# The Mississippi Chinese

## Between Black and White

James W. Loewen

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"You're either a white man or a nigger, here. Now, that's the whole story. When I first came to the Delta, the Chinese were classed as nigras."

["And now they are called whites?"]

"That's right!"

Conversation with white Baptist minister,
Clarksdale, Mississippi

## Acknowledgments

I wish to thank the many Chinese-Mississippians who shared parts of their lives and histories with me and made possible this book. Nothing that I have written here has been intended to injure or embarrass the Chinese as a group or any individuals among them. Those who shared the most information with me expected me to tell the truth, and that is what I have tried to do. I hope they will approve the result.

I am also indebted to many other Mississippians — blacks, whites, and others — for suggestions and data. Several students and faculty members at Tougaloo College and Harvard University read all or parts of the book and made valuable suggestions. Patricia Hanrahan, now Loewen, read and edited the entire manuscript; Jan Hillegas and Mrs. Agatha Bradford were expert retypists. Finally I owe thanks to many others for advice and assistance, among them Dorothy Heid Bracey, Peter F. Loewen, Gerald Globetti, Anthony Layng, Michael H. Schwartz, Harrison White, Bruce Nicholas, Joe C. Huang, Rev. Jachin Chan, and especially Ezra F. Vogel.

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James W. Loewen
Tougaloo, Mississippi, June 1970

# The Mississippi Chinese

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# Introduction

In the northwest corner of the state of Mississippi lies a vast alluvial plain, formed from the rich black flood deposits of the Mississippi and Yazoo rivers. Almost perfectly flat, rimmed by low bluffs to the east and south, the basin is called the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta. The Delta stretches over nearly the entire 185-mile distance from Memphis to Vicksburg, though it includes neither of those cities, and at its widest point it extends sixty miles east of the Mississippi River. Divided into plantations often several square miles in area, the land is tilled by black sharecroppers and owned by white planters. These two groups are all that most persons know of the Delta; indeed, they form the stereotyped image of its population. But in fact, other ethnic groups have lived in the Delta almost from its first settlement, including Lebanese, Italians, Mexicans, Jews, and a substantial number of Chinese.

Although they form the largest population of Chinese in any Southern state, the existence of the 1200 Delta Chinese is virtually unknown outside of Mississippi. They came to the state in 1869 or 1870, at a time when planters were recruiting agricultural labor, and they entered the plantation system at the bottom, as sharecroppers. Partly for this reason, white Mississippi considered them to be of roughly Negro status and barred

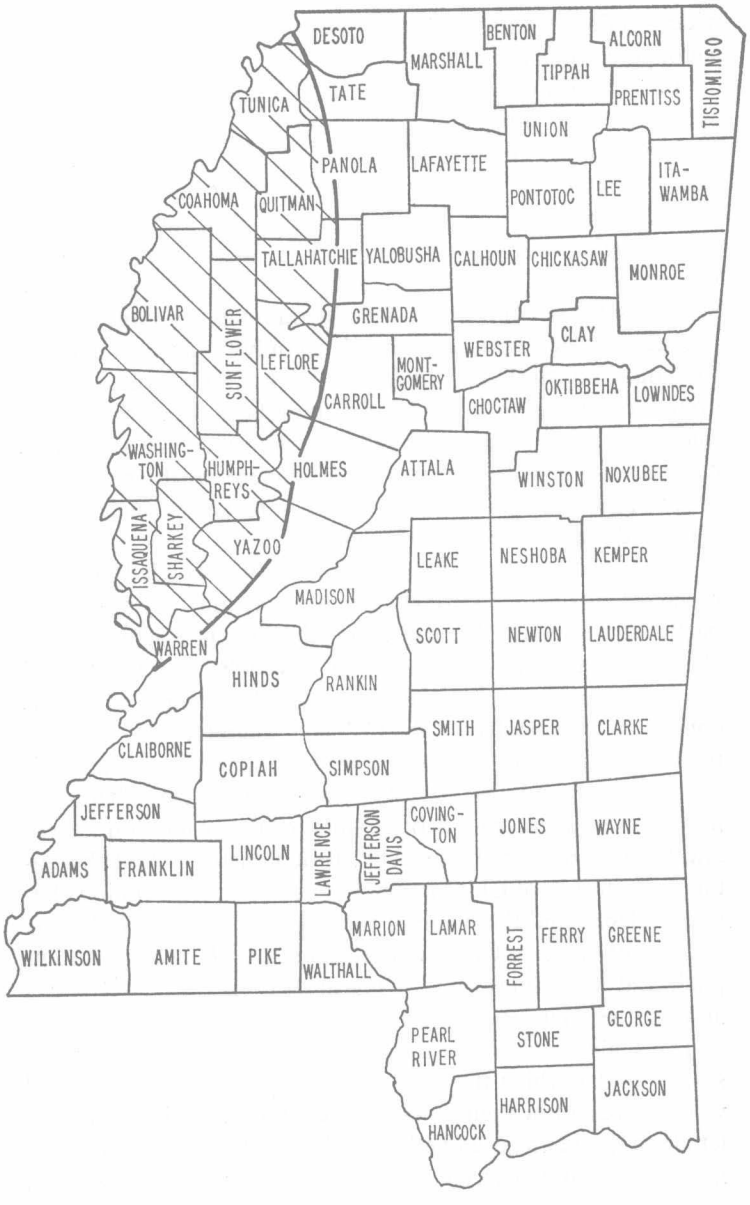
them from white schools, organizations, and other social interaction.

Soon after their arrival, however, the Chinese forsook the cotton fields to become merchants — small grocers — and over the ensuing decades they rapidly improved their economic position. They became richer, and their social position showed corresponding improvement. No longer were they clearly of "Negro" status. As a group, their racial definition gradually shifted upward.

For a time they were considered neither white nor black, and the segregation system attempted to deal with them as exceptions. During the 1930's and early 1940's, Cleveland, Greenville, and several other towns operated triply segregated school systems, with separate buildings for Chinese pupils, as well as for whites and blacks. These schools still stand, but they have been abandoned for some twenty years. Since that time, the Chinese have been admitted into the white public schools and into other institutions. Today they are very nearly, and in some respects entirely, equal in status to Caucasians.[1]

Ten decades have passed since the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution was enacted, but Delta society is still rigidly segregated. A vast social and economic gulf yawns between the dominant white and subordinate black. Yet one group in Mississippi, a "third race," the Chinese, has managed to leap that chasm. Originally classed with blacks, they are now viewed as essentially "white." The color bar stands, but they have crossed over it. Moreover, in some communities they bridge it anew every day, for they still stand in a sense as an intermediate group. Negroes do not consider them exactly white; Caucasians do not consider them black. They are privileged and burdened with an ambiguous racial identity.

This book focuses on the causes of their change in status, the processes by which it came about, and the opposition it engendered. Therefore the emphasis is always on race relations; only in part is the book an ethnography of the Chinese as an ethnic minority. The history of their status transition and the complexity of their present relations with the other races pro-




1. The Mississippi Delta.

vide a unique vantagepoint for the analysis of segregation as an ongoing social system.

Two basic concepts underlie this analysis. First, segregation is viewed as an etiquette system, a system of norms, expected behaviors, and definitions, which works to label blacks inferior and to keep them locked into subordinate positions. This system is rarely seen in all its complexity. First-time visitors to the Delta may wonder why its blacks are so poor and may conclude that factors within the black population are responsible, such as selective migration, unstable families, or some alleged character defect. Permanent residents of both races often come to similar conclusions, blinded by their very nearness to the system or unwilling to see its operation because of their complicity with it. Such answers are false, however; the social and cultural system is to blame; and the Chinese, by their efforts to escape it, lend support to these assertions and provide added ways to document the system's operation.

Second, Delta social structure not only is divided into two racial groups but is strongly demarcated into social classes, particularly within the white population. The white upper class, or local power structure, controls each county and small town, and it has strongly influenced public opinion and the conditions which affected the Chinese. Therefore any study of the Chinese minority must become at the same time an analysis of the actions and ideology of the white upper class. Thus the first chapter opens with a brief study of the plantation system and the general social hierarchy. It demonstrates that the initial importation of Chinese labor stems from the relations between blacks and the white upper class immediately following the end of slavery. Chinese were hired by planters as an implicit and sometimes explicit threat to their own black labor and to other Negroes in the area.

The Chinese soon learned, however, that the neo-slavery system under which they and Delta Negroes worked the land would never allow them to become economically independent, let alone rich; almost immediately they moved into food retailing. More than 90 percent of all Chinese families in Mississippi

now operate groceries — an incredibly uniform occupational emphasis. Chapter 2 argues that the concentration and economic success of the Chinese groceries indicate that something was amiss in the segregation system, that segregation seemed to create a profitable niche for the Chinese which neither blacks nor whites could exploit.

In turn, the economic advance of the Chinese made possible their later social rise, though not in any simple way. Chapters 3 and 4 define their earlier, near-black status and analyze the process by which they came to be defined almost white. Money alone, of course, was not the answer and has done little for the racial status of the black middle class. The Chinese had to use their cash to establish a life style and image different from that of the black majority. Otherwise, whites would say, "But if we let in the Chinese, won't the 'niggers' be right behind?" Having thus dealt with this main ideological objection to their advance, the Chinese utilized ministers, wholesalers, and other Caucasians to whom they had close ties in order to persuade the local white power structure to admit them to schools, hospitals, and other white public institutions.

However, as Chapter 5 observes, there was a great deal of opposition to the Chinese in the earlier parts of this century, and it continued to manifest itself whenever the minority attempted to break another social barrier. Almost no whites are in a position to have strong personal interests, economic or symbolic, in keeping the Chinese "down." Consequently, it is not obvious why the Chinese have almost always been opposed. The explanation invokes processes related to anti-black opposition, and Chapter 5 assesses parallels between anti-Chinese and anti-Negro discrimination.

As the Chinese rose in status, gradually attaining membership in the white caste, one group was left behind: those members who had married or lived common-law with black wives and families. These families are the subject of Chapter 6. Like the group as a whole, they have lived in an uneasy ambivalence between white and black sides of the segregation barrier. But while the majority of the Chinese have now been clearly placed

on the white side of that barrier, the Chinese-Negro families are definitely on the black side. Their relations with Negroes and with Caucasians are not exactly those of "pure" Negro families, however, and the contrasts afforded by this small group shed more light on the values held by both blacks and whites resulting from segregation.

Finally, the concluding chapter projects present trends and tries to assess the future of the group. Ironically, now that white Mississippi has begun to accept the Chinese more fully, the Chinese themselves are leaving. Occupationally oriented toward large Western cities, most will not remain much longer in the land of their youth. And at the same time, vast changes in the system under which they have made their living may threaten the incomes of those storeowners who stay. Segregation is slowly dying, but not without violence, and some of that violence is directed toward the race which for so many decades stood in the middle. And as segregation ends, the special place it created for the Chinese ends as well.

It should be clear, then, that this book is both historical and contemporary, both a study of the Chinese minority and an analysis of the system with which the group interacted. Accordingly, not only the Chinese experience but also white and black relations to the Chinese had to be surveyed. The most important tool in this work was the free-ranging interview, not confined to a written schedule or rigid set of questions. In all, I interviewed 321 different people — Chinese, Negroes, Caucasians, and others.[2] Nearly as important was participant observation among the Chinese and in white institutions in which Chinese participate. My field experience ranged from pure observation, such as attendance at an all-night mah jongg game in which high stakes and a limited research budget combined to make me solely an onlooker, to participation in the bass section of the Chinese Baptist Church Choir of Cleveland, Mississippi, in which my preoccupation with the musical notes at hand precluded notes of any other kind. In addition, current records and historical sources proved useful in a number of ways. Finally, five-page questionnaires were given to twenty-

seven Chinese college students and to seventy-five Caucasian students at Mississippi State University. Most of the research was carried out in Greenville, Clarksdale, Vicksburg, and the small towns and rural areas of Bolivar County. I first learned of the Mississippi Chinese when I met and became acquainted with several Chinese students when I was enrolled at Mississippi State University in 1963. All other field research was conducted in January–February and May–September of 1967, with occasional one-day visits in 1968, 1969, and 1970.

Because of the sweeping changes caused by school desegregation orders in early 1970, this book is perhaps the last field study of segregation in its "pure" form that will ever be written. Already segregation is passing into history. In some areas, public schools are no longer "white" or "black"; in other districts the public schools are overwhelmingly black, while whites have retreated to new private schools. What new social and cultural system will replace segregation is not yet clear, but changes have already occurred since the research for this book was completed.