborating on her life experiences. Atung is there all along, by her side to serve her and their masters, those who employ Afong Moy throughout her life.

CREATIVE TEAM

May Adrales
Director

Lloyd Suh
Playwright

Collette Pollard
Scenic Designer

Melissa Ng
Costume Designer

Noele Stollmack
Lighting Designer

Andre J. Pluess
Sound Designer

Clare Arena Haden
Voice & Text Coach

Deanie Vallone
Dramaturg

Nancy Davis
Dramaturgical Consultant

Frank Honts
Casting Director

Dale Brown, CSA
Casting

Kimberly Carolus
Stage Manager

Josh Hart
Stage Management Resident

Ismael Lara, Jr.
Assistant Director

PRODUCTION HISTORY

The Chinese Lady premiered in July 2018, produced by Ma-Yi Theater Company and Barrington Stage in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. Playwright Lloyd Suh is a member of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab. The co-production then moved to Theater Row, New York City in October 2018. Our production at Milwaukee Rep continues this new play's and Afong Moy's journey.

Shannon Tyo in The Chinese Lady, *Ma-Yi Theater Company. Photo Credit: Ma-Yi Theater Company.*

Daniel K. Isaac and Shannon Tyo in The Chinese Lady, *Ma-Yi Theater Company. Photo Credit: Ma-Yi Theater Company.*

Lisa Helmi Johanson

Afong Moy: Afong Moy begins the play as an optimistic representative of her culture who sees herself as an ambassador. As she experiences America and its people over the years of her life, we see the evolution of her worldview and her understanding of her role.

"What is happening is a performance. For my entire life is a performance. The words I am speaking are not my own. The clothes I am wearing are not my own. The Room in which I am seated is intended to be representative of China, just as I am intended to be representative of The Chinese Lady: the first woman from the Orient ever to set foot in America, and yet this Room is unlike any room in China, and I am unlike any lady to ever live." - *Afong Moy*

"I am very pleased to be here in this great country. I am very pleased to represent my country, my family, my culture, and my history to you in hopes that this may lead to greater understanding and goodwill between China and America, and between all the peoples of the world." - *Afong Moy*

Jon Norman Schneider

Atung: Atung is a manservant employed by Afong Moy's masters, the Carnes, to help her and translate for her to audiences. He has a more skeptical viewpoint of the world, the intentions of Afong Moy's visitors, and those who colonize and appropriate cultures other than their own. He is a faithful servant, but also a man with strong opinions.

"Like cracks in a bell or a story of when it was first rung, we embellish and interpret, perhaps not in the pursuit of the literal truth, but some other more intangible truth about ourselves and the nature of truth itself?" - *Atung*

"Sometimes when I dream, I dream of China. I dream of my childhood, of sky and streams of memory, of earth that bore me and mother and father that look like me. Sometimes when I dream, I dream of ocean, and the ship that carried me to all of these new worlds." - *Atung*

THE STORY BEHIND THE PLAY

Sketch of Afong Moy in one of her exhibition rooms. Photo Credit: National Women's History Museum.

Afong Moy was a real Chinese woman who indeed came to New York City in 1834. She arrived on the merchant ship Washington, operated by a Captain Obear, to serve as a promotional gimmick for the wares of importers Nathaniel and Frederick Carne. Obear's job of finding a young Chinese woman of a certain class to promote their goods proved difficult as China was a fairly closed society and women in upper-class families were often secluded. Historical record is unclear on how Obear was able to secure a deal with Afong Moy's father, a distinguished citizen of China living outside Canton. Records do indicate that a large sum of money was exchanged, as well as a promise that she would return with Obear upon his next journey to China.

Upon her arrival in America, papers speculated what the young woman might look like and act like, as she was quite possibly the first Chinese woman in the United States. At this time, very few Chinese people were living in America, as the mass immigrations that would occur in response to the Gold Rush and the building of the Transcontinental Railroad had yet to happen. So, Afong Moy brought with her a culture that was unique and new to most Americans. This proved to be a huge draw for many people, and thousands of people came to visit her, watch her, and learn about her culture.

Afong Moy was put on exhibition in a display filled with Chinese wares that the Carne brothers imported to give her "room" a supposedly authentic and luxurious feel. If patrons enjoyed Afong Moy and all of her beautiful things, they could purchase them for themselves from her employers-- sometimes right outside the exhibition hall. The Carnes' marketing gimmick seemed to work, as Afong Moy became a household name within a few months of her arrival.

When patrons would attend Afong Moy's performances, she would display her tiny bound feet on a cushion, answer questions through her translator, eat with chopsticks, and hobble around the room so people could see her walk. As time went on, she also added singing Chinese songs to her performances, and learned some English with which she could directly converse with patrons. People all over the country lined up to see her do these everyday things as they were "exotic" and fascinating. Many were most intrigued by her tiny feet, a symbol of her "otherness."

Afong Moy toured many major cities in the United States for several years, and people all over the country came to see her. After her first few years in America, it was unclear how her fortunes fell, but some evidence suggests that she experienced some hard times. In 1848, she shared an exhibition space with Tom Thumb, who was under contract with P.T. Barnum. In 1850, Barnum brought another Chinese woman to be part of his exhibition and started a campaign to discredit Afong Moy as inauthentic and not a "true lady." After this discrediting, Afong Moy disappeared from newspapers and slipped away into obscurity after years of exploitation of her person and her culture.

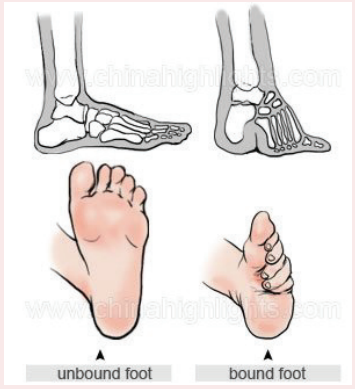
Chinese Beauty Standards and Foot Binding

Lotus shoe. Photo credit: Samford University Library.

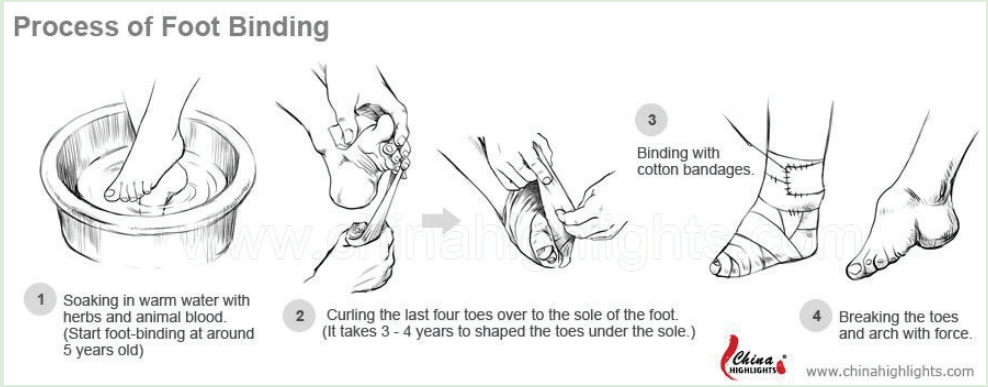
Woman with bound feet. Photo credit: Shmoop.com

Throughout Chinese history, as in much of the rest of the world, the standards of female beauty changed over time. During some of the earlier Chinese dynasties, confidence, power and a level of devotion to more outward adornment were prized, but during Afong Moy's time, the standards had shifted. Afong Moy lived during the Qing Dynasty, a period from 1644-1911, when a demure and more reserved beauty was prized. During this time, the government tried to put an end to the practice of foot binding, with little success, as the practice continued among upper class women.

While foot binding had long been associated with eroticism, during this period the meaning of the practice moved more towards social responsibility and subservience. Upper class women bound their feet as a symbol of their status and their morality. Women were expected to possess virtue and talent, but beauty as a symbol of sexuality was less accepted. We see these qualities in Afong Moy's performances throughout the play, and specifically through her dainty walking on her bound feet. Legend has it that foot binding was begun by a court dancer in the 10th century who bound her feet and entranced the Emperor with dancing on her toes. The practice came into fashion during that time and from the very beginning had erotic overtones, and was considered a desirable trait in acquiring a good husband. The practice also limited women's movement and in many upper class families, served as a status symbol based on how tiny the feet were. In lower class families, the practice was also prevalent, but researchers Laurel Bossen and Hill Gates suggest that the purpose was different: the bound feet helped confine young girls and women to doing the handwork and embroidery that was so important in pre-industrial China.



Drawing of unbound and bound feet. Photo Credit: China Highlights.



The process of foot binding began when a girl was very young. The feet were soaked in very hot water and animal blood, and then the toenails were clipped very short before rubbing the feet with oil. All of the girl's toes, except the big toe, were broken and bound flat against the sole of the foot. Then the arch was strained and the foot bent over onto itself before being bound with a very long silk binding. Girls were often forced to walk long distances to encourage their arches to break. The bindings were removed and rewrapped every few days to prevent infection, and sometimes excess skin or flesh was trimmed off. As the foot started to assume the correct shape, the bindings became tighter and the shoes smaller. The process took one to two years, and by the end the heel and sole were completely crushed together, creating a cleft in the middle and a "lotus" shape. After the feet were in the proper shape, they were as small as three inches in length and the women had to wear specially made "lotus shoes." The practice served as a connection between generations of women, as mothers or older female relatives often bound the feet of the young girls. One researcher referred to the practice as "underpinning women's culture."

Foot binding remained popular for possibly 1,000 years, and was finally outlawed by the Chinese government in 1912. In rural areas, the practice continued with some young girls into the 1950s. The last factory making lotus shoes did not close until 1999.

Zisha teapot. Photo Credit: Meimei Fine Teas.

TEA
IN CHINESE CULTURE

Woman performing Chinese tea art. Photo Credit: China Travel.

A *gaiwan*. Photo Credit: Amazon.

Drawing of Ancient Chinese tea drinking game during the Song Dynasty. Photo Credit: People.cn.

Tea, and the ceremonies and culture surrounding it, are a very important part of Chinese identity and culture. In the play, Afong Moy serves and drinks tea as part of her performance. In China, tea is not only a part of daily life, but also an integral part of special occasions and ceremonies.

After the discovery of tea, it remained restricted to a corner of Southwest China for over 2,000 years because of the difficulty of transportation. In 316 B.C., tea became an indulgence for the elite class and spread to other parts of China due to warring factions taking it with them to other parts of the country. After this dissemination of tea began, its popularity spread to the masses. As the changing dynasties evolved in China, new traditions and customs around tea emerged, but its omnipresence continued.

In China, the preparation of tea is very particular and each type of tea requires specific utensils, vessels, and steeping processes. Whether using a *Zisha* teapot, pouring the tea into a *gaiwan*, or serving with traditional blue and white porcelain, Chinese tea accoutrements are as varied as the hundreds of varieties of tea.

Tea art is the act of serving tea, and takes many forms. Afong Moy performs tea art in the play, and did so in her real life performances. Author of *Chinese Tea*, Ling Yun, describes tea art as follows:

> Its movements are like finger dancing with an opera-like plot. A graceful show of tea art is on when a tea sommelier slowly stretches out her wrists. While she fetches a tea utensil, you are seeing her fingers move like seeing the first blossom of a lotus flower. When she holds up the cup and moves it, it's like an orchid floating in the air . . . The whole set of gestures are completed in a continuous gentle flow without any breaks, just like following the movements of Tai-Chi, where there seems to be a spirit floating and transferring in between, revealing the beauty and richness of its vitality.

Yun also refers to the immense role tea has in China and its culture: "Tea is the carrier of Chinese culture, where its values and ideal Tao of the Chinese can be found. Tao, the most supreme conception of the Chinese philosophies, signifies universal law, ultimate truth, and the general rule governing all motions, or the essence or origin of everything on earth."

Photo from Wilerson S Andrade on Flickr.com.

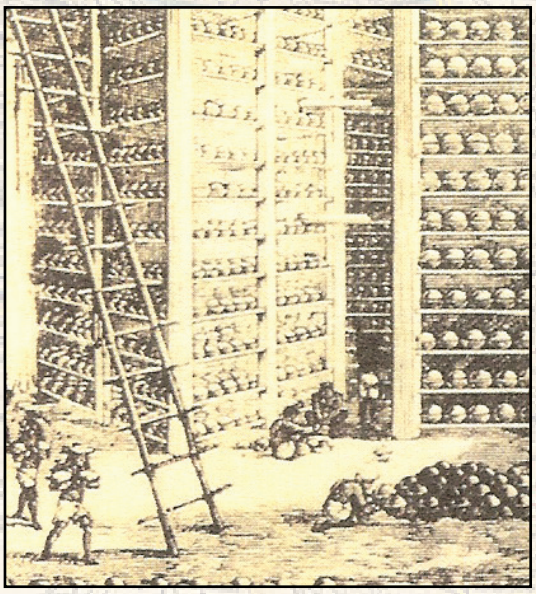
CHINA IN THE EARLY 1800s

In the 1800s, Imperial China met with many conflicts and struggles that ultimately led to its downfall in 1911-1912. During the Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), China became increasingly isolationist and refused to accept Western ambassadors because they would not proclaim the Emperor to be higher than their own heads of state. Even trading vessels were limited, except in Canton, where traders were allowed to bring wares and to purchase goods using only silver. Great Britain gave the East India Company a monopoly on trade with China, and merchants began buying porcelain and tea in abundance.

In turn, the British were importing opium to China. Opium was illegal in Great Britain, but it was a vital part of traditional Chinese medicine. Recreational use was not widespread until the English started importing tons of the drug during the 1700s and early 1800s. Addiction to opium skyrocketed and silver to pay for it flowed out of Chinese coffers, much to the alarm of the Chinese emperor. In 1839, the Imperial Commissioner Lin Zexu outlawed opium throughout China. He arrested dealers, and confiscated over two million pounds of opium and threw it in the ocean. British traders got their government to promise compensation for the lost income, but the British government did not have the money. So, they went to war.

Tensions arose later that year when some drunk British sailors killed a Chinese villager and the British government would not turn the sailors over to be prosecuted by the Chinese justice system. In November, the British established a blockade around Pearl Bay to protest the restriction on the opium trade. Two British ships carrying cotton attempted to run the blockade and the Navy ships fired a warning shot at their own merchants. The Chinese sent a squadron of their own ships to escort the merchant. The Captain of HMS *Volage* saw this act as "intimidation" by the Chinese and fired at the ships, thus beginning the war.

German political cartoon depicting the hypocrisy of the British forcing the Chinese to buy opium during the Opium Wars. Photo Credit: The British Empire.co.uk



East India Company Warehouse Stocked with Opium. Image Credit: Wikipedia

1836 map of China published by C. Pique. Image Credit: Wikipedia.

& THE OPIUM WARS

The East India Company's steam ship Nemesis destroying Chinese junks in 1841, painting by Edward Duncan. Photo Credit: Wikipedia.

Commissioner Lin Xexu. Image Credit: Wikipedia.

The First Opium War continued until 1842, with great losses on the side of the less advanced Chinese Navy and other military. In August, the Chinese were defeated and peace treaties were drawn up. In the Treaty of Nanjing, the British forced the Chinese to pay them a huge indemnity, give Hong Kong to the British, and open up more trade ports to merchants. In the Treaty of Brogue, Britain was also given "most-favored nation" status, which allowed Britain extra rights within China, and also allowed any British citizens committing a crime in China to be tried in British courts. These treaties put China at a significant disadvantage in their relationship with Britain.

As Imperialism increased its hold on China in the mid-1800s, France and Russia also wanted a piece of the action and advantages that Britain had secured. The British continued to seek more control in China, wanting unlimited ability to trade opium on the mainland, and increased trading ports. In 1856, another war began. The Chinese seized a former pirate ship with a Chinese crew and expired British registration. The ship's captain told the British that the Chinese had taken down the flag of a British ship. The British demanded the release of the prisoners, and when only 9 of the 14 crew members were released, the British bombarded the walls of Canton and thus the Second Opium War began.

China was not in a place to fight back, as it was fighting the internal peasant uprising known as the Taiping Rebellion. The rebels had taken control of much of the country and had almost seized Beijing. Again, the British Navy destroyed their Chinese opponents, with the help of the French, who joined the war shortly thereafter. Even the U.S. got involved in the war at one point, although the country remained officially neutral. When a treaty ending the war was drawn up in 1858, the Chinese Emperor at first agreed and then refused to sign, leading to more fighting. In the end, the Chinese surrendered and conceded to many of the foreign powers' extensive demands ending the war at the Convention of Peking in 1860.

EXHIBITING "THE EXOTIC" FOR AMUSEMENT IN 1800S AMERICA

"I have been told to highlight certain features that I possess, as they may seem exotic and foreign and unusual to you. I understand it is my duty to show you things that are exotic, and foreign, and unusual." - AFONG MOY

Afong Moy is put on display because of her "otherness" and her identity as a Chinese woman is novel to those across America who visit her. The exhibition of people as oddities or amusements was common practice during the 1800s, not only in the United States, but also in Europe. While Afong Moy is supposedly put on display for education and commercial goods promotion, the evolving display of human beings for amusement became prevalent in this time period.

In both Europe and America, so-called "human zoos" became popular in the mid to late 1800s. In these exhibitions, people from other countries or cultures were often displayed in native dress and performing a variety of activities. Displays that included people from Africa often showcased staged fights and dances. The physical differences in people were highlighted, including skin color and body composition. A woman named Saartjie Baartman, later to be known as the Hottentot Venus, was put on display in London around 1810. She was seen as a fascination due to her body composition, specifically her intimate areas, which were the highlight of her "act." When she died, her skeleton and some of her body parts were put on display until 1974 in a museum in France. In 2002, her remains were sent back to Africa where she was finally given a proper burial.

Throughout the 1800s and early 1900s, displays of people from foreign countries, indigenous people, or those with physical differences were common in "museums," fairs, and circuses. The St. Louis World's Fair and other World Fair exhibitions featured reproductions of various tribal villages, where native people from those tribes would perform cultural dances and rituals. These entertainments were often looked upon as educational and enlightening, but even so, some saw the exploitative practices for what they were and fought to end them.

Perhaps the most well-known of the purveyors of this sort of display of humanity was P.T. Barnum, the famous circus man. Barnum's American Museum in New York put on display not only artifacts and wax figures, but also living people who had unique physical features, special talents, or foreign origins. Even Afong Moy was said to have entered into Barnum's orbit late in her career. While Barnum is often lauded as "The Greatest Showman," it is clear that much of his fame came from the exploitation of othering people instead of embracing their common humanity.

The fashion for ethnic displays and presentations lent itself to the emerging "science" of Social Darwinism and the idea that different ethnic groups are more fully human or inherently advanced. Doctors and researchers often looked to these displays of people, and sometimes examined the people themselves, as proof for their racist theories of the superiority of white European races. While commercialized displays of these kind seem like relics of our past, the last of the "human zoos" closed in Belgium in 1958 and the remains of these practices still resonate in our society.

Ota Benga, a Congolese man on display at the Bronx Zoo, 1906. Photo Credit: Daily Mail.


Drawings of Saartjie Baartman. Photo Credit: BBC.


Chief Yellow Hair and his council, St. Louis World's Fair. Photo Credit: Daily Mail.

FEATURED ARTIST INTERVIEW

LLOYD SUH

PLAYWRIGHT

Based on an interview conducted by May Adrales, written by Kristen Carter

Lloyd Suh started writing at a very young age, focusing on becoming a novelist. Once he started college, his focus shifted over to theater. "I was living in the dorms and I had all these actor friends who were having more fun than anybody else I knew, so I just started hanging out at the theater building," Suh explained in an interview with director May Adrales. "Then I took some playwriting classes and it snuck up on me, really. It just occurred to me that it was a lot more fun to write for the theater."

His new play, *The Chinese Lady*, tells the story of the first female Chinese immigrant in the United States, Afong Moy, bought and brought here by the Carne Brothers, who then put her on display in the Peale Museum. He was inspired to write her story when he was researching Asian American history and happened across her name in a book. It was just in a brief sentence, but Suh said he was "just struck by the idea that this woman was brought at such a young age [and] she was performing an identity that as time went on, was probably not her identity….And I felt a resonance in…having to perform an expectation of who you are; of having an awareness of how people see you and what they expect. The performance of your identity and how that might differ from who you really are; how that might influence who you ultimately become. And where can you lose yourself and where can you express yourself and what do you do with yourself in those situations?"

As he continued his research and dove deeper into Afong Moy's history, Suh was surprised at the lack of information and the conflicting information he found. According to Suh there were many resources exploring her life after her arrival in the United States and at the height of her popularity, but there was very little to be found about her later years. "There are some accounts and the reliability of those accounts is questionable, in some cases they contradict each other….And it was once I started to just really think about and wrestle with why there's so little after a certain point – that's when the play really began to form, that's when I realized that's what this play's about. It's about …the impossibility of really knowing who she was or what happened. That became the emotional part of the piece."

Suh imagines what it must have felt like for Afong Moy, to be brought to America from China and used as a sideshow attraction, and put "on display with objects". There is a history of people who are seen as "different" being exploited in this way. On Afong Moy's treatment, Suh says, "I think the motivation for why people did [that] was really out of curiosity, but I think that curiosity was cruel. I think it's very possible to be curious without being cruel. I think it's possible to be cruel without being curious. In this instance…the way in which that curiosity is exercised in those situations is just deeply and inherently cruel."

Although this play brings to mind issues such as stereotypes, immigration, racism, and identity, Suh says that while these topics are important and valuable to address, such ideas are not the reason he wrote it, nor the main ideas he wants the audience to walk away with. "The whole action of the play is about a series of questions that I had for myself, about history, Afong Moy, America, the future, and the human capacity to understand and to see…. The unifying thing about the play I hope…is that it asks everybody who watches it to be witness to a person's story and to try as best as they can to receive it. How they receive it is going to vary but it asks that they receive it. That alone I think is hard. It is a hard thing to openly, honestly receive a person's story." As difficult of a task as that may be, it is a key component for people to do so when they are trying to have empathy and find similarities with others who do not share their same history or who have not lived the same story.

resources

About the Play:
http://www.wbur.org/hereandnow/2018/08/02/chinese-lady-play-afong-moy

Afong Moy:
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The Ticket Office is visible on the left upon entering the Wells Street doors. The Stiemke Studio is located on the first level.

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