



## **A Culture in Decline: The Mississippi Delta Chinese**

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John Thornell documents the history of Chinese settlers in the Mississippi Delta in this scholarly note, quoting from, among other sources, interviews carried out in 2000 as part of an oral history project funded by the Mississippi Humanities Council.

### **Chinese in the Mississippi Delta**

In 2003, the long-vacant Chinese Mission School building in Cleveland, Mississippi, was finally demolished. In this small Delta town, with a population less than 14,000, a vacant lot now stands where a residential school for Chinese children once flourished. The demolition of the school building parallels the gradual demise of the culture that supported it. Greenville (population 41,500), thirty-five miles from Cleveland, was home to forty-two Chinese grocery stores in 1951. Now Greenville has ten. From 1960 to the present, the population of Delta Chinese has declined by one-half. A culture with a Delta-wide population of Chinese involved in all aspects of community life and accentuated by Chinese grocery stores, Chinese mission schools, and churches has been relegated to a largely invisible presence. The Chinese struggle for survival is particularly poignant because of the proud accomplishments of the culture in the face of what seemed to be insurmountable obstacles.

The factors associated with the presence of a Chinese population in the Delta can be traced to the end of the Civil War in 1865. The war afforded freedom to four million slaves who had been the cornerstone of an agricultural economy. Planters, faced with the loss of the core of their labor force, responded by experimenting with foreign labor. Chinese and, later, Italians were recruited as part of this experiment.

Labor conventions were held to discuss the possibility of recruiting Chinese workers. In June 1869, at a meeting in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, cotton planters organized the Arkansas River Valley Emigration Company. Its purpose was to attract Chinese labor, who could be obtained in “great num-

bers and at cheap rates, and made efficient in the cultivation of cotton, and are proof against the malaria of the climate” (Cohen 1984, 78).

Locating in the Mississippi Delta to work in farming seemed a harsh way to fulfill the goal of making money to support families back in China, although in many ways the Delta 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. Their dream of making money in farming was short-lived, however. Exploitation by planters, low economic returns from their labor, and the extreme physical demands of farm life contributed to failure of the experiment.

As Delta Chinese left the farms, many found an opportune economic niche in black neighborhoods. Historically, Southern blacks had depended on goods acquired in commissaries as part of a credit system designed to keep them in a state of peonage. Post-Civil War blacks gained purchasing power, providing the Delta Chinese an opportunity to make a living by opening small businesses, mostly grocery stores. 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.

In addition to farm laborers-turned merchants, other Chinese came to the Mississippi Delta. Some left the railroads in California. Early twentieth-century Chinese came to escape domestic turmoil in China, most notably after the downfall of the Imperial Manchu dynasty in 1911 (Quan 1982, 6). Also, Delta Chinese sponsored extended family members to join them to work in the grocery stores.

### **“Between Black & White”: Challenges to Life in the Mississippi Delta**

As the Chinese began to consider the Delta to be a permanent home, they encountered challenges, most notably social isolation. The small population and fairly large geographical spread precluded the development of Chinese enclaves such as Chinatown in San Francisco. In order to make progress on assimilation, the Chinese were forced to find ways to gain acceptance in the white community while trying to avoid alienation of their black customer base. The Chinese were careful to curry favor with black customers who were their economic lifeline but were increasingly attentive to strengthening links with the white community. Many Chinese families began sending their children to one of the churches favored by the community. They contributed to causes and programs favored by white community leaders. Some even anglicized their Chinese family names.

Beyond courting the favor of whites, it was also necessary to acknowledge the duality of Jim Crow law. The Delta Chinese began to distance themselves socially from blacks, hoping they could escape Jim Crow dis-

crimination themselves. Being “between black and white,” the subtitle of James Loewen’s (1971) book on the Mississippi Chinese, aptly describes the dilemma they faced. How they responded to that cultural gulf provides useful insights into the character and culture of the Delta Chinese.

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. Equally insidious was the personal discrimination the Chinese encountered, as described in anecdotal comments based on their memories of growing up in the Delta. Audrey Sidney (2000) recalls racial slurs such as “chink” being used, and, upon applying for a teaching job in Greenville, being told that “only Caucasians could teach in the white public schools of Greenville.” Annette Joe tells the story 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: “Well, you are Chinese” (Joe and Joe 2000). Freeda and Hoover Lee remember white farmers refusing to send their children to the Louise public schools because Chinese children were allowed to attend (Lee and Lee 2000).

Some Chinese made the effort to move from their homes above or beside the grocery store into white neighborhoods, but they were typically denied the opportunity to do so. Audrey Sidney’s realtor told her family “he couldn’t sell [them] a house in any white neighborhood” (Sidney 2000).

The normal Chinese response to prejudice was to refuse 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” (Dong and Dong 2000). Bobby Jue provided the most common response—namely, that “that is the way things were at that time” (Jue and Jue 2000).

In a conversation with the author on April 15, 1997, Audrey Sidney stated that “sometimes we are mistreated. We may go home and talk about it, but we don’t demonstrate.” The notion that being Chinese was a “handicap” exemplifies the attitude that it really wasn’t society that needed to change its view of the Chinese but the Chinese who needed 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” (Dong and Dong, 2000).

### **Acceptance in the White Community: Opening the Door to Education**

The cumulative effect of strengthening links with the white community coupled with sanctioning Jim Crow law afforded Chinese a degree of privilege in small Delta towns. Chinese frequented public places where blacks could not. Their stores attracted white customers. For the first time, Chinese saw social acceptance within their grasp.

Of all the benefits associated with acceptance by the white community, the most important was access to the white schools. The language in the Mississippi Constitution of 1890 did not address education for Chinese, although it did include a clear mandate for a dual school system for blacks and whites. The lack of credibility of the dual-system concept in Mississippi was apparent to the most casual observer. James Vardaman ran for governor in 1904 on a platform that included elimination of funding for black public schools. Black public schools were open as few as four months a year, and black teachers earned one-fifth of what white teachers made.

Black public education was not a viable option for the Chinese, to whom cultural identity was defined in terms of academic achievement. One Chinese educational researcher put it this way: "To do well in school is to be Chinese" (Siu 1992, 8). Moreover, Confucian tradition valued education and the teacher in particular.

Rejecting the black public schools forced the Delta Chinese to make hard decisions. In a few small Delta communities, Chinese were able to attend the white public schools. Home-schooling, paid tutors, or sending children back to China or out of state to get an education were the most common alternatives.

### **To Court in 1924: *Gong Lum v. Rice***

Attending the white schools was preferred, but that option depended on the benevolence of the local school district. Typical of such towns was Rosedale, Mississippi, a small community located in Bolivar County on the Mississippi River. Rosedale had an active Chinese population whose members had worked hard at being accepted by the white community. The benefits of that hard work included enrollment for Chinese children in the white schools. Gong Lum, whose grocery store was frequented by both blacks and whites, had numerous white friends, and his family was active in one of the local churches. A white couple served as godparents to his two daughters. The two girls, along with some other Chinese children, were attending the white schools of Rosedale without incident. In the fall of 1924, however, the school district informed the Chinese children they could no longer attend the white school.

The Lums decided to file suit against the school district. The suit, *Gong Lum v. Rice*, was first heard in the circuit court of Bolivar County shortly after the suit was filed that fall. The plaintiff's lawyers made two primary arguments. First, they presented the case that the Lum children were not members of the colored race. Second, they challenged Rosedale's compliance with *Plessey v. Ferguson*, which required separate but equal facilities. The judgment favored the Lums. The defendants—namely, the school

authorities and state of Mississippi—filed an appeal with the Supreme Court of Mississippi.

There the arguments by the state were twofold: that the clear intent of the framers of the Constitution was to separate the education of whites from all other races, and that Chinese were non-white. The Lums argued that the 1890 constitutional requirement of separate schools applied only to two races: black and white.

The Mississippi Supreme Court ruled that the Lums were not entitled to attend a white school, and the decision of the lower court was reversed. The Lum attorneys filed an appeal with the U.S. Supreme Court.

After hearing the Lum family's appeal of the state ruling, Chief Justice William Howard Taft delivered an opinion affirming the ruling of the Mississippi Supreme Court, rejecting the notion that Chinese citizens were denied equal protection of the law by being classified among the colored races. He concluded that Chinese were provided an "education equal to that offered to all, whether white, brown, yellow, or black" (Horowitz and Karst 1969, 159).

Although tangential to the plight of the Chinese, *Gong Lum v. Rice* became a landmark case. One legal writer suggested that, by the case, "the validity of school segregation clearly was settled" (Horowitz and Karst 1969, 160). Another landmark case, the 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education*, would reverse the decision to uphold *Plessey v. Ferguson*.

### **Chinese Mission Schools in the Mississippi Delta**

Even in the face of the *Gong Lum* decision, the Chinese rejected the black schools. Instead, they partnered with the white churches in which they had become members. These churches offered another post-*Gong Lum* alternative: the establishment of Chinese mission schools in some Delta communities. The schools were residential, with no set grade levels for different ages and with a blended curriculum based on a traditional U.S. model with some Chinese education. The schools entailed a partnership wherein local school officials provided some financial support for a teacher and the sponsoring church supported construction and maintenance of facilities. The children were taught by a white teacher during the regular school day and received supplemental instruction in Chinese from Chinese tutors in the evenings. The local churches, which were usually Baptist, mandated religion as part of the school curriculum and also exercised decision-making responsibility over the school.

The Chinese Mission schools provided children an education comparable to that of whites. It also showed the white community that, by refusing to attend the black schools, the Chinese were deserving of social acceptance.

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 had 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.

After World War II, attitudes toward the Chinese seemed to change. On April 15, 1997, in a conversation with the author, Martha Miller, a teacher at the mission school in Cleveland suggested that it “no longer seemed fair to treat the Chinese differently.” Edward Joe stated that “a war is bad, but after the Second World War, a lot of people came back. They accepted Chinese a lot more” (Joe and Joe 2000). Ultimately, Delta Chinese children gradually began to enroll in the white public schools. The Delta Chinese “Baby Boomer” generation was a product of Mississippi’s white public schools.

A high-quality public education enabled the Chinese to affirm their cultural commitment to education, but the cost was high. The idea of taking over the family grocery store and remaining insulated from the outside world became less attractive to educated children. Many of the baby boomers pursued economic and further educational opportunities elsewhere.

### **A Commitment to Chinese Culture Now & into the Future**

Many Delta Chinese saw the grocery store as a cultural linchpin. It enabled families to live and work together toward common economic and social goals. It also served as a setting for transmitting Chinese culture from generation to generation. Integral to that transmission was the rigorous work ethic that defines Chinese culture, a work ethic that was integrated into every aspect of daily life. Families worked eighteen-hour workdays in the grocery store. The Delta Chinese who remain view the work ethic learned in those stores as their legacy to later generations of Chinese who have left the stores but retained the work ethic as a basis for new and successful careers elsewhere.

An article in the September 9, 1994, issue of the *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, the newspaper with the largest circulation in Mississippi, commented on the gradual demise of the Chinese culture in the Delta. According to author Carmen McCollum, the Chinese mission churches, which “upheld Chinese traditions and gave people a place to gather, talk, and worship,” were dying out. The Greenville, Mississippi, church, with two hundred or more members in the 1970s, was down to a congregation of thirty. The mission church in Clarksdale had closed, and the one in Cleveland had only a handful of

members. “The old corner grocery store operated by the Chinese family is dying out” as young Chinese college graduates move away to bigger cities for better jobs, remarked McCollum. Delta Chinese families continue to decline in number, with reunions centered on the funerals of pioneers who lived their lives working in the grocery stores and supporting their families. Those extended families now return from places like California, Texas, and New York to pay their respects. With no plans to return permanently, though, these Chinese ultimately leave the Delta behind.

The Chinese have made invaluable contributions to the quality of life in the Delta by serving as town mayors and as leaders of civic clubs and churches—and by being involved in all facets of community life. Their stores and businesses have played an important role in the Delta economy. Their commitment to educational excellence has been a model for all the citizens of the Delta. The fear is that the legacy of their unique culture will be lost and their sacrifices forgotten. Future generations of Delta citizens must ensure that does not happen. We must preserve the heritage of the Chinese in the Mississippi Delta.

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