



# THE CHINESE LADY

BY

LLOYD SUH



DRAMATISTS  
PLAY SERVICE  
INC.



THE CHINESE LADY  
Copyright © 2019, Lloyd Suh

All Rights Reserved

THE CHINESE LADY is fully protected under the copyright laws of the United States of America, and of all countries covered by the International Copyright Union (including the Dominion of Canada and the rest of the British Commonwealth), and of all countries covered by the Pan-American Copyright Convention, the Universal Copyright Convention, the Berne Convention, and of all countries with which the United States has reciprocal copyright relations. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form by any means (electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise), or stored in any retrieval system in any way (electronic or mechanical) without written permission of the publisher.

The English language stock and amateur stage performance rights in the United States, its territories, possessions and Canada for THE CHINESE LADY are controlled exclusively by Dramatists Play Service, 440 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10016. **No professional or nonprofessional performance of the Play may be given without obtaining in advance the written permission of Dramatists Play Service and paying the requisite fee.**

All other rights, including without limitation motion picture, recitation, lecturing, public reading, radio broadcasting, television, video or sound recording, and the rights of translation into foreign languages are strictly reserved.

Inquiries concerning all other rights should be addressed to APA Agency, 135 West 50th Street, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10020. Attn: Beth Blickers.

#### NOTE ON BILLING

Anyone receiving permission to produce THE CHINESE LADY is required to give credit to the Author as sole and exclusive Author of the Play on the title page of all programs distributed in connection with performances of the Play and in all instances in which the title of the Play appears, including printed or digital materials for advertising, publicizing or otherwise exploiting the Play and/or a production thereof. Please see your production license for font size and typeface requirements.

Be advised that there may be additional credits required in all programs and promotional material. Such language will be listed under the “Additional Billing” section of production licenses. It is the licensee’s responsibility to ensure any and all required billing is included in the requisite places, per the terms of the license.

#### SPECIAL NOTE ON SONGS/RECORDINGS

Dramatists Play Service neither holds the rights to nor grants permission to use any songs or recordings mentioned in the Play. Permission for performances of copyrighted songs, arrangements or recordings mentioned in this Play is not included in our license agreement. The permission of the copyright owner(s) must be obtained for any such use. For any songs and/or recordings mentioned in the Play, other songs, arrangements, or recordings may be substituted provided permission from the copyright owner(s) of such songs, arrangements or recordings is obtained; or songs, arrangements or recordings in the public domain may be substituted.

The co-world premiere of THE CHINESE LADY was presented at Barrington Stage Company (Julianne Boyd, Artistic Director; Branden Huldeen, Artistic Producer), Pittsfield, Massachusetts, July 2018. It was directed by Ralph B. Peña, the scenic and costume designs were by Junghyun Georgia Lee, the lighting design was by Oliver Wason, the sound design and music composition were by Fabian Obispo, and the production stage manager was Geoff Boronda. The cast was as follows:

AFONG MOY ..... Shannon Tyo  
ATUNG ..... Daniel K. Isaac

THE CHINESE LADY was commissioned and co-world premiere presented by Ma-Yi Theater Company (Ralph B. Peña, Artistic Director) in New York City.

THE CHINESE LADY was developed with support of the Roe Green Award at Cleveland Play House.

Additional thanks to Claudia Alick, Christine Bruno, Nancy E. Davis, Loretta Greco, Sonia Fernandez, Andrea Hiebler, Laura Kepley, Peter Kim, Kimber Lee, Rachel Lerner-Ley, Teresa Avia Lim, Gregg Mozgala, A. Rey Pamatmat, Haleh Roshan Stilwell, and Krista Williams, all of whom contributed in essential ways to the development of this play.

## CHARACTERS

AFONG MOY, female, from fourteen years old to advanced age.

ATUNG, male, older than Afong Moy.

## SETTING

The United States, beginning in 1834.

## NOTES

The characters should be played by Asian or Asian American performers. They should speak in their natural and organic speaking voices, with no affected dialect or accent (the lone exception is in Scene 3, when Atung performs multiple voices). Otherwise, the characters should simply talk the way the actors talk.

While acknowledging that there is a distinction between the historical practice of foot binding and a contemporary model of Disability culture, the relationship of audiences to Afong Moy's feet was certainly influenced by historical perceptions of disabled bodies. In an ideal circumstance, the role of Afong Moy would be played by a performer with a similar physicality to the historical Afong Moy. While further acknowledging that feet like Afong Moy's no longer exist, I encourage producers to seek out and consider performers with physical or mobility disabilities.

The text of the play acknowledges that the performers' bodies are not the bodies of their historical counterparts. The production should as well. Regardless of whether or not the performers have physical disabilities, at no point should they pretend to a type of mobility that they do not possess. In some cases, of course, this may mean that certain physical actions described in the play may not occur literally. As with their speaking voices, the characters should simply move the way the actors move.

# THE CHINESE LADY

## Scene 1

*Lights up on Afong Moy, fourteen years old, in her Room. The Room is a box placed in the center of the larger stage. Outside the box, the stage is unadorned. Inside the box, it is ornate, decorated with various types of Chinoiserie. Water-color paintings, vases, curtains, silks, furniture, etc. She wears a traditional Chinese gown and jade or lacquered jewelry in her hair.*

*Afong begins the scene seated. Atung sits on a plain-looking chair, downstage of the Room.*

AFONG. Hello. My name is Afong Moy.

It is the year 1834.

I am fourteen years old, and newly arrived in America.

I was born in Guangzhou Province in 1820. I am one of seven children, the youngest. My family has sold me for two years of service to Misters Nathaniel and Frederick Carnes, traders of Far East Oriental Imports to New York. I will be on display here at Peale's Museum, for your education and entertainment, at a price of twenty-five cents adults, ten cents children.

Thank you for coming to see me.

*She bows.*

ATUNG. I am Atung. I am

AFONG. Atung is irrelevant.

ATUNG. I am irrelevant, that's what I was going to say, I was going to say I am irrelevant.

AFONG. Atung has been in service to Misters Nathaniel and

Frederick Carnes as a manservant and translator of Chinese to English and back again. He is now assigned to me.

ATUNG. You do not need to know who I am or where I come from, or how it came to be that I speak both languages with such practical and occasionally poetic fluency. Only that I will assist Afong Moy, The Chinese Lady, during all exhibition hours.

AFONG. We will not be needing Atung's translation services for the time being, for I am not speaking. It would of course seem that I am speaking, as my mouth is moving and my thoughts are becoming articulated through sound, but this is not in fact what is happening. What is happening is a performance. For my entire life is a performance. These words that you hear are not my own. These clothes that I wear are not my own. This body that I occupy is not my own. This 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.

And yet here we are. You and I.

ATUNG. And Atung.

AFONG. And Atung, who is irrelevant. Seated in this Room in this museum, in this exhibition hall advertising The Chinese Lady.

I shall assume that you have paid your twenty-five cents, ten cents for children, because you are curious about China. Curious about what a Chinese lady might look like or act like. I have not been in this country long enough to know the ways in which I might differ from other ladies you have encountered, or what your particular curiosities might be. But 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.

At the start of every hour, I sit down and stay seated. I watch the customers enter the exhibition hall. I do not move. Some customers stand quietly and expectantly, while some come directly towards

the Room and examine its contents. They look at the furniture. The vases. The silks and the paintings. They talk to each other. Oh look at that. I've never seen such a thing. It reminds me of. I wonder if. What do you think it feels like? And they look at me. They look at my eyes. They look at my hands. At my clothes. At my hair. At my face.

They say things to each other. Do you think she... I wonder if she... And my goodness look at her feet.

Allow me to explain my feet.

In many parts of China, it is considered a sign of elevated social status and cultural refinement for women and young girls to have tiny feet.

When I was four years old, my feet were placed into a hot mixture of herbs and animal blood to soften the skin and muscles. My toenails were clipped to their smallest possible size. Both feet were then deeply massaged and oiled before the toes were broken by hand and bound flat against the soles, into triangles. My arches were bent, then bound in silk ribbons. These ribbons were wound in a figure-eight motion, multiple times, pulling the ball of the foot and heel together, and pressing the toes underneath the sole.

This continued for about a year, every few weeks, the bones broken, then set, then broken again.

And for this part of the exhibition, I walk. In one revolution around the Room, to illustrate and demonstrate the form and function of my feet.

*She walks.*

ATUNG. Typically, during this part of the show I am the one who describes the process of foot binding to the audience. But I do not need to do that now.

AFONG. Because I already did.

ATUNG. Because she already did.

*Afong Moy finishes her long revolution around the Room and sits.*

And now I will bring her food.

*Atung exits.*

AFONG. Next, I will eat, and you will watch me. Atung will bring to me plates of steamed shrimp and Chinese vegetables, along with a pot of tea which I will pour and drink in a ritualistic way so as to demonstrate its importance in my culture.

*Atung enters with a tray of food and tea.*

ATUNG. Shrimp and Chinese vegetables. Pot of tea.

AFONG. I will eat these foods with chopsticks.

*She displays the chopsticks with a flourish.*

*She takes a bite.*

Since arriving in America I have been living in a small room in the home of Mrs. Augusta Obear, wife of the ship's captain who brought me here. It is a lovely home with details quite peculiar and novel to my experience. The foods I have been eating there take some getting used to. There is much bread. There is much corn. There is much potatoes. I am unaccustomed to such foods. As is my digestive system.

*Perhaps she burps.*

The room in Mrs. Obear's house is quite different than this Room, though the Obears have added a few artifacts from China to the decor, presumably to make me feel more at home. These accents are comforting despite their inauthenticity, but I am even more appreciative and fascinated by the differences. I have been sleeping on a bed that is elevated some three feet above the floor. I hope I do not fall off of it!

Also, everyone wears their shoes inside the house! A curious phenomenon.

I am ambivalent about the fork. I have seen it in use and I understand its functionality; it seems a useful tool for the stabbing of food, but ultimately I feel it lacks grace. Chopsticks are elegant and poetic. Forks are violent and easy.

*She has finished her food.*

I am finished, Atung.

ATUNG. Very well.

*Atung takes the food, leaves the tea, and exits.*



AFONG. Now I will pour the tea.

*She does.*

In China, tea is of the utmost importance. There are many kinds of teas, for various uses; it is as much for pleasure and entertainment as it is for health and medicine.

The story goes that over four thousand years ago, the Chinese emperor Shennong would boil his water before he drank it so that he could be sure it was not contaminated. One day, while traveling outdoors, a leaf from a wild bush fell into the water and steeped itself in the cup. He did not notice this leaf, and to his surprise he drank the very first cup of Chinese tea.

I like this story because it tells us that history is an accident.

The accident of tea has changed the course of history, and without it I would perhaps not be here with you today.

Let me put it this way.

It is human nature to be curious. Curiosity is evolution. We migrate, from the trees, through the jungle, across oceans and rivers, we are constantly searching. This is what sent the Carnes brothers to China. This is what brings me here. We want to see. It is the same impulse that brought you here, to this Room, to me. You want to look at me. You want to understand more about the world. You want to understand more. More. More.

I will discuss the history of tea in greater detail at a later time.

For now, thank you for attending this presentation of The Chinese Lady.

I am very pleased to be here in this great country. I am very pleased to represent my homeland, 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!

*Atung enters and draws a curtain across the Room.*

# THE CHINESE LADY

by Lloyd Suh

1 man, 1 woman

Afong Moy is fourteen years old when she's brought to the United States from Guangzhou Province in 1834. Allegedly the first Chinese woman to set foot on U.S. soil, she has been put on display for the American public as "The Chinese Lady." For the next half-century, she performs for curious white people, showing them how she eats, what she wears, and the highlight of the event: how she walks with bound feet. As the decades wear on, her celebrated sideshow comes to define and challenge her very sense of identity. Inspired by the true story of Afong Moy's life, *THE CHINESE LADY* is a dark, poetic, yet whimsical portrait of America through the eyes of a young Chinese woman.

*"...piercing and intimate... this quiet play steadily deepens in complexity as we trail the idealistic Afong and the more knowing Atung through the decades... by the end of Mr. Suh's extraordinary play, we look at Afong and see whole centuries of American history."*  
—**The New York Times**

*"It takes only minutes of *THE CHINESE LADY* to see that...playwright Lloyd Suh [has] constructed the dramatic equivalent of a perfect cabinet. Every hinge moves smoothly; the herringbone joins are a low-key marvel. You can almost see yourself in its hard-won polish. ...Suh's version of Afong Moy is wonderful."*  
—**Time Out New York**

*"...Afong Moy might not have fulfilled her intention of educating and connecting the world in her life, but *THE CHINESE LADY* sure has the promise and potential [to] do so."*  
—**TheFrontRowCenter.com**

**Also by Lloyd Suh**  
CHARLES FRANCIS CHAN JR.'S  
EXOTIC ORIENTAL MURDER  
MYSTERY

ISBN 978-0-8222-3990-1



**DRAMATISTS PLAY SERVICE, INC.**

9 780822 239901