

Struggle for Identity in The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Chinese in the Mississippi Delta.

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The Mississippi Delta, an alluvial plain flanked by the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers in the northwest corner of the state, has been described by historian James Cobb as "the most Southern place on Earth." (1) It offers stark contrasts. Because of an economic heritage born out of cotton farming, a wealthy planter aristocracy has historically been juxtaposed against an impoverished laborer class. The economic contrasts are amplified by persistent racial and class differences. Landmarks such as abandoned railroad tracks and bayous establish boundaries within which unwritten rules maintain a black/white dichotomy. Living inside those boundaries and struggling to find their place in that rigid dichotomy are the Mississippi Delta Chinese. How they came to the Delta and the difficulties they encountered there are the focus of this article.

A significant resource in support of the research described is an oral history project on the Delta Chinese funded by the Mississippi Humanities Council and directed by the author. Interviews from that project are the basis for a portion of the information provided herein.

The end of the Civil War in 1865 signaled the demise of the Confederacy and freedom for four million slaves. These slaves had been the cornerstone of an agricultural economy. Their freedom created panic among planters in the agricultural South. How would productivity be sustained as they faced the loss of the core of their labor force? One creative solution was to experiment with the recruitment of foreign labor. Chinese and, later, Italians came to the South in response to the potential need to replace the slaves who were now free.

During the post-Civil War period, several labor conventions were held to discuss the possibility of recruiting Chinese workers in an attempt to solve the labor problem. In June 1869, at a meeting in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, cotton planters organized the Arkansas River Valley Emigration Company. The purpose was to attract Chinese laborers, who could be obtained in "great numbers and at cheap rates, and made efficient in the cultivation of cotton, and are proof against the malaria of the climate." Recruiters were dispatched to Hong Kong in search of farm labor. Two ships, the *Villa de St. Lo* and the *Charles Auguste*, arrived in New Orleans in 1870 with approximately four hundred Chinese laborers.

Southern cotton planters met the two ships and transported the immigrants to their farms to work in the cotton fields. (2) Although there are no records to confirm the eventual disposition of the Chinese who arrived in New Orleans in 1870, it is known that a small core of Chinese laborers arrived in the Mississippi Delta about 1870 to work in agriculture in Washington County. (3) These early Chinese settlers came to the Mississippi Delta as sojourners. They saw working in the cotton fields as an opportunity to make enough money to support their families in China. Their goal was to eventually return home to their ancestral villages. (4) Longtime Delta resident Edward Joe recalled his father always telling him "that we were going to make our living and go back to China." (5)

Locating in the Mississippi Delta to work in farming seemed a harsh way to fulfill that goal, although in many ways it was preferable to the more populated West Coast, where discrimination against Chinese laborers working on the railroads and in the mines was well-documented among Chinese. The Mississippi Delta Chinese hoped for better. Yet their dream of making money in farming was short-lived. Due to the extreme physical demands of farm labor, to exploitation by planters, and to low economic returns from their labor, the experiment was a failure. The Delta Chinese began leaving the farms in search of other ways to earn a living.

Many found an opportune economic niche by opening grocery stores in black neighborhoods. Historically, Southern blacks had acquired goods in commissaries as part of a credit system designed to keep them in a state

of peonage. As blacks established purchasing power independent of the farm, they provided an economic opportunity for the Mississippi Chinese to make a living by opening small businesses, mostly grocery stores. One of the first Chinese grocery stores opened about 1874 in the black neighborhood of Rosedale, Mississippi. Others quickly followed throughout the Delta, with Chinese families claiming black neighborhoods in small towns as their territory. (6)

For Southern blacks, who sought relief from the plantation-based commissaries, and Chinese, who saw new financial opportunities as merchants, the union was a merger of self-interests. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 placed severe limits on Chinese immigration. As a result, there was little opportunity for the early Delta Chinese to bring family members from China to work in the stores and, more importantly, to offset their social isolation. This isolation, coupled with close economic ties to the black community, served as a catalyst for the development of social relationships with members of the black community. There were almost no Chinese women, so a few romantic encounters evolved between Chinese men and black (and occasionally white) women. Some of these were primarily physical, while others became long-term relationships that included marriage and children. Arlee Hen, child of a black mother and Chinese father, remembered that "there weren't any Chinese women for them to marry and white women they weren't allowed to marry, so they had to do something." Charlie Sing and Emma Clay exemplified the long-term relationship, marrying in 1881 and producing fourteen children. (7)

In addition to the early cadre of farm laborers turned merchants, other Chinese came to the Mississippi Delta. Some came from California after having worked on the railroads. Bobby Jue remembers his grandfather coming to the Delta to open a grocery store after working on the railroad in California. (8) Others arrived in the early twentieth century to escape domestic turmoil in China, most notably after the downfall of the Manchu dynasty in 1911. (9) As Chinese established an economic presence in the Delta, they sponsored extended family members to join them, often to work in the grocery stores. The aforementioned oral history project of fifteen Delta Chinese families confirms a steady migration of Chinese into the Delta throughout the first half of the twentieth century Sam Chu-Lin, author of the documentary "Chu-Lin is an Old Family Name," recalls numerous stories of Chinese who came to the United States during the first half of the twentieth century and settled in the Mississippi Delta. His documentary looks at the struggle of those immigrants through the eyes of one family. (10)

Those who came from China were connected through family and friends in the Delta. Freeda Lee remembers traveling with her father when she was a small child to check on Chinese families who had come to the Delta. It was important to her father to help these people because of difficulties he himself had encountered when getting started. (11) Chinese immigrants knew the Delta to be a place of economic opportunity coupled with a strong support system of Chinese who would nurture their success in a new country That support system, combined with difficult political and economic conditions in China, led to a steady increase of Delta Chinese, from a total of 183 in 1900 to 743 in 1940 (12) and 1,200 in 1960. (13)

Living in the Delta was a challenge for the early Mississippi Delta Chinese. The decision to tie their livelihoods to the black community served their economic interests but tainted them socially in the eyes of the white community. Initially since they viewed themselves as sojourners, their status in the Delta social structure was of little concern. Although they lived in the United States, they thought in terms of their social position in China. One Chinese woman remembered that her father kept his queue because if he cut it, "he would never be able to go back to his village." (14)

However, as the Chinese shifted away from their sojourner identity and acknowledged the Delta as their home, they realized that their economic and social involvement with the black community was isolating them from the white community and the benefits thereof. Not inclined toward assimilation with the black minority and

rejected by the prejudice of the white majority the Chinese found themselves victims of social isolation. In urban centers, they created their own enclaves, such as Chinatown in San Francisco. But the small population and fairly large geographical spread in the Mississippi Delta precluded this option for Chinese who had immigrated there, so that they lived quite differently from their urban counterparts. Acceptance in the Delta, where rigid social caste was dominant, required that the Chinese reassess their patterns of social behavior.

Delta Chinese sought ways to gain acceptance in the white community while continuing to support their black customers. In effect, they engaged in a juggling act in which they tried to keep both sides of the social fence happy. Out of necessity they continued their links with the black community working hard to remain in favor with the customers who represented their economic lifeline. At the same time, links with the white community became increasingly important. Many Chinese expanded this courtship, seeking social affirmation. Chinese families began sending their children to church--most often the church favored by the local white power structure in the community. They gave money to causes and programs favored by white leaders. And some anglicized their Chinese family names. It was not enough, however, for Chinese to court the favor of whites: in dealing with blacks, they also had to acknowledge the Jim Crow laws to show themselves worthy of white approval. (15) In some cases, the Delta Chinese had to distance themselves socially from blacks if they were to have any chance of escaping Jim Crow discrimination themselves. A part of that distancing entailed the rejection of children from mixed marriages.

Delta resident Luck Wing spoke of two of his children marrying Caucasians and of how accepted they were. He went on to say, however, that mixed marriages in the earlier years of the twentieth century were unacceptable. "The children would catch it from both sides. The Chinese wouldn't want to claim them and the Caucasians wouldn't claim them. I felt sorry for those children." (16)

Lillie Woo recalled how upset her mother was when her son announced that he was marrying a Caucasian. The young woman was eventually accepted, but it was difficult. (17) The history of interracial marriage and race relations in the Delta is a sensitive issue for Delta Chinese. A 1984 documentary by Christine Choy which addresses the triangular relationships among Chinese, blacks, and whites in the Delta, reflects the debate over how common such relationships were. Choy's work examines the practice of interracial relationships as a significant theme in the lives of Delta Chinese. Many Delta Chinese, however, are troubled by the documentary and refute its accuracy. (18) Particularly troublesome is the perception that Choy labels Delta Chinese as racist. (19)

The issue of race is complicated for Chinese because of their being "between black and white," as the subtitle of James Loewen's book on the Mississippi Chinese puts it. The ways Chinese responded to that distinction provide useful insights into their character and culture. There is ample evidence that prejudice against the Chinese was a prevalent part of their lives. From the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 to the Gong Lum court case of 1927, a clear pattern of overt discrimination, sanctioned by the federal government, was evident. Not as flagrant but equally insidious was the personal discrimination the Chinese encountered, as described in anecdotal comments based on their memories of growing up in the Delta.

Edward Joe notes that "there are a lot of people that would look flat at you." (20) Audrey Sidney recalls racial slurs such as "Chink" being used. (21) Luck Wing, in speaking about his college years at the University of Mississippi, remembers that "a lot of people would get all mad and stuck their nose out. They will call you 'Chinaman,'" (22) Annette Joe tells of applying for a teaching job and being told by the school superintendent, "I am not ever going to hire anybody like you," to which she replied "Well, how am I?" His reply was, "Well, you are Chinese." (23) Audrey Sidney tells a similar story of applying to teach in Greenville, Mississippi, in 1956, and being told that "only Caucasians could teach in the white public schools of Greenville." (24) Freeda and Hoover Lee remember white farmers refusing to send their children to the Louise public schools because

Chinese children were allowed to attend them. (25)

Even as late as the 1960s, after the racial barriers for Chinese were supposedly removed, Warren Lancaster recalls going to Greenville to get a haircut: "The barber took me outside. He said, 'You know we don't cut Chinese's hair.'" (26) As Chinese families gained financial security, some made the effort to move from their homes above or beside the family grocery store into white neighborhoods. But Audrey Sidney's realtor told her family that "he couldn't sell us a house in any white neighborhood." (27) Such prejudice was not limited to the white community. As a child, Bobby Jue recalls being called names and pushed off the sidewalk by black students attending the school next to his father's store. (28)

During the Civil Rights movement, tensions often arose. Freeda and Hoover Lee describe the boycott of their grocery store by the black community after whites had killed a black man. Out of fear, the white community also avoided the store, so the Lees' business dropped off considerably. (29)

Although prejudice against the Chinese was pervasive, many whites and blacks treated the Chinese with respect and kindness. Fay Dong divided the whites into two groups: those who welcomed the Chinese with open arms, and the "rednecks, and some of those were not so wonderful." (30) Through their stores, the Delta Chinese developed many lasting friendships with their black customers. When Willie "Joe" Young retired from his grocery store in Rena Lara, Mississippi, in 1967, the entire town, black and white, turned out to say goodbye and thank him for a lifetime of kindness to that small town. The ultimate Good Samaritan, Young had loaned money, paid utility bills for neighbors before the "cut off" man came, and fed children in his store. (31) His example of the storeowner being a caretaker for numerous citizens, many of them black, was played out throughout the Delta as well.

Although the stories of prejudice paint a picture of how difficult conditions could be for Delta Chinese, equally interesting--or more so, in their eyes--is the manner in which they responded. The Chinese take pride in the fact that they refused to become victims. Juanita Dong explained it as follows: "You just got to remember you have a handicap. You are just going to have to overcome it." (32) Annette Joe described prejudice as "an enabling experience," saying that "you can do a lot of things you couldn't do before." (33) Similarly, Bobby Jue called prejudice a "learning experience." He articulated the most common response--namely, that "that is the way things were at that time." (34)

Audrey Sidney, in a recent interview with the author, pointed out with pride that, although both blacks and Chinese experienced discrimination, the Chinese made a conscious choice not to hold demonstrations or, as she put it, "practice Yellow Power." (35) She went on to state that "sometimes we are mistreated. We may go home and talk about it, but we don't demonstrate." (36) Fay Dong's characterization of being Chinese as a "handicap" exemplifies the view that it wasn't society that needed to change its attitudes toward the Chinese but the Chinese who needed to work harder to overcome them.

A recent explanation by a Chinese-American college professor expresses the same perspective. He pointed out that the Chinese came as visitors to this country, so it wouldn't have been appropriate to demand changes to accommodate their differences. (37) The response of the Delta Chinese was to work harder. As Juanita Dong put it, "We were always just told you need to work 20 to 25 percent better than anybody else to get to the same place. That was a given." (38)

In the process of working to overcome prejudicial attitudes toward them, the Chinese have been accused of being prejudiced in turn toward the black community they served--an accusation disputed by the Delta Chinese. Bobby Jue remembers that "we didn't look down upon the blacks like the Caucasians did. (39) That is one reason we did well in black neighborhoods." Fay Dong expressed similar sentiments: "We were better to them

and kinder than a lot of people were." (40) Luck Wing tells the story of why his brother moved to Los Angeles. He took the family and the black maid, who cared for the children, out for ice cream in Clarksdale, Mississippi. They were refused service because of the maid. The family got so upset they decided to move to California. (41)

Although the Chinese may not have expressed overt racism toward blacks, they didn't, or couldn't, embrace blacks as peers. Bobby Jue explained that Chinese wanted to improve themselves, "to achieve more and do better," so "you really didn't want to associate with what you called back then 'the colored race,' so we kept to ourselves." (42) To do otherwise would have jeopardized Chinese efforts to gain social acceptance from the white community. Jue's comments reflect the difficult and delicate task facing the Chinese--namely, to maintain the proper balance between seeking favor in the white community and not alienating their loyal customer base, the black community John Quon describes it as "a tightrope that we had to walk." (43)

This would become particularly troublesome during the Civil Rights movement. Quon recalls his father giving money to both the NAACP and the White Citizens Council. Sam ChuLin remembers his grandfather being a good friend of Senator James Eastland, a staunch supporter of segregation, while also making interest-free loans to numerous black friends. (44) Over time, such efforts aimed at gaining social approval met with some success, and Chinese gradually ceased to be perceived by the white community as colored. As a result, they began to be afforded a degree of privilege in small towns throughout the Delta. Chinese were able to frequent public places that blacks could not.

After improving their stores, Chinese grocers began to have white customers. Social mobility for Delta Chinese increased as they curried white favor and acknowledged Jim Crow laws. Chinese in small Delta towns now sensed that acceptance by the white community was within their grasp. (45) In some communities, embracing the white community had an important tangential benefit: It gave the Chinese access to white public schools. The Mississippi Constitution, adopted in 1890 by conservative Democrats determined to eliminate the last vestiges of Republican Reconstruction, included a clear mandate for a dual school system for whites and blacks. The constitutional language did not address education for Chinese. The 1890 Constitution placed the Delta Chinese in a difficult position. The concept of a dual school system in Mississippi had always been a farce.

In the 1904 gubernatorial campaign, the voters elected James Vardaman, who ran on a platform that included elimination of funding for black public schools. (46) The State Legislature rejected Vardaman's proposal but continued to ignore the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case, which mandated "separate but equal" schools for the races. Mississippi schools were separate but hardly equal. The State Legislature and local white school officials gave only token support to black public education. Black schools were open as few as four months a year. Black teachers earned one-fifth of what white teachers did. There were enormous disparities in annual school expenditures per child.

As late as 1941 in Bolivar County, the county with one of the largest Chinese populations in the Delta, expenditures were \$45.55 per white child and \$1.09 per black child. (47) The black schools, though accessible to Chinese, were blatantly inferior, while the superior white schools were constitutionally off-limits to the Chinese.

Access to high-quality schools was important to Chinese because their cultural identity was often defined in terms of academic achievement; as one Chinese writer stated, "To do well in school is to be Chinese." (48) Moreover, Confucian tradition valued education, and the teacher in particular. One writer, commenting on the history of the Chinese in America, suggested that their faith in schooling was unmatched by any other racial minority group. (49)

Longtime Delta resident Fay Dong, when asked about important Chinese parental values, stated: "More than anything else, they taught us the importance of education, which we were happy to pass on to our children." (50) With education being such an important cultural value, high-quality schools were paramount to the Delta Chinese. By the early 1920s, Chinese families had reconciled themselves to the disparities in the schools, and for the most part rejected the black public schools as a viable option.

In a few small Delta communities, Chinese were able to attend the white public schools. One family in Louise, Mississippi, remembered that the wife of a local farmer served as a benefactor to the Chinese, paving the political way for them to attend the white schools. (51) Some families reported being home-schooled by paid tutors who taught their children or, in one case, all the Chinese children in the community. In cases where local schools wouldn't accept Chinese students but nearby communities would, the children would commute or move.

Freeda Lee recalls growing up in Ruleville but attending school in Sumner, some 15 or 20 miles away. (52) It was not uncommon to send children back to China to get an education. Several Delta families remembered children who did so. Freeda Lee's father took her three older brothers back to China "to get a Chinese education." (53) Sending children out of state in their high school years was de rigeur as well. Paul Wong remembers moving to Portland, Oregon, to finish high school, after attending the Cleveland, Mississippi, church mission school. (54)

Attending the white schools was preferred, but depended on the benevolence of a town's local school district. Typical of such towns was Rosedale, Mississippi. It was here that the legality of Chinese children attending white schools would be challenged in a landmark case that went all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Rosedale, a small community located in Bolivar County on the Mississippi River, had an active Chinese population whose members had worked hard at being accepted by the white community. One such resident was Gong Lum, whose grocery store was frequented by both blacks and whites. Lum had numerous white friends, and his family was active in the local Presbyterian Church. A white couple served as godparents to his two daughters, Berda and Martha, named for two prominent white women in Bolivar County. The two girls, along with some other Chinese children, attended the white schools of Rosedale, and had been doing so without incident for some time.

In the fall of 1924, the school district called the Chinese children in and told them they could no longer attend the white school. The catalyst for the decision is in dispute, but it was most likely prompted by state authorities responding to complaints from a few local white residents, some of whom were concerned about the influx of Chinese into the community. (55) Many white citizens of Rosedale were upset with the decision, including some of the school trustees charged with enforcing the order. (56) Even when the Lums decided to file suit against the school district, white support persisted. Brewer, Brewer, and McGhehee, a well-known law firm from nearby Clarksdale, accepted the case, mostly on a pro bono basis. (57) The fact that a prestigious white law firm would accept the case affirmed evidence of white support. The subsequent suit, *Gong Lum v. Rice*, was filed on October 28, 1924. (58)

The case was first heard in the circuit court of Bolivar County shortly after the suit was filed in the fall of 1924. The plaintiff lawyers argued that the Lum children were not members of the colored race or of mixed blood but, rather, pure Chinese. Moreover, they argued that "separate but equal" facilities did not exist in Rosedale, as required under *Plessy v. Ferguson*. The judgment in the case favored the Lums. Judge William Alcorn criticized school officials, pointing out that Martha Lum was not "a member of the colored race" and therefore deserved to go to the white school. (59) The defendants--namely, the school authorities and State of Mississippi--filed an appeal with the Supreme Court of Mississippi. (60)

The appeal to the Mississippi Supreme Court appeal was heard during the March term of 1925. E. C. Sharp, Assistant Attorney General for the State of Mississippi, argued that the clear intent of the framers of the Constitution was to separate the education of whites from all other races. Moreover, he maintained that the classification of Chinese as non-white was indisputable. He stated that "the status or classification of this race (Chinese) has been declared and fixed by our legislature. It has in unmistakable terms placed the Chinese or Mongolian race in the same category with the Negro." (61)

The Lums' family attorney Earl Brewer, argued that the 1890 Constitution's requirement of separate schools applied only to two races--black and white: "The purpose of the constitution was to make it certain that Negro children should not attend the same school with white children." He pointed out that the exclusionary doctrine failed to apply, stating that "the Chinaman is not a colored person within the meaning of our laws." (62) The Mississippi Supreme Court rejected Brewer's argument. The Court defined the term "white" as referenced in the 1890 Constitution to mean "members of the Caucasian race." The Court cited the intent of the framers of the Mississippi Constitution that separate schools were needed "so as to prevent race amalgamation."

The Court concluded that the state was not "compelled to provide separate schools for each of the colored races." In ruling that the Lums were not entitled to attend a white school, the decision of the lower court was reversed. (63) The Lums' attorneys filed an appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court. In 1927, the Supreme Court of the United States heard the Lum family's appeal of the state ruling. Chief Justice William Howard Taft delivered the opinion of the high court. In it, Justice Taft affirmed the ruling of the Mississippi Supreme Court. He rejected the notion that Chinese citizens were denied equal protection of the law by being classified among the colored races. He cited *Plessy v. Ferguson* as affirmation of "separate but equal" and concluded that Chinese were provided with an "education equal to that offered to all, whether white, brown, yellow, or black." (64)

The unanimous ruling in *Gong Lum v. Rice* clearly defined the placement of Chinese students within the dual school structure in Mississippi. It also served as a landmark case. As one legal writer put it, "The validity of school segregation clearly was settled." (65) Another landmark case, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, would be needed before the Court reversed its position. Although the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the Mississippi Supreme Court ruling that Chinese were "entitled to have benefit of the colored public schools," (66)

The Chinese chose not to accept that option. Instead, they again sought alternatives based on financial resources and what was available to them in their areas. Some parents were able to enroll their children at private religious schools, others sent them to out-of-state schools or back to China, and still others employed private tutors. In a very few cases, Chinese students continued to attend the white public schools in communities where they were allowed to do so. The Lums refused to accept what they saw as a demotion in social class and moved to Arkansas. (67)

Fortunately for the Delta Chinese, they still had access to the white churches in which they had become involved. In the late 1920s and 1930s, these churches offered another post-Lum school alternative: as part of their missionary efforts and in collaboration with local school officials, they established Chinese mission schools in some Delta communities, most notably Cleveland, Rosedale, and Greenville. These were residential schools with no set grade levels for different ages, and with a blended curriculum based on a traditional U.S. model and some Chinese education. Fay Dong remembers it as "everybody from five to eighteen all in the same room and trying to teach them." (68)

A teacher at the Chinese Mission School in Cleveland, Mississippi, recalled in an interview that local school officials would usually provide some financial support for a teacher while the sponsoring church supported construction and maintenance of school facilities. Chinese children attending these schools usually received

instruction from a white teacher during the regular school day and supplemental instruction in, and from, Chinese tutors in the evenings. In return for their financial support, the local churches, which were usually Baptist, required inclusion of religious instruction in the curriculum and decision-making responsibility over the school. (69)

These schools provided an educational lifeline for Chinese living throughout the Delta, where few acceptable educational alternatives existed. They proved successful in giving Chinese children an education comparable to that of whites, providing further evidence to the white community that, by refusing to attend the black schools, the Chinese were deserving of social acceptance. The success of the mission schools allowed Delta Chinese a victory over the defeat they had suffered in the Gong Lum case. They had once again proved themselves worthy of white admiration, a seemingly elusive goal.

In the post--Lum period, the Chinese again showed their resilience. Instead of pursuing legal action and/or claiming the role of the victim, they found an alternative that was embraced by the white community. In the words of Audrey Sidney, "I think through hard work, endurance, and believing in yourself, we will get there." (70) The mission schools represented a partnership between the white community and the Chinese. The church bound the two together in a common cause that transcended their racial differences. It is not surprising that a New Deal researcher doing a Works Progress Administration survey in the late 1930s commented in her report that the Delta Chinese, though not completely accepted by white society, "are liked and respected, nonetheless, by all who cannot fail to admire their honesty and integrity." (71) The mission schools had made their mark.

The advent of World War II gave the Delta Chinese further opportunities to prove themselves worthy of white acceptance. Some enlisted in the armed services, others engaged in rigorous fund-raising in support of the war effort, and all demonstrated their patriotism. The alliance between China and the United States cemented a special bond against a common enemy, Japan. The enthusiasm with which the Delta Chinese embraced the war effort made a favorable impression on the white community. The participation of numerous Delta Chinese was documented and appreciated. When U.S. President Bill Clinton proclaimed October 26, 1998 as Chinese Veterans of World War II Day, longtime Delta resident Kenneth Gong was one of the White House honorees. (72)

When the war was over, attitudes toward the Chinese seemed to have changed. A teacher at the mission school in Cleveland remembered that it "no longer seemed fair to treat the Chinese differently." (73) Edward Joe's recollections, based on his father's war experience, were that "a war is bad, but after the Second World War, a lot of people came back. They accepted Chinese a lot more." (74) After World War II, Delta Chinese children gradually began to attend the white public schools, with the timeline for doing so dictated by the benevolence of the individual school district. Mae Wing recalls attending the Chinese mission school in Greenville and then transferring to the white high school after World War II. Thus the Delta Chinese "Baby Boomer" generation was, for the most part, a product of Mississippi's white public schools.

The significant increase in access to high-quality public education for post--World War II Chinese children proved to be a double-edged sword for Chinese families. On the one hand, the commitment to education in Chinese culture was affirmed. On the other hand, increased educational access both at the K-12 and post-secondary levels, accompanied by assimilation with the majority white culture, caused an increase in social mobility. The idea of taking over the family grocery store and remaining insulated from the outside world became less attractive and was replaced by the desire to pursue economic and educational opportunities elsewhere.

For Delta Chinese who saw the family grocery store as their economic, social, and cultural linchpin, the

prospect of its demise was particularly sad. The families interviewed for the oral history project unanimously identified those stores as the single most important factor exemplifying the rigorous work ethic that defines Chinese culture. That work ethic was integrated into every aspect of Chinese life. Families recalled eighteen-hour work days in the grocery store. Bobby Jue commented that the thing he regretted most was "that the grandkids won't know what it's like to run a grocery store." (75) The Delta Chinese view the work ethic learned in those stores as their legacy to later generations who have left the stores but retained the work ethic as the basis for new and successful careers elsewhere.

The peak population of about 1,200 Delta Chinese in 1960 (76) had declined to 782 by 1990. (77) In 1994 the Clarion-Ledger, the largest newspaper in Mississippi, printed articles on the Chinese that highlighted their accomplishments but depicted a culture in demise. The Chinese mission churches, which "upheld Chinese traditions and gave people a place to gather, talk, and worship," were dying out. The Greenville church, with 200 or more members in the 1970s, was down to 30 in 1994. The mission church in Clarksdale had closed, and the one in Cleveland had only a handful of members. The older Chinese pointed to Americanization as the catalyst for the decline. Chinese have joined mainstream white churches, and "the old corner grocery store operated by the Chinese family is dying out."

Young Chinese college graduates were moving away to bigger cities for better jobs. One young Chinese merchant from Greenville lamented the decline, stating that "future generations will lose out. Two hundred years down the road, my bloodline won't exist anymore. We'll lose our heritage as we become more Americanized." (78)

The fear of losing Delta Chinese culture is compounded by a new wave of Asian immigrants arriving in the state. The 2000 Census revealed an increase of 50 percent in Mississippi's Asian population. Many of them are from China, Taiwan, and other Pacific Rim countries. Some have settled in the Delta. Like their predecessors, many of these newcomers have become merchants, opening take-out restaurants and grocery stores. Native Delta Chinese view themselves as Americans, so some of them think of their new neighbors as foreigners because of their different cultures and languages. One longtime resident suggested that "they look like us, but that's about it. We don't have much in common." (79)

As Chinese leave the Delta and new Asian residents take their place, Chinese Americans fear that the legacy of their unique culture will be lost and their sacrifices forgotten. The Mississippi Humanities Council is providing grants to support oral history projects as a method of archiving the stories of people, groups, and cultures of Mississippi.

One of these projects, which targets the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta, is reflected herein. There is also an effort underway to establish a Chinese heritage museum in Greenville, Mississippi. The hope is that these and other efforts will be successful in preserving the important historical and cultural legacy of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta. The Chinese have made invaluable contributions to the quality of life in the Delta. Chinese have served as town mayors, leaders of civic clubs and churches, and in all facets of community life in the Delta, and have a strong record of philanthropic support for community causes. Their stores and businesses have contributed significantly to the Delta economy. Their commitment to educational excellence has been a model for all the citizens of the Delta. Generations of Chinese now work side by side with white and black leaders to make the Delta a better place to live. Although their numbers are small, they continue to enrich the Delta. That enrichment has earned--and will continue to preserve--a unique place for the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta.

NOTES

(1.) James C. Cobb, *The Most Southern Place on Earth: The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

- (2.) Lucy M. Cohen, *Chinese in the Post--Civil War South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1984), 64, 77-79.
- (3.) Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias: The Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1982), 6.
- (4.) Jeannie Rhee, "In Black and White: Chinese in the Mississippi Delta," *Journal of Supreme Court History: Yearbook of the Supreme Court Historical Society* (1994): 119.
- (5.) Edward and Annette Joe, interview by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell, 1 May 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (6.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 119-20.
- (7.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 120.
- (8.) Bobby and Laura Jue, interview by Kimberly Lancaster, February 4, 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (9.) Quan, *Lotus Among the Magnolias*, 10-11.
- (10.) Sam Chu-Lin to John Thornell, September 20, 2001, transcript of letter in the hand of author, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (11.) Freeda and Hoover Lee, interview by Kimberly Lancaster, April 24, 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (12.) James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese: Between Black and White* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), 25.
- (13.) Somini Sengupta, "Cleveland Journal: Delta Chinese Hang on to a Vanishing Way of Life," *New York Times*, November 1, 2000.
- (14.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 120.
- (15.) Jim Crow laws legally mandated separation of the races. Schools, housing, shopping, theaters, medical services, and transportation were just a few of the areas in which the laws were strictly enforced. In these and all other areas of Southern society, there had to be a dual structure in place to avoid mixing of the races.
- (16.) Luck and Mae Wing, interview by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell, March 1, 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (17.) Lillie Woo, interview by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell, February 14, 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (18.) Sam Chu-Lin to John Thornell, March 9, 2001, transcript of letter in the hand of the author, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (19.) Sam Chu-Lin, "Down South: Chinese Americans in Mississippi Looking to Build Museum," *Asianweek.com*, November 2--8, 2001.
- (20.) Joe interview, May 1, 2000.
- (21.) Audrey Sidney interview by Kimberly Lancaster, February 4, 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (22.) Wing interview; March 1, 2000.
- (23.) Joe interview, May 1, 2000.
- (24.) Sidney interview, February 4, 2000.
- (25.) Lee interview; April 24, 2000.
- (26.) Warren Lancaster, interview by Kimberly Lancaster, May 21, 2000, transcript, Delta State University Cleveland, Miss.
- (27.) Sidney interview; February 4, 2000.
- (28.) Jue interview, February 4, 2000.
- (29.) Lee interview, April 24, 2000.
- (30.) Fay and Juanita Dong, interview by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell, May 1, 2000, transcript, Delta State University Cleveland, Miss.
- (31.) Delma Furniss, "Rena Lara Folks Hope 'Joe' Still Using Watch," *Clarksdale Press Register*, July 29, 1988.
- (32.) Dong interview, May 1, 2000.
- (33.) Joe interview, May 1, 2000.
- (34.) Jue interview, February 4, 2000.
- (35.) Audrey Sidney interview by John Thornell, 10 December 10, 2001, Delta State University Cleveland, Miss.
- (36.) Sidney interview, February 4, 2000.
- (37.) John Quon, interview by John Thornell, December 13, 2001, Delta State University Cleveland, Miss.
- (38.) Dong interview, May 1, 2000.
- (39.) Jue interview, February 4, 2000.
- (40.) Dong interview, May 1, 2000.
- (41.) Wing interview, March 1, 2000.
- (42.) Jue interview, February 4, 2000.
- (43.) John Quon, as quoted in Chu-Lin, "Down South," November 2-8, 2001.
- (44.) Sam Chu-Lin to John Thornell, March 9, 2001, transcript of letter in the hand of author, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (45.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 121.
- (46.) Jesse O. McKee, *Mississippi: A Portrait of an American State* (Montgomery: Clairmont Press, 1995), 140.
- (47.) Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 65.
- (48.) Sau-Fong Siu, "Toward an Understanding of Chinese-American Educational Achievement: A Literature Review" (Boston: Center on Families, Communities, Schools and Children's Learning; Wheelock College, 1992), 2, ED 343 713, microfiche (database online, available from ERIC).
- (49.) Siu, "Chinese-American Educational Achievement," 13.
- (50.) Dong interview, May 1, 2000.
- (51.) Francis Wong, interview by Kimberly Lancaster and Jennifer Mitchell, 19 January 2000, transcript, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss.
- (52.) Lee interview, April 24, 2000.
- (53.) Lee interview, April 24, 2000.

- (54.) Paul Wong to Martha Miller, September 11, 1993, transcript of letter in the hand of author, History Department, Delta State University, Cleveland, Miss. For more on the Chinese mission schools, see the discussion later in this essay.
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- (56.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 122.
- (57.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 122.
- (58.) Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 66.
- (59.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 123.
- (60.) Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese*, 67.
- (61.) Cases Argued and Decided in the Supreme Court of Mississippi at the March Term, 1925 (Columbia, Missouri: E. W. Stephens Publishing Co., 1926), vol. 139: 763-64.
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- (65.) Horowitz and Karst, *Law Lawyers and Social Change*, 160.
- (66.) Cases Argued, 787.
- (67.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 126.
- (68.) Dong interview, May 1, 2000.
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- (70.) Sidney interview, February 4, 2000.
- (71.) Rhee, "In Black and White," 129.
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- (77.) "New Era Challenges Chinese Heritage," Jackson (Miss.) Clarion-Ledger, September 9, 1994.
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