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Theatre Company

# INSIDE OUT

A STUDY GUIDE FOR EDUCATORS

**INTRIGUING,  
POWERFUL,  
AND BASED ON  
A TRUE STORY,**

*The Chinese Lady*  
is a play unlike  
anything you've  
seen before.

An artistic illustration of a woman in traditional Chinese attire, featuring a large, ornate fan and a butterfly in her hair. The background is a mix of pink, red, and white washes with yellow and green accents.

## THE CHINESE LADY



# INSIDE OUT

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***The Chinese Lady***

By **Lloyd Suh**

Directed by **Seema Sueko**

**SEP 9 - OCT 16, 2022**  
SINGLETON THEATRE

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SEASON SPONSORS



# SYNOPSIS

Inspired by the life of the first recognized Chinese woman to set foot in the United States, *The Chinese Lady* tells the story of Afong Moy, who is brought to New York from Guangzhou, China by American merchants in 1834. At 14 years old, she is put on display to sell imported goods to the American public by showcasing the ways she brews tea, eats with chopsticks, and walks on bound feet. With the help of her interpreter, a young man named Atung, Afong Moy's exhibition tours the country and brings her to the White House, where she meets President Andrew Jackson. As the years pass, the evolution of her exhibition with the changing times means Afong Moy must grapple with the realities of her new home and her own sense of identity.

# PLAYWRIGHT

**Lloyd Suh** is the author of *The Chinese Lady*, *Charles Francis Chan Jr.'s Exotic Oriental Murder Mystery*, *American Hwangap*, *The Wong Kids in the Secret of the Space Chupacabra Go!*, *Jesus in India*, and others, produced with Ma-Yi, Magic Theatre, EST, NAATCO, PlayCo, Denver Center, Milwaukee Rep, ArtsEmerson, Children's Theatre Co, and more, including internationally at the Cultural Center of the Philippines and with PCPA in Seoul, Korea. He has received support from the NEA Arena Stage New Play Development program, Mellon Foundation, NYFA, NYSCA, Jerome, TCG, Dramatists Guild, and residencies including NYS&F and Ojai. He is an alum of Youngblood and the Soho Rep Writer/Director Lab, and was a recipient of a 2016 Helen Merrill Award and the 2019 Herb Alpert Award in the Arts. From 2005-2010 he served as Artistic Director of Second Generation and Co-Director of the Ma-Yi Writers Lab, and has served since 2011 as the Director of Artistic Programs at The Lark, and since 2015 as a member of the Dramatists Guild Council.

Source: <https://newdramatists.org/lloyd-suh>

# A TIMELINE OF AFONG MOY'S LIFE

## 1815 - 1820

- Afong Moy is born in Guangzhou, China.

## 1829

- Conjoined twins Chang and Eng Bunker are brought to the United States from Siam (now Thailand) and exhibited as the Siamese twins. They are the first Asians to be exhibited in the U.S.

## 1830

- President Andrew Jackson signs the Indian Removal Act. From 1830 to 1850, five major Native American nations in the eastern United States are forcibly removed west of the Mississippi River.

## 1834

- Afong Moy arrives in New York City and is put on display to sell imported goods by merchants Francis and Nathaniel Carnes.

## 1835

- Afong Moy tours the eastern United States.
- P.T. Barnum begins his career with the exhibition of Joice Heth, a black woman whom he claims is George Washington's 161-year-old nurse.
- The Second Seminole War begins in Florida as the Seminole resist forced relocation efforts by the U.S. Military.

## 1837

- Afong Moy meets President Jackson at the White House.
- The Panic of 1837 causes an economic depression in the United States. Many in the working class remain unemployed into the early 1840s.

**Unprecedented Novelty!**  
THE  
**CHINESE LADY,**  
**AFONG MOY,**  
Accompanied by her Attendant and Interpreter,  
**ACONG,**  
A Youth of 17, lately arrived from Canton, with a variety of Chinese Curiosities,  
Altogether forming a complete  
**CHINESE MUSEUM,**  
Is ready to receive visitors in a splendid  
**CHINESE SALOON,**  
At Washington Hall, south Third street,  
Between the hours of 10 A. M. and 2 P. M. and from 5 to 9 P. M.  
Admission 50 Cents. Children under 12 years 12 1-2 cents.



Afong Moy, possesses a pleasing countenance, is nineteen years of age, and her feet, including her shoes, are but four inches in length, being the size of those of an infant of one year old, having worn iron shoes for the first ten years of her life, according to the custom of the country. She is richly dressed in Chinese Costume, and will occasionally walk before the company. Several articles of Chinese Furniture are of great value, which, with the various curiosities of her native country, form an interesting Exhibition of themselves. Acong, her companion and interpreter, a youth of pleasing address, writes in the Chinese Characters, speaks English with considerable fluency, and will interpret for the company.

Large sums of money have been expended, and great difficulties experienced, in overcoming the extreme jealousy of the Chinese, in allowing their females to be carried out of their country, or even to be seen by foreigners, and as neither pains nor expense have been spared to produce an interesting exhibition, it is confidently hoped that the Chinese Lady, after a voyage of seventeen thousand miles, for a very limited visit to the United States, will be honoured with crowded audiences of the American Public.

Among the various Curiosities, will be found the following:

- No. 1. A large circular Steel MIRROR, of modern manufacture, in great request among the wealthy Chinese.
  2. An Iron CUP, used by the affluent in the reign of the Yuen Dynasty, (1366,) in the offerings to idols.
  3. A MIRROR used by the Foo Yuen, in the reign of Kue-pang, of the Sung Dynasty, A. D. 967.
  4. A SAHRE, formed of Cash, (the common Copper Coin of China,) that was found in the ruins of a Temple of Jos, in one of the northern provinces, and from the dates on the Coins, it appears they were made in the reign of Hong Yuen, of the Tang Dynasty, A. D. 735.
  5. A MIRROR made in the reign of Chang-Woo, of the How-Han Dynasty, A. D. 229.
  6. and 7. Two MIRRORS, having no inscription upon them, the date of their manufacture could not be discovered, but they are supposed to be at least 600 years old.
  8. A Chinese BELL, which was formerly used to assemble the Priests in a Temple of Jos. It was made in the Province of Shaw-wo, in the reign of Ching-hwa, of the Ming Dynasty, A. D. 1486. This was considered a very valuable curiosity in Canton.
  9. Twenty-nine CASH, of various reigns, from that of Keen-Yuen 81 B. C., to that of Yung-Ching, in 1735, a list of which can be shown to the curious.
  10. One Manilla MARVADIE.
  11. Five Chinese MUSICAL INSTRUMENTS, such as are now used at all marriage and other festivals.
  12. A Chinese MAS OF WAR JUNK.
  13. A Chinese MANDARIN BOAT.
  14. A Chinese GONG, used to announce the approach of the Mandarins.
- The company will also find in the Saloon, a great variety of beautiful Work Tables, of most exquisite workmanship; several Paintings, China Vases, beautiful Chinese Lanterns, with a variety of curious figures in manhood, Books, &c., not enumerated in this Catalogue, but well worthy of their notice.

JESPER HARDING, Printer, No. 74½, South Second Street.



Advertising broadside. The Chinese Lady, Afong Moy. Philadelphia: Jesper Harding, 1835.

- 1838**
- Trail of Tears: 15,000 Cherokee are forced to leave their lands and walk to "Indian Territory" in what is now Oklahoma. A quarter of them die from starvation, illness, and exposure.
- 1839 - 1842**
- The First Opium War breaks out between China and Great Britain, resulting in the Treaty of Nanjing, which grants Britain exclusive trading benefits, including access to the port of Hong Kong, and opens five new Chinese ports to international trade.
- 1844**
- The United States and Qing dynasty China sign the Treaty of Wangxia, granting the U.S. the same privileges as the British under the Treaty of Nanjing.
- 1847**
- Afong Moy returns to the public stage under the management of P.T. Barnum.
- 1849**
- The California Gold Rush begins. Chinese immigration is encouraged with the promise of gold, as well as work in mines and on railroads.
  - The Seneca Falls Convention takes place, the first women's rights convention in the United States.
- 1850**
- P.T. Barnum replaces Afong Moy with another young Chinese woman known as Pwan Ye Koo. Afong Moy disappears from historical record.
- 1856**
- The Second Opium War begins between China, and Great Britain and France.
- 1857**
- The Panic of 1857 causes another financial crisis in the United States.
- 1860**
- The Second Opium War ends.
- 1861**
- The Civil War begins.
- 1863**
- President Abraham Lincoln issues the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing slaves in Confederate states.
  - Work on the Transcontinental Railroad begins.
- 1865**
- The Civil War comes to an end.
  - The 13th Amendment abolishes slavery in the U.S.
  - President Lincoln is assassinated.
  - The Ku Klux Klan is formed by six former Confederate soldiers.
- 1869**
- A "Golden Spike" marks the completion of the first Transcontinental Railroad.
- 1871**
- 500 white and Hispanic rioters descend upon Los Angeles' Chinatown in what becomes known as the Los Angeles Chinatown Massacre. 52 Chinese Americans are injured and 20 are tortured and lynched, their bodies put on display along the town's borders.
- 1875**
- The Page Act effectively prohibits Chinese women from immigrating to the U.S.
- 1880**
- Denver's Chinatown is completely destroyed by more than 3,000 white rioters from the 1600 block of Wazee Street to Larimer and 11th. A laundry worker named Look Young is killed and countless more are injured.
- 1882**
- Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning Chinese immigration for ten years and forbidding courts from granting citizenship to Chinese already in the country.
- 1885**
- The settlement now known as the city of Rock Springs in Sweetwater County, Wyoming is burned to the ground by a mob of 150 white men. 50 Chinese American coal miners are mutilated, decapitated, and castrated. Many are burned alive or left to die along the river.
- 1887**
- 34 Chinese Americans are stripped of their gold and tortured to death in the Snake River Massacre in Hells Canyon, Oregon. Their bodies are dumped in the river, where they are not discovered for years.
- 1892**
- Congress renews the Chinese Exclusion Act for another 10 years.
- 1893**
- A group of businessmen and sugar planters force Queen Liliuokalani of Hawaii to abdicate, leading to the dissolution of the Kingdom of Hawaii two years later. It is annexed as a U.S. territory and eventually admitted as the 50th state in the union.
- 1902**
- The Chinese Exclusion Act is made permanent. It is not until 1943 that the law is repealed in favor of a quota system, which favors migrants from Western and Northern Europe, allowing a mere 105 Chinese to enter the U.S. each year. In 1965, the Immigration Act eliminates the quota system, reopening migration pathways for non-European immigrants.
- 2022**
- On April 16, Denver City Council issued a formal apology to Chinese immigrants and their descendants for its role in the city's 1880 Chinese riots, making it only the sixth US city to do so.

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## THE STORY BEHIND THE PLAY

Very little is known about the real Afong Moy. The few historical records that exist are further limited by their questionable reliability. What we do know is that Afong Moy (her real name is unknown) was born around 1815 - 1820 in the port city of Guangzhou in southern China. In 1834, Captain Benjamin Obear sailed to Guangzhou on behalf of American merchants, Nathaniel and Francis Carnes, to negotiate Afong Moy's passage to the United States. The Carnes were importers of Chinese goods and imitation French goods manufactured at lower costs in China. Their unconventional marketing strategy was to exhibit a young Chinese woman with their products in order to entice American consumers. According to newspaper reports, the Carnes paid Afong Moy's family in exchange for a two-year stay in the U.S. She arrived in New York soon after. Although she is officially considered to be the first Chinese woman to set foot in the United States, records show she was accompanied by an unnamed female servant.

In New York City, Afong Moy met the American public in a salon decorated with colorful silks, porcelain vases, illustrated screens, and more—all for sale, of course. She herself was presented in the manner and fine dress of an aristocratic Chinese lady. With the help of a young Chinese man, Atung, she presented the objects in the room and demonstrated how she brewed tea, ate with chopsticks, and walked with bound feet.

Soon Moy's exhibition toured the country, with a brief stop in Havana, Cuba. In museums, theaters, lecture halls, and salons, she indulged Americans' curiosity for the exotic Far East. Many were especially fascinated by her tiny feet. In Philadelphia and Charleston, groups of doctors took measurements of her feet and published their findings in the newspaper. She met with President Andrew Jackson at the White House. Over time, the exhibition transitioned away from the promotion of goods to that of spectacle, with the incorporation of theatrical set pieces and singing. Afong Moy shared the stage with traveling musicians, ventriloquists, magicians, and automatons.

Afong Moy was not, in fact, returned to China when her contracted two years were up. In 1838, she was found in a poorhouse in Monmouth County, New Jersey. She remained there until 1847, when the arrival of a Chinese junk in New York revived interest in the Chinese Lady. By then, American perceptions of China had soured following the First Opium War. Americans saw China's defeat by Great Britain as the sign of a weak, aging power clinging to inferior, depraved customs. In this changed climate, Afong Moy returned to the stage under the management of P.T. Barnum.

As part of Barnum's American Museum, Moy toured alongside acts like Tom Thumb; Signor Canto, the Wonderful Man Monkey; and the Ohio Mammoth Girl. Barnum eventually replaced Moy with the 17-year-old Pwan Ye Koo, whom he presented as a new arrival from Beijing and "the only Chinese Lady out of China—a genuine lady and no mistake."

No records currently exist of Afong Moy after 1850. Only questions remain as to where she went, how long she lived, or if she ever returned to China.

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# NOTES ON THE CHINESE LADY AND ITS INSPIRATIONS

Centuries after Afong Moy disappeared from the historical record, playwright Lloyd Suh encountered a brief mention of her in historian Erika Lee's *The Making of Asian America: A History*:

Afong Moy's exhibit sent a clear message: China and the Chinese were exotic, different, and as Moy's bound feet further illustrated, degraded and inferior. By relegating her to an exotic curiosity, the Carne [s/c] brothers and all who came to gawk at her reaffirmed the West's superiority as well as the great differences between the United States and China.

Afong Moy's story resonated with Suh as someone engaged in the performing arts, and—as a Korean American writer—the performance of one's identity. In an interview with director May Adrales, Suh recounts:

[I was] just struck by the idea that this woman was brought at such a young age [and] she was performing an 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?

The spotty historical record of Moy's life leaves us with many more questions than answers. It was those questions that inspired Suh and continue to draw audiences to her story.

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.

For Suh, Afong Moy's story is a deeply urgent one that speaks to what it means to be an American. That question, of how one defines an American, is at the heart of the play.

...My more pressing concerns are assumptions about American culture, and perhaps more specifically Asian American culture. Afong Moy spent almost her entire life in America, and yet in her lifetime was exclusively perceived to be a Chinese curiosity for the white American gaze. This play is among many plays I've been working on recently that explore forgotten or unexamined moments in Asian American history, and so there's an aspect of it that aspires to an overdue remembrance, and an overdue examination, towards a broader picture of what we understand America to be.

Journalist and critic Diep Tran weaves Afong Moy's story into the broader fabric of the Asian American experience in a piece for *American Theatre*:

By looking at Moy, and other women of color like her (Sarah Baartman, whose exploitation was dramatized in Suzan-Lori Parks's play *Venus* or Julia Pastrana, also the subject of a play by Shaun Prendergast), white audiences could decry other cultures as barbaric and effectively absolve themselves of their own sins, including the genocide of Native Americans or, as Moy points out in *The Chinese Lady*, the transatlantic slave trade.

When other people use you as a way to look at themselves, your own reflection will become blurred and fractured. The image that Moy presented to white Americans about Chinese people (and by extension, all Asians) persists to this day: Quiet and submissive. Foreign and exotic. Dirty and diseased.

Some of those stereotypes were unfairly placed upon Asian Americans. Other stereotypes were performed by Asian Americans as a means of survival. The prostitute from *Full Metal Jacket* and Long Duk Dong from *Sixteen Candles* were played by Asian actors, after all. We have both pushed against the confines placed upon us and sometimes played into them.

Moy inhabits that contradiction. She begins *The Chinese Lady* by performing her ethnicity for the audience. In real life, this is how she made her living.

But while Afong Moy's story played out centuries ago, her experiences as an Asian woman in America are very much still alive for thousands of Asian Americans, and perhaps more resonant than ever in the face of anti-Chinese sentiment and growing violence against Asians. In an interview with *American Theatre*, Suh remarks on the impact of recent events on the play:

...What's happened over the past couple of years is that this country is now in a very self-aware reckoning about what it is to be an American, what it is to live in a country that has the history that it has, and how the color and the origin of our bodies, influences the way we navigate that history. I think that reckoning has a big impact on the way that performers speak those words, but also the way audiences receive them.

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# THE CHINESE LADY AND THE ORIENTALIST GAZE

What we know of Afong Moy's life is defined by perception and performance. From the start, the Carnes "played on, controlled, and mediated the public's consciousness of her visual difference—her bound feet, Chinese clothing, and accessories—all to promote their goods."<sup>1</sup> They understood that in the early 1800s, Americans saw China as an exotic land of beauty and revered history. By presenting Moy as a noble denizen of that land and playing up the historicity of the objects around her, they were able to manipulate Americans' fantasies into profit.

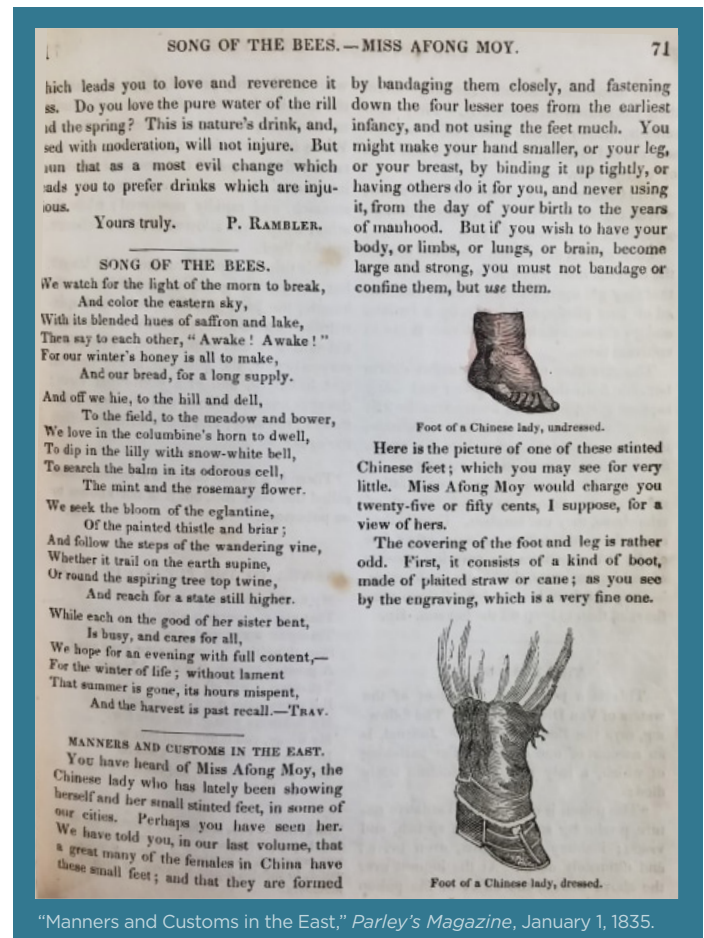
Cultural theorist Edward Said defined Orientalism as "a system of representations framed by a whole set of forces that brought the Orient into Western learning, Western consciousness..."<sup>2</sup> In Moy's time, representations like hers on stage reflected American fantasies and fears, enabling the creation of an Other against which Americans could reassure themselves of their own progressive politics and moral superiority. Many of the existing records of Afong Moy are found in the diaries of those who attended her exhibition. Their authors rarely wrote of the experience itself, parroting instead what was said of her in the press. Even when they went to see her, they did not see *her* for what she was, but rather what she represented.

That representation changed dramatically throughout her time in the U.S. When she first arrived, there were few Chinese people in America and China itself was largely unknown and closed off to foreigners. Americans filled the void with romanticized fantasies of an ancient, sophisticated culture of pagodas and silks. The Opium Wars dashed those fantasies. "The public began to form stereotypical views of the Chinese as backward, arbitrary, undemocratic, and sometimes cruel."<sup>3</sup> In the later part of her career, Afong Moy became less of an exotic curiosity and more of a foil to American civilization and progress. Her bound feet became a symbol of China's backward customs, her explanation of the Chinese emperor's absolute power proof of the righteousness of American republicanism. Her limited abilities with English were not the consequence of circumstance, but rather evidence of Chinese intellectual inferiority.

Moy's experience is less notable as documentation of Chinese culture in the 19th century, than it is as a reflection of how Americans defined their place in the world against the cultures they encountered in an age of Manifest Destiny at home and growing interests abroad. With so little of her own expression left in the historical record, what we know of her story must be framed within the context of her time, and the motivations—conscious and subconscious—of the people who dressed and displayed her, and those who came to see her.

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# CHINESE IMMIGRATION TO THE UNITED STATES

Chinese immigration to the United States began in earnest around the 1850s. Promises of gold in California and ample work on the railroads presented opportunities for an impoverished populace looking for a way out of economic and political chaos in Qing dynasty China.

By 1851, 25,000 Chinese immigrants had arrived in California, the majority of them from the southern coastal province of Guangdong (Canton). They soon found themselves stranded, alienated from their families and the communities around them, engaged in difficult, dangerous labor for very little return. At first, American industry welcomed the Chinese, whom they saw as "quiet and valuable" industrious workers. An estimated 20,000 Chinese laborers were hired at low wages to build the Transcontinental Railroad. Risking their lives, they blasted through mountains and laid hundreds of miles of track in the heat and freezing cold. Others ran laundries and restaurants or worked as farmers and miners.

1 Davis, p. 3  
2 Said, p. 202-203  
3 Davis, p. 4

As the Chinese presence in America grew, a heady mixture of social and economic developments fueled hostilities from white Americans. Economic depressions pushed white prospectors and laborers to see the Chinese as competition. The 1875 Page Act, which prohibited Chinese women from coming to the United States, meant that immigrants were mainly men living in bachelor communities—a fact, coupled with their physical difference, that made them a target of suspicion and emasculation. Meanwhile, American sentiment had soured toward China in the wake of the Opium War. Condescending ideas of Chinese moral depravity and intellectual inferiority, along with racist fears of their supposed cunning and deceit, were supported by burgeoning pseudo-scientific notions of race science.

While politicians and industry leaders spewed fear-mongering vitriol and pushed anti-Chinese legislation, white vigilantes felt empowered to act on their hatred. They drove the Chinese off their claims, mobbed their camps, and pelted them with stones. They destroyed their homes and businesses, forced them out of town, and carried out heinous acts of violent torture that included burnings, lynchings, and drownings. In 1871, tensions exploded in Los Angeles' Chinatown, resulting in one of the worst instances of mass lynching in American history. In Denver, more than 3,000 rioters destroyed the city's Chinatown. One of the most gruesome attacks occurred in Rock Springs, Wyoming, where a Chinese settlement was burned to the ground by a mob of 150 white men who then mutilated the bodies of 50 Chinese miners. An estimated 250 roundups were carried out all over the western United States.

Very often, the same police and community leaders the Chinese turned to were at the head of the attacks. And they sought to alienate Chinese immigrants through legal means as well. The Foreign Miners License tax law required non-native born workers to pay for the right to mine. In San Francisco, the Queue Ordinance of 1873 outlawed the long braids worn by Chinese men. The Chinese were kept out of public schools and government jobs. They were prohibited from testifying in court against white Americans. In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, the first federal law prohibiting immigration and the only law specifically banning an ethnic group from entry to the United States. The Chinese Exclusion Act was later extended, then made permanent. The 1924 Immigration Act fully excluded Chinese immigrants and extended restrictions to other Asian countries. The exclusion acts were not repealed until 1943, when China became an American ally in World War II.

The Chinese, however, were not passive victims throughout the decades. Many were unafraid to speak out against the violence being done. Historical records show countless letters to the Secretary of State, telegrams to local authorities, and a handful of outspoken figures like Norman Assing, who criticized the governor of California for “[prejudicing] the public mind against my people, to enable those who wait [for] the opportunity to hunt them down, and rob them of the rewards of their toil.” Another young man, Wong Kim Ark, was born in San Francisco and denied reentry after visiting family in China. His case went to the Supreme Court and ultimately secured the right of birthright citizenship for nonwhites under the Fourteenth Amendment. In 1885, Chinese Americans Joseph and Marie Tape successfully sued the San Francisco Board of Education for the right to send their daughter, Mamie, to public school. In Chinatowns around the country, residents formed mutual-aid organizations and district associations to build the support that America would not provide.

In 1965, the Immigration and Nationality Act eliminated the quota system that favored western Europeans. It also allowed more skilled workers and family members to enter the U.S. This brought a surge in numbers to the Chinese American population, as well as significant demographic change. Many of these new immigrants came from Hong Kong and Taiwan and were highly educated. Others came as refugees fleeing the Cultural Revolution in mainland China. Chinese American communities moved from urban Chinatowns to middle-class “ethnoburbs.” The end of the 20th century brought a third wave of immigrants, further diversifying the Chinese American community in the U.S.

Today, many Chinese Americans are grappling with their identities in the face of mounting violence against Asian Americans. China's economic and political growth in the last half-century has sparked a return to the fear-mongering rhetoric of the Other. The COVID-19 pandemic's origin in Wuhan, China has caused a spike in anti-Chinese sentiment and violent attacks on Asian Americans, fueled by politicians who speak of “kung flu” and the “China virus.” And two hundred years after the Carnes engaged Afong Moy in the promotion of cheaper Chinese replicas of French goods, Americans regularly call for boycotts on products “Made in China.” Although we are centuries away from the men and women who first came seeking their fortunes, “the surge in violence against Asian Americans is a reminder that America's present reality reflects its exclusionary past.”<sup>1</sup>

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1 Luo, “The Forgotten History of the Purging of Chinese from America”



# HUMAN CURIOSITIES: A HISTORY OF PUTTING PEOPLE ON DISPLAY

The long history of human exhibitions like Afong Moy's traces that of colonialism back to Europe's Age of Discovery. European explorers saw indigenous peoples as part of the flora and fauna: something to make note of, catalog, and possess. On his voyage to the New World, Columbus kidnapped between ten and 25 Native Americans. Only eight survived the journey to Spain. In the 19th century, this interest in the exotic coalesced with the emergence of race science and a growing sense of racial superiority, often under the guise of intellectual and moral edification. In 1810, a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa named Saartjie Baartman was put on display in London under the label of the "Hottentot Venus". Her body was a subject of scientific interest, racist bias, and erotic fetishization. She was examined in Paris by racial anthropologists and her body was put on display after her death at the Museum of Mankind until 1974.

The United States in the early 19th century was in the midst of cultural transition. Nancy E. Davis, author of *The Chinese Lady: Afong Moy in Early America* writes, "Americans had an increasing desire for edification; museums, athenaeums, and salons provided those opportunities to learn about a wider world. They were also places to be seen engaging in that activity." And there was no shortage of impresarios, entrepreneurs, and amateur scholars to meet that desire.

P.T. Barnum loomed largest of these in the early 1800s. After launching his career with the exhibition and exploitation of an elderly black woman, Barnum purchased the American Museum in New York where "from 1841 to 1868, he combined freak shows and serious scientific exhibits, entertainment and edification, to produce 'rational' amusement..."<sup>1</sup> Such exhibits included people with conditions like albinism, dwarfism, and hypertrichosis (causing an excess of hair on the body); a black man named William Henry Johnson whom Barnum named "What Is It?" and presented as the missing link between humans and primates, and conjoined brothers Chang and Eng Bunker from Thailand, known as the "Siamese Twins." In 1847, Barnum added Afong Moy to his collection. Even before she joined the American Museum, Moy had been subjected to stares and examinations in the name of science and intellect. As she toured America in the 1830s, she was coerced on two occasions to unwrap her feet before groups of doctors so that they could measure them and verify their authenticity.

By the 1870s, sideshows and touring exhibitions had evolved into large-scale "human zoos" where groups of indigenous people were made to playact their "primitive" lives in replicas of their villages back home. The celebrated world's fairs that brought about the Ferris wheel and the Eiffel Tower were also sites of the mass exploitation of indigenous people kept in cruel, unsanitary conditions. Many of them had been brought over on false terms or outright abducted. Those who died of illness from a lack of sanitation were passed on to museums and scientific institutions just as Baartman had been nearly a century ago. Europeans and Americans drank in the fabricated imagery of their colonies abroad and deemed themselves more civilized. Ethnological expositions served as confirmation of the pseudo-scientific belief in biological distinction between races and the superiority of the white race. They also acted as instruments of nation-building by bolstering support for further imperialist efforts abroad.

In the U.S., the exhibition of human beings was linked to imperial interest on the North American continent and elsewhere overseas. The 1904 World's Fair in St. Louis brought more than 3,000 "savages" from Africa, Asia, and the Americas who spent eight months in replicas of their native villages, forced to repeatedly perform shocking rituals and participate in the "Savage Olympics." The display of a group of indigenous Filipino men, women, and children helped to justify ongoing American imperialism in the Philippines. Ota Benga, a "pygmy" from the Belgian Congo (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), went from the Fair to the Bronx Zoo, where Americans delighted in watching him care for the elephants and comparing him to orangutans. In 1900, members of the Jicarilla Apache Nation were brought to the Denver Zoo as the "Wild Apaches." Meanwhile, "Buffalo Bill" Cody's Wild West Shows featured Native Americans in reenactments of violent battles and raids. The message was clear—as a visitor to the St. Louis Fair noted, the story being told was "the race narrative of odd peoples who mark time while the world advances, and of savages made, by American methods, into civilized workers."

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# VOCABULARY

## Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln (1809-1865) was the 16th president of the United States. As president, he led the country through the Civil War and issued the Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves within the Confederacy. In 1865, he was assassinated by Confederate sympathizer John Wilkes Booth while attending a play at Ford's Theater, just a few days after the end of the Civil War.

## Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson (1767-1845) was the 7th president of the United States. Born into poverty in the rural Carolinas, he built his wealth and made his way to the presidency first as a lawyer dealing in land speculation in reserved Indian territory, a planter and slave owner, and as a general in the War of 1812. Although he was the 5th wealthiest president in history, Jackson successfully campaigned by framing himself as a "common man" unlike his opponent, John Quincy Adams. His presidency brought a shift in power from the political elite to the common people, but was also mired in controversy. Jackson made aggressive efforts to forcibly remove Native Americans from their ancestral lands and was responsible for the Trail of Tears, in which thousands died of disease, starvation, and exposure on the long journey west. He opposed the growing abolition movement and vetoed the recharter of the Bank of the United States, contributing to an economic crisis in the Panic of 1837.

## Beijing

Beijing is the capital of China. It is located in the northeastern part of China and is home to the Forbidden City, where the Chinese emperor resided in Afong Moy's time.

## California Gold Rush

Following the discovery of gold at Sutter's Mill in California, thousands migrated West to seek their fortunes, sparking the start of the California Gold Rush in 1849. Life for gold miners was difficult and few managed to strike it rich. As competition grew, white miners resorted to violent tactics to keep those of other ethnicities off of what they saw as their territory. Meanwhile, mining methods devastated the land and local indigenous populations. The Gold Rush peaked in 1852 and was over by the end of the decade.

## Carnes Brothers

Nathaniel and Francis Carnes were American merchants in the 19th century. Although they were known as brothers, they were in fact, cousins. They were the first American merchants to mass produce imitation European goods for low cost in China so that they could undersell their competitors in the U.S. The Carneses also invested in smaller, less expensive native Chinese goods with exotic appeal. Together, they concocted the marketing scheme that brought Afong Moy to America as a living ambassador for their products.

## Chinese Exclusion Act

In 1882, Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, banning Chinese immigration to the United States for 10 years. It was the first federal law restricting immigration to the U.S. It also restricted Chinese residents from being granted American citizenship. In 1892, Congress extended the ban for another 10 years. In 1902, the law was made permanent. The Immigration Act of 1924 introduced a quota system allowing a percentage of immigrants of different ethnicities to enter the U.S. each year, but it was not until 1943 that Congress repealed all the exclusion acts and allowed foreign-born Chinese to be naturalized as American citizens.

## Corset

A corset is an article of clothing worn around the torso in order to shape the waist. They were worn as undergarments by women—and sometimes men—in the Western world from the 16th to early 20th century.

## Erhu

An erhu is a Chinese instrument with two strings. It is played by propping it up on the performer's thigh and moving the bow horizontally across the strings. It is a versatile instrument primarily known for its mournful sound.

## Foot-binding

Although the origins of foot-binding in China are unknown, by the 19th century it had become a symbol of female refinement and a means of achieving marriageability and upward mobility. The painful process of footbinding took years and required lifelong care of the feet. Foot-binding continued in China despite criticism and attempted bans, until it was finally outlawed in 1912.

## George III

George III (1738-1820) was king of Great Britain and Ireland. During his reign, Britain lost its American colonies in the American War of Independence. He suffered from porphyria, a rare blood disorder which manifested in bouts of madness.

## Gettysburg Address

A speech delivered by President Lincoln at the dedication of the Gettysburg Civil War Cemetery. The Battle of Gettysburg was one of the bloodiest of the Civil War, with over 51,000 casualties. The Gettysburg Address concludes with the famous lines, "that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth."

## Guangzhou

Guangzhou is a city in China's southeastern province of Guangdong that lies at the head of the Pearl River Delta, a location that has historically made it one of China's main centers of trade. During the Qing dynasty, Western trade was restricted to Guangzhou under the Canton System until the First Opium War and the Treaty of Nanjing.



### **Liberty Bell**

In colonial times, the Liberty Bell rang from the tower of the Pennsylvania State House to summon lawmakers to meetings. In the 19th century, the bell became a symbol of liberty and unity in the wake of the Civil War. It is known for the famous cracks that have formed throughout its history.

### **Manifest Destiny**

The phrase “Manifest Destiny” was coined in 1845 and came to embody the idea that the United States was destined by God to expand and spread democracy across the North American continent. Manifest Destiny was used throughout the 19th century as a rallying cry and justification for western migration, territorial expansion, the genocide of indigenous peoples, and American foreign policy leading to war with Spain, the annexation of Hawaii, and the construction of the Panama Canal.

### **Mughal Empire**

The Mughal Empire was an Islamic dynasty from Central Asia who ruled much of the Indian subcontinent from 1526 to 1761. Mughal rule was characterized by its capable rulers, administrative prowess, and attempts to integrate Muslims and the Hindu majority into a united Indian state. It was the last Indian dynasty before British colonial rule.

### **Nitroglycerin**

Nitroglycerin is a powerful explosive chemical compound commonly used in dynamite.

### **Opium | Opium Wars**

Opium is a highly addictive narcotic extracted from the seeds of the poppy plant. Its effects include a state of euphoria and relaxation, pain suppression, slowed respiration and heartbeat, and the inhibition of muscles in the gastrointestinal tract. 18th century European traders flooded the Chinese market with opium to offset losses from heavy demand for Chinese tea, silk, and porcelain in their own countries. Opium addiction became widespread in China and the Chinese government made attempts to prohibit its production, sale, and use. British traders defied these efforts and growing tensions between China and Britain culminated in the Opium Wars, which weakened the Qing dynasty and opened China up to foreign imperialist interests.

### **Oriental | the Orient**

*Orient* and *Occident* are terms that mean east and west, respectively. *Oriental*, then, refers to something that is situated in or belonging to the East. Use of the term *Oriental* to describe a person is considered dated and offensive.

### **Parasol**

A parasol is a type of light umbrella used to protect from the sun.

### **P.T. Barnum**

Phineas Taylor Barnum (1810-1891) was known for touring exhibitions of oddities and “human curiosities,” which he promoted through the creation of sensationalist marketing tactics that blurred the truth. He later purchased the American Museum in New York, where the public could pay to see fabricated creatures like the Feejee Mermaid (a human head attached to the body of a fish), as well as “living curiosities” including Tom Thumb (a 10-year-old boy Barnum claimed to be an unusually small man), the “Siamese Twins” (conjoined twins Chang and Eng from Thailand), the “Aztec Lilliputians” (children from El Salvador who suffered from microcephaly), and Afong Moy. Through his partnership with James A. Bailey, Barnum is also known for the popularization of the American circus as the spectacle we know today.

### **Pwan Ye Koo**

In 1850, P.T. Barnum replaced Afong Moy in his American Museum with a young Chinese girl named Pwan Ye Koo. Although there is little verifiable information about her, Barnum claimed she was 17 years old, had bound feet, and was of aristocratic origins. A daguerreotype was made of her image in 1850 and is considered to be the first photograph of a Chinese woman.

### **Qing Dynasty**

The Qing dynasty (1644-1912) was the last imperial dynasty of China. In 1644, the Manchus, a semi-nomadic people from the north, conquered Ming dynasty China. In order to solidify their authority over the majority Han Chinese, Qing rulers selectively adopted aspects of Chinese culture like the civil examination system and conservative Confucian ideals, while simultaneously enforcing Manchu customs, forcing Han Chinese men to cut their hair in the Manchurian fashion that would become a target of racist ridicule in the U.S. Under Qing rule, China saw a growth in the arts and decorative crafts—particularly in ceramics, increased contact with Europeans, and the formal annexation of Taiwan. Eventually, internal unrest and foreign conflicts led to the end of imperial rule and the creation of the Republic of China in 1912.

### **Sierras**

Sierra Nevada is a major mountain range in central and eastern California, with a small extension into Nevada, that forms America’s “western backbone.” It runs from the Mojave Desert in the south all the way up to Northern California and was the central site of the California Gold Rush.

### **Susquehanna River**

The Susquehanna is the longest river in the Eastern United States, running through New York and Pennsylvania and draining into the Chesapeake Bay.

## Transatlantic Slave Trade

From the 16th to 19th centuries, European slave traders trafficked and sold African men, women, and children, transporting them across the Atlantic Ocean to their colonies in the Americas as chattel property and slave laborers. Approximately 12.5 million Africans were enslaved, with many dying on the passage due to inhumane conditions aboard slave ships. Those who survived were sold at public auction to plantation owners, farmers, and merchants, who relied on the enslaved Africans for domestic services, artisanal crafts, and agricultural hard labor. It was not until the 19th century that various European and American nations officially ended their participation in the trade. In the United States, the question of slavery was divisive from the start, influencing the shape of the country's formation and territorial expansion, and ultimately culminating in the American Civil War.

## Transcontinental Railroad

The Pacific Railroad Act of 1862 chartered two companies to build a railroad linking the United States from east to west. Union Pacific built westward from Council Bluffs, Iowa, while Central Pacific started in Sacramento, California, and built east. Three years later in 1869, the two companies met in Utah to drive the golden spike that would complete the Transcontinental Railroad. Up to 20,000 Chinese workers were instrumental in the construction of the line and made up 90% of its workforce.

## Treaty of Nanjing

The Treaty of Nanjing ended the First Opium War in August 1842. It was the first of the unequal treaties between China and foreign imperialist powers, and ended the Canton System of trade that had been in place since 1757. The treaty provided the British with benefits including the cession of Hong Kong as a British colony and the opening of five new Chinese ports. France and the United States would later broker their own treaties with China modeled after the Treaty of Nanjing.

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# QUESTIONS AND ACTIVITIES

## Preshow Questions

- 1) How does one “perform identity?” Explain how this may effect the performer and the observer? How does your answer change when that person is also placed in the position of representing a culture?
- 2) If you could travel back in time to visit and observe a historical person make history, who would you visit and what would you hope to learn? Is there someone or a significant event in your own family line you would be interested in travelling back in time to observe?

## Postshow Questions

- 1) How do the technical elements of scenic, costume, sound, and lighting design enhance the story?
- 2) How would you describe the relationship between Afong Moy and Atung? What changes in the relationship take place?
- 3) How does Afong’s identity evolve through the play?
- 4) How is the audience in the theatre to interpret Afong’s performance as part of the exhibition?
- 5) How do you explain the justification of placing a human being on display as a curiosity? What are the advantages and disadvantages of this “exchange of ideas and practices?”
- 6) Explain the significance of the tea ceremony and the binding of the feet? How does this further the story?
- 7) Why does the playwright follow Afong and Atung through multiple time periods? How does the idea of the cultural exchange change and evolve over time? What do you think causes this change?
- 8) What is the significance of Atung’s dream? How does it inform the character?
- 9) What happens to Afong Moy and Atung after the play is over?

# ACTIVITIES

## Object Exchange

Materials: Personal object, pen and paper

- 1) Select a personal object that has meaning for you and that you are willing to share with other people. This object can be anything from your past that had significant importance when you were younger.
- 2) Create a short description about the length of a paragraph and include a description of the object, how you acquired the object and why the object had importance to you. Condense the story into three parts; a beginning, middle, and end.
- 3) Write a second paragraph about how the object lost or gained importance as you became older in age and add any other pertinent information that you are willing to share.
- 4) Exchange your object with another person. In a paragraph, describe the object and then speculate how they may have acquired this object, why this object is important to this person, and why it gained or lost its importance to them.
- 5) Compare your original paragraphs to the paragraphs that your partner has written and discuss. What similarities and differences are there in the description or in the importance? Explain why you believe that there were similarities and differences in the stories?
- 6) Continue the discussion. What happens when we substitute a human being for the object? How does our perception of the person change?

### Colorado Model Content Standards

**Writing PG:** Effectively use content-specific language, style, tone and text structure to compose or adapt writing for different audiences and purposes.

**Writing PG:** Write with clear focus, coherent organization, sufficient elaboration, and detail





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