

Lotus Among the Magnolias

THE MISSISSIPPI CHINESE

by Robert Seto Quan

*In Collaboration with
Julian B. Roebuck*

Foreword by Stanford M. Lyman



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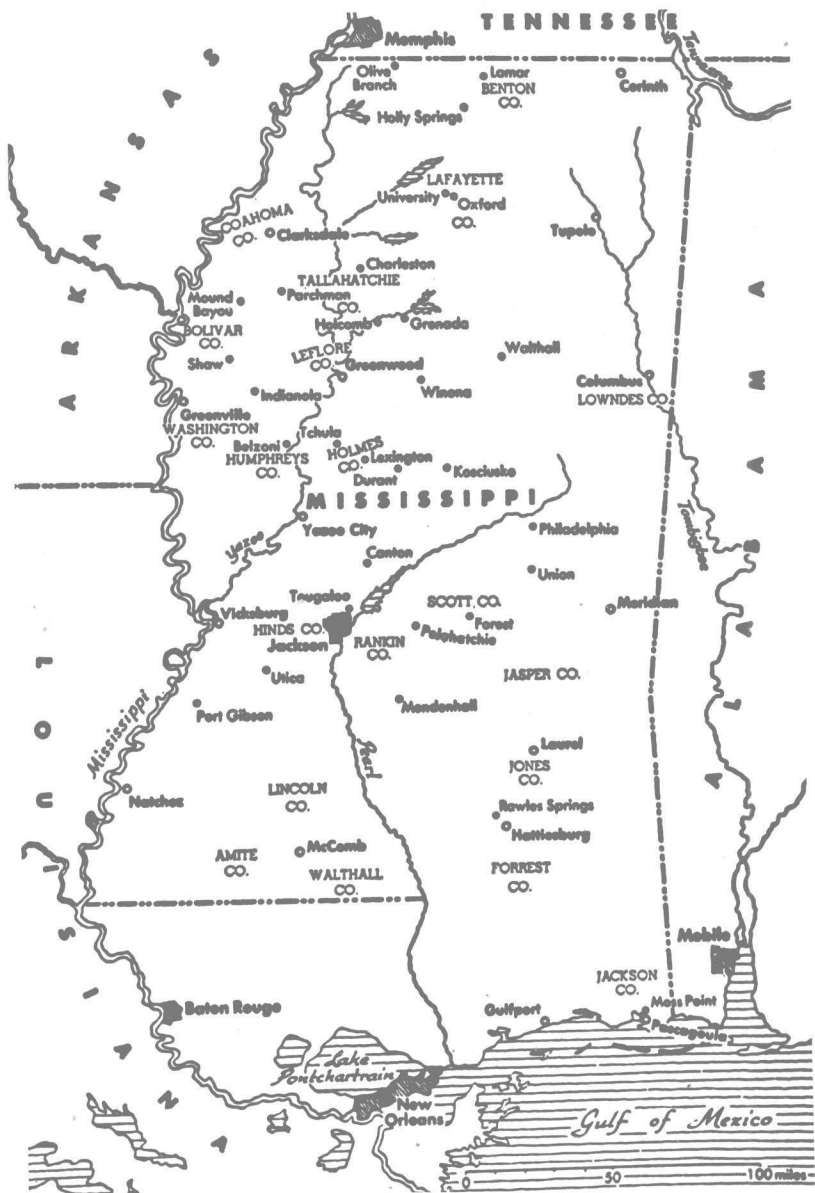
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MAP OF MISSISSIPPI The Mississippi Delta, a rich alluvial plain formed by the flood deposits of the Mississippi and Yazoo Rivers, is located in the northwest corner of the state.

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In memory of my father,
Louis Pang Seto,
a pioneer to the Gold Mountain
and now a cosmic ancestral guide

Foreword

The Chinese of the Mississippi Delta comprise one of the far-flung outposts of the Chinese diaspora. Scattered over most of the world in the last four centuries, a portion of the Chinese people is separated—probably forever—from the mainland of China. Chinese communities are to be found from Annam to Zanzibar and in almost all lands and islands in between. Their settlements are cultural islands as well; for the immigrant Chinese and their descendants are remarkable for their collective independence, preservation of homeland customs, and maintenance of traditional social organization in a variety of alien environments. Accused of refusing to assimilate, the overseas Chinese in fact give vivid testimony to the resilience and adaptability of their old world institutions. In America as elsewhere, the Chinese attest to the validity of pluralism.

The Chinese of the Mississippi Delta, however, are unique; their community stands out from those established by their ethnic compatriots in San Francisco, New York City, Los Angeles, Chicago or Vancouver, British Columbia. In the large cities of North America, Chinese established an “extra-territorial” enclave within the urban setting. Called “Chinatowns,” these communities are not only products of racism and segregation; they also represent the congregative spirit of the Cantonese immigrants and the transplantation of “premodern,” local institutions to “modern” cosmopolitan America. Chinatown is not merely a ghetto with pagodas and a paper dragon; it is a complex of traditional institutions,—a culture, an economy, and a way of life—that is separate and thriving in America. The Chinatown Chinese are known to white American tourists—and to Blacks, Japanese, Pilipinos, and Hispanics—as persevering ethnics who provide food, curios, and an exotic scene for

those in search of the unusual. But to the *Delta Lotus* Chinese—the Chinese of Mississippi surveilled in the present study—the Chinatown Chinese are also strange. Huddled together in crowded streets, noisy bars and restaurants, and cramped quarters, the Chinatown *Hon Yen* do not impress the second and third generation Chinese Americans from Leflore, Quitman, Sharkey, Sunflower and the six other counties of the Mississippi Delta. Chinese from the Deep South do not speak the same English, dress in the same style, walk in the same manner, or think in the same way as Chinatowners. Nor are they indistinguishable from America's middle class urbanites. The *Delta Lotus* is a new variety of flora in the American ethnic garden. It currently flourishes among the magnolias of Mississippi, but only time will tell whether it will wither in the rice bowl of urban Chinatowns or flower among the other species in Northern cities and suburbs.

One central fact makes the Mississippi Chinese exceptional to their counterparts in urban America. There is no Chinatown in the Mississippi Delta. These Chinese have been cut off from the religious, medical, educational, familial, village, and communal institutions that Cantonese brought with them to America. Most significant there are no clans, *hui kuan* (speech and locality associations), secret societies and temples established among the Delta Chinese. Such institutions are the mainstay of the overseas Chinatown—not only in the United States, but throughout Southeast Asia, Oceania, and Africa. The Mississippi Chinese have forged a community without these traditional forms of organization. They have constructed their community around two other institutions: the nuclear family and the family-centered grocery store.

The Delta Chinese have been able to create their own type of community, first, because of the presence of sufficient women among them to make marriage and domesticity possible; second, because they took up a strategic if unwanted position between the white and black populations, providing goods and services to the latter, while preserving and protecting the caste superiority of the former.

The shortage of women has been the bane of most overseas Chinese communities. In the United States the number of Chi-

nese males was almost twenty times greater than females in 1890. In the Chinatowns of San Francisco, New York, Chicago and other large cities homeless men clubbed together in surname associations, *Landmannschaften*, and clandestine criminal-political societies, and recreated themselves in brothels and gambling parlors, and, on occasion, with opium. Money was sent to patiently waiting wives in China. Sons sired on occasional visits to the homeland were encouraged to follow their fathers to the overseas Chinatown, creating generations of familial separation. As a largely male community, the Chinatowns of America—from 1850 until 1940—survived despite their family-less condition. Secret societies owned or controlled brothels where declass  Chinese women were pressed into indentured service as prostitutes. America's harsh anti-Chinese immigration laws—which from 1882 until 1943 prohibited *inter alia* the entrance of a Chinese laborer's wife—were partially circumvented by the smuggling of Chinese into America. But the imbalance in the sex ratio was not ended until 1970.

The Mississippi Chinese—who settled in that area from the middle 1870s—appear to have suffered from the shortage of women during the first fifty years of their habitation there. Aspects of their marital problems are indicated in the common-law marriages of a few Delta Chinese to black women and in the abortive attempt by the *Ong Leng Tong*—a secret society—to organize among them. However, enough women seem to have arrived to make the establishment of Chinese families possible after 1920. One wonders whether these women were illegal entrants or, more likely, the wives of Chinese merchants—one of the classes whose spouses were exempt from the restrictions of the Chinese Exclusion Act. These women—as the testimony of the Chinese in the present study reveals in countless ways—functioned to create a stable family-centered community. They became wives and mothers to the Delta Chinese, and by making hearth and home possible obviated the necessity of clans, *hui kuan*, and secret societies, and of whoring, gambling, and drug-taking. Moreover, these women undertook and largely succeeded in resolving the most significant problem facing their people in the South—making the Chinese respectable in the eyes of local Mississippians. Their major project in

this regard was the establishment of the Chinese Baptist Church. A *Christian* identity established the trustworthiness and probity of the Chinese merchant; for, as Max Weber had observed in his travels through the American South in 1904, baptism was the single most important prerequisite to economic and social acceptance in backwoods America's version of the Protestant ethic. A *Chinese* Christian identity—implemented by means of a separate church—helped to lift the hated epithet “colored” from the Chinese and elevated them above the Negroes.

The children born of these intra-racial marriages also helped to solidify the Chinese group and deter its amalgamation with the Blacks. Ironically the very fact that these children were citizens of the United States by reason of their birth in America—while their immigrant parents remained “aliens ineligible to citizenship” until 1943—caused them to suffer the rigors of segregated schooling. When Mrs. Gong Lum brought suit in the United States Supreme Court in 1927 to prevent her children from being sent to the school for “colored” children, she was told by the Court that she could not avail herself of the equal treatment clauses of the Burlingame Treaty between the United States and China because they applied only to Chinese aliens. After that ignominious setback, many Delta Chinese sent their children to the private Baptist school, further entrenching their acceptable religious identification and keeping them apart from Negro children.

The Chinese community in the Delta is not territorially compact. Much of it consists of grocery stores, with residences in the rear, scattered throughout the Black sections of the several counties. The Chinese grocer developed much of the character that Werner Sombart attributed to the economic stranger. Rational calculation and a perceptive scrutiny of the socio-cultural realities of the Southern racial situation provided the basis for his everyday conduct. These included paying scrupulous attention to the prevailing etiquette of race relations that supported the caste structure, teaching, but not believing in, the praxiological precepts of Mississippi racialism to their children, and purchasing personal security and the right to a livelihood with carefully calculated donations to all factions embroiled in racial

struggles. Despite its location within the black community or in the racially undefined border areas between whites and blacks, the Chinese community has not been absorbed by either racial group. Rather, it has emerged out of an attempt to conflate it with the low-caste group into a racial quasi-caste in its own right. The key to this emergence has been *respectability*—a status attained by religious conversion and carefully maintained public neutrality in the civil rights struggle.

The Delta Chinese identify themselves in a complex status structure based on deference, reference, and place. Deference is accorded on the basis of age and pioneer experience in settling in the Delta. Reference is based on Delta Chinese identity as either aged first families, aging local businessmen, adult middle class professionals who might leave the area but not escape their Mississippi roots, and young people whose future seems bound up with that of their nearest age group, the professionals. Place is always the Delta, for these Chinese are neither one more group of Chinese Americans nor a people dissolved in the melting pot. When the professionals and youth leave Mississippi for the big cities of the North, West, or New South, they discover how much they are emotionally, linguistically, and culturally tied to the region of their birth. These Chinese are the lotus that has its roots in the bottomland of the Mississippi Delta.

Yet, as the testimony of the young Chinese American women of the Delta reveals, the Chinese community of Mississippi is again threatened by the loss of its distaff group. These women are better educated than their parents or grandparents, and, unlike their less adventurous male peers, willing to strike out on their own—in the big cities, in the new careers opening up for women, and, most significantly, in intermarriages with white men of their own class and aspiration. The young Mississippi Chinese revere their aged women pioneers and preservers of culture. But they do not wish to emulate them. For the females of the Delta Lotus it seems time to pull up roots, transplant the seedlings, and generate new and different varieties.

The Chinese of the Mississippi Delta are part of the rich and variegated history and culture of the Deep South. Their part in the caste and class structure of this region has not been given its due—except by the Mississippi Chinese themselves and by

FOREWORD

the blacks and whites who, sometimes grudgingly, sometimes gratefully, acknowledge their presence. This is their story. Their words, so carefully and lovingly collected by Robert Seto Quan and edited and interpreted with the aid of Julian B. Roebuck, tell a saga of Chinese diaspora in America.

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Preface

In writing about the Chinese community of the Mississippi Delta, we have been conscious of two differences between the present investigation and other studies of Chinese Americans. First, most studies have focused on large urban settlements supported by cultural centers ("Chinatowns") and by continuous immigration. In contrast, we portray a small, isolated enclave situated within a biracial society—a small Southern town—and lacking the benefit of ethnic cultural centers or of significant immigration. Second, other reports on Delta Chinese Americans have been written by people unable to claim any affiliation with the society they studied, whose point of view was therefore necessarily limited. The information for the present book was collected firsthand by Robert Quan, who speaks both Cantonese and English. As a Chinese American he was afforded access to the community that would not have been granted to someone of another ethnic background.

Quan lived in the Chinese Delta community from 1975 through 1978 while he taught at Delta State University in Cleveland, Mississippi. He shared in the lives of the Chinese people during this period, recording his personal observations of their social life and daily work. His field notes recorded the interviews and conversations quoted throughout this book and are supplemented by the photographs he took at the time. No tape recordings were made, and pseudonyms have been used to protect the privacy of individuals within the Chinese community. The data gathered have been organized and interpreted by both authors, but the first-person narrative, used in chapters 2–7, refers to fieldwork performed by the senior author alone.

PREFACE

From preliminary observations and information given to him by friends who were leaders in the Delta Chinese community, Quan found that the Delta Chinese divided themselves into five major categories: *Lo Nen Ga* (old people), *Sen Ga* (businessmen), *Jen Ga* (professionals), *Hok San* (college students), and *Ching Nen* (young people). The Chinese describe their community and themselves by reference to these naturally occurring groups. We have therefore used them to organize our account, much as the Chinese use them to define their collective and individual identity. One chapter has been devoted to each reference group, and about each we have asked the following questions: Who are the members? How did they become members? How do they view themselves and other groups? How do they define and perceive the world around them? How do they envision life and survival inside and beyond the Mississippi Delta? What are their hopes and concerns?

The first Chinese immigrants to the Delta were classified as "colored."¹ They and members of the second and third generations managed to transform this pejorative identity tag and to establish a functional Chinese community. Their search for identity as Mississippi Chinese and as Americans occurred against a background of shifting economic pressures and changing race relations. It is the story of this search that we have tried to tell, with the help of many of the individuals who have lived it. We hope that our attempt to trace the vicissitudes of life among three Mississippi Delta Chinese generations will prove interesting and useful to laymen, students of ethnic group relations, and the Mississippi Chinese themselves. Though our findings suggest that these remarkable people will eventually disperse, we also note some of the contributions that their culture will leave behind. American civilization is richer as a result of their presence as a community.

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¹Not to be confused with the term "colored" used to designate blacks; "colored Chinese" is a separate classification.

man contributed their sage counsel during fieldwork. Both authors are grateful to several members of the Chinese community, including Gwen Gong, who read, edited, and criticized the findings. We also thank the many white, black, and Chinese Mississippians who gave us essential information.

The senior author extends his gratitude to Lou Git, Jennifer Mei Lin, Dave, Kathy, Shell, Stan, and Dexter of the Quan family; and to Fay Tuey and Dr. Barry Eckhouse for their patience and encouragement from start to finish. Sue Yong Seto provided motherly wisdom and pecuniary aid, and Elizabeth Roebuck provided excellent nutritional support. Both authors wish to thank Barney McKee and Seetha Srinivasan of the University Press of Mississippi and Lyell Behr of Mississippi State University for their support. We dedicate this book to Robert Quan's late father, Louis Pang Seto.

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