

Second Edition

THE MISSISSIPPI CHINESE

Between black and white



James W. Loewen

Preface by Robert Coles

The Mississippi Chinese

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and White

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James W. Loewen

The University of Vermont

Preface by Robert Cole



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For information about this book, write or call:

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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**

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Preface

"A SHADE DARKER, A SHADE LIGHTER"

By Robert Coles

At the end of the Civil War, not all of the South's white people were demoralized and confused, or daunted by the Yankees who ran the states that had made up the Confederacy. Between 1866 and 1876, the Reconstruction years, the Mississippi Delta was cleared and drained; the stage was set for decades of cotton planting, cotton growing, cotton harvesting, all of it demanding menial work done by thousands of men and women so that a handful of plantation owners would get rich—work done mostly by black sharecroppers who were lucky if they got enough food to stay alive in return for their dawn-to-dusk labor. It was a barter economy: if they worked all the time (there was no five-day week or eight-hour day) they were given cornmeal and fatback and their cabins—and pronounced "faithful," "the salt of the earth." But Reconstruction did to an extent unnerve the South's white leadership, including its plantation owners. Black men and women were no longer slaves. Now they were voting, even getting elected. With the federal army of occupation everywhere, the South's white people were not able to do everything they pleased, though there was always the hope (soon to become a reality) that up in Massachusetts and New York people would tire of lording it over Dixie and

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would begin to appreciate how radical an idea it is to let the poorest of the poor take over political institutions. Meanwhile, plantation owners had to carry on until that day came—in 1877, when Rutherford B. Hayes was chosen President through the collusion of Southern and Northern conservatives, even though he had less of the popular vote than New York's Governor Samuel Tilden. It was Hayes who ordered the federal troops withdrawn. In Mississippi's Delta region, labor had had to be brought in, and in the late sixties and early seventies that had meant bringing in the recently freed black voters, black citizens—no longer “help” or outright slaves. White yeoman, with a whole continent before them to explore and lay claim to, could not be attracted. And the planters, though they looked to the blacks for labor, feared the consequences. *De Bow's Review*, a Southern journal of commerce, remarked, “We will state the problem for consideration. It is: To retain in the hands of the whites the control and direction of social and political action, without impairing the content of the labor capacity of the colored race.” Of course, if “the colored race” proved too difficult and presumptuous, too bent on “equality,” there were other possibilities, as the editor of the Vicksburg *Times* pointed out: “Emancipation has spoiled the negro, and carried him away from fields of agriculture. Our prosperity depends entirely upon the recovery of lost ground, and we therefore say let the Coolies come, and we will take the chance of Christianizing them.”

The “Coolies” were Chinese, and they did indeed come to the Delta, as James W. Loewen tells us in “The Mississippi Chinese.” They came as farm laborers, but by the time the federal presence was removed from the South the white powers felt less threatened by the blacks, who were still there, still impoverished and vulnerable, so the Chinese were no longer in demand for menial tasks. The Chinese, most of them from the Sze Yap, or the Four Counties district, southwest of Canton, may have been poor themselves, but they had not crossed the pacific in order to live penniless in the nondescript cabins plantation owners managed to find the

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money to build. The point of coming to America was to earn money and keep sending it home until they could return to parents and wives and children. "Sojourners," Professor Loewen calls them—frugal, tidy, proud men who knew that America did not want them the way it wanted immigrants from other nations; men who had not been brought up to make the "adjustment" to the white man, the "bossman," that blacks long ago had been compelled to make. So the Chinese began to set up grocery stores for the freed blacks, who, naturally, spent what little money they now earned on food. (The plantation owners had taken to giving their sharecroppers a pittance of cash instead of provisions.) And thus an astonishing drama commenced in the Delta. Blacks who had scarcely left the plantations they had been tied to body and soul were buying food from strangers who scarcely spoke any English. "In some stores," says Professor Loewen, "a pointer stick was positioned at the counter, and the customer could point to the items he wanted, the grocer's English being limited to the price." The Chinese were foreigners, and they were non-white—which meant they could be cheated, insulted, attacked by white wholesalers or robbers and receive little protection from the law. Credit from other businessmen was needed but not always available, at least on fair terms. And, says Professor Loewen, credit was a risky affair "because many planters defrauded their tenants." Still, the merchants did well. A few ventured into other parts of Mississippi, and a few tried other work, but usually they came back to the Delta and the "black-oriented groceries." In fact, only a few years ago over a thousand Chinese still lived in the thinly populated counties that border on the Mississippi. "In 1960, fourteen Delta counties contained ninety-two per cent of all Mississippi Chinese, and the Delta alone had more Chinese than any other area or state of the South, excluding Texas. In some Delta towns, particularly in the recent pre-supermarket past, Chinese held a near monopoly over the grocery business, especially the Negro sector of it. And to my knowledge, all but eight families, or ninety-seven per cent of the population, are

presently engaged in or recently retired from the operation of grocery stores. This is a truly incredible concentration, far greater than in the proportion of Chinese in Northern cities in all retail occupations combined.”

How have such people managed—with themselves, and, of course, with blacks and whites? Professor Loewen shows us how tortuous and absurd a social system can become; looking at the ways these Chinese learned to live with segregation, we learn yet again, and once removed, how the blacks fared, not to mention the whites. The presence of a second “color group” in Mississippi began to tax the ardor of even the most race-conscious segregationists. How many school systems or kinds of graveyard can a town afford to keep going? (At times, there were three of each.) How many codes of behavior, rituals of deference or mastery can children learn and their parents keep in mind, let alone practice? How many “separate but equal” institutions can a society live comfortably with—especially a complicated, increasingly technological one made up of many kinds of people and calling itself a “democracy”? Lebanese, Syrians, Jews, Italians, Mexicans also came to the Delta, in small yet significant numbers, but they were white. The Chinese were something else. The author cites a young Chinese Mississippian: “Sometimes I feel as if my skin is just a shade darker than white, and sometimes that it’s just a shade lighter than Negro.” Mississippi’s social and political system apparently could not tolerate that particular ambiguity, and in time the Chinese obtained many of the privileges a white took for granted. Without the intervention of the Supreme Court or a civil-rights movement—in fact, well before 1954—Chinese children were attending white schools, and their parents were being allowed to enter white churches, libraries, restaurants, and movie theatres. “By persuasion, negotiation, and pleading, through trusted Caucasian intermediaries and on their own,” says the Professor, “the Chinese began to make progress.” In the late thirties, Greenwood admitted Chinese boys and girls to its white schools; in 1941, Clarksdale followed; Greenville, though it

was a liberal enclave in the Delta, did not go along until 1945; some of the smaller towns held out until the early fifties. The author points out the ironies that exist even to this day. A Chinese grocer who is rude to his poor black customers is sought after by middle-class blacks who are proud of the courtesy he extends them; whites who operate groceries that serve black people are looked down upon by other whites. What is all right for the Chinese to do is not all right for a white man, and so the dominant race can deal with and profit from the subjugated one only in certain ways. Chinese who experience prejudice refuse to relate it to those upper-class whites who, the author says, often demonstrate it. We are told that blacks, too, do not notice narrowness and meanness when these attitudes are dressed up and covered by the polish of an educated way of speaking. The author speculates that it may be satisfying for the Chinese and the blacks "to believe that the 'good' people, those who matter in society... really want you, and that only the 'white trash' oppose you." He even speculates on whether Chinese parents do not consciously teach such things to their children, lest they "grow up feeling that educated, high-status people were prejudiced against them." One wonders how any changes at all take place, especially in the tight-knit and isolated communities of the rural South. Yet outsiders do arrive—the Chinese, the black and the white political activists—and small reverberations become the loud, clear noise of significant social change. James Loewen has written a scholarly book—concisely, and with a historian's sense of perspective, a moralist's sense of urgency. The particular injustice he happens to be studying is, he reminds us, but one of many this nation continues to allow. He is aware of the South's many ambiguities, but compassion for a region's predicament cannot blind a social observer. The Mississippi Chinese may ultimately become an odd mixture of the victim and the oppressor, but in the meantime their situation is untenable. As blacks assert themselves and the plantations become almost fully mechanized, the Delta's Chinese grocers are leaving. These foreigners who settled in, sought out wives

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from distant cities, and became very much part of a strange world now sense the end of their peculiar involvement with slavery, which was for so long called “the peculiar institution.” As this nation interests itself in the eight hundred million Chinese whose presence halfway around the world is a force to be reckoned with, we could do worse than look at our still beleaguered South, where there are other Chinese, who in their own way confront us as pointedly, if not in such volume, as their distant countrymen are now managing to do.

(This review of the First Edition, which serves as the Second Edition Preface, is reprinted from *The New Yorker*, May 20, 1972.)

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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

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

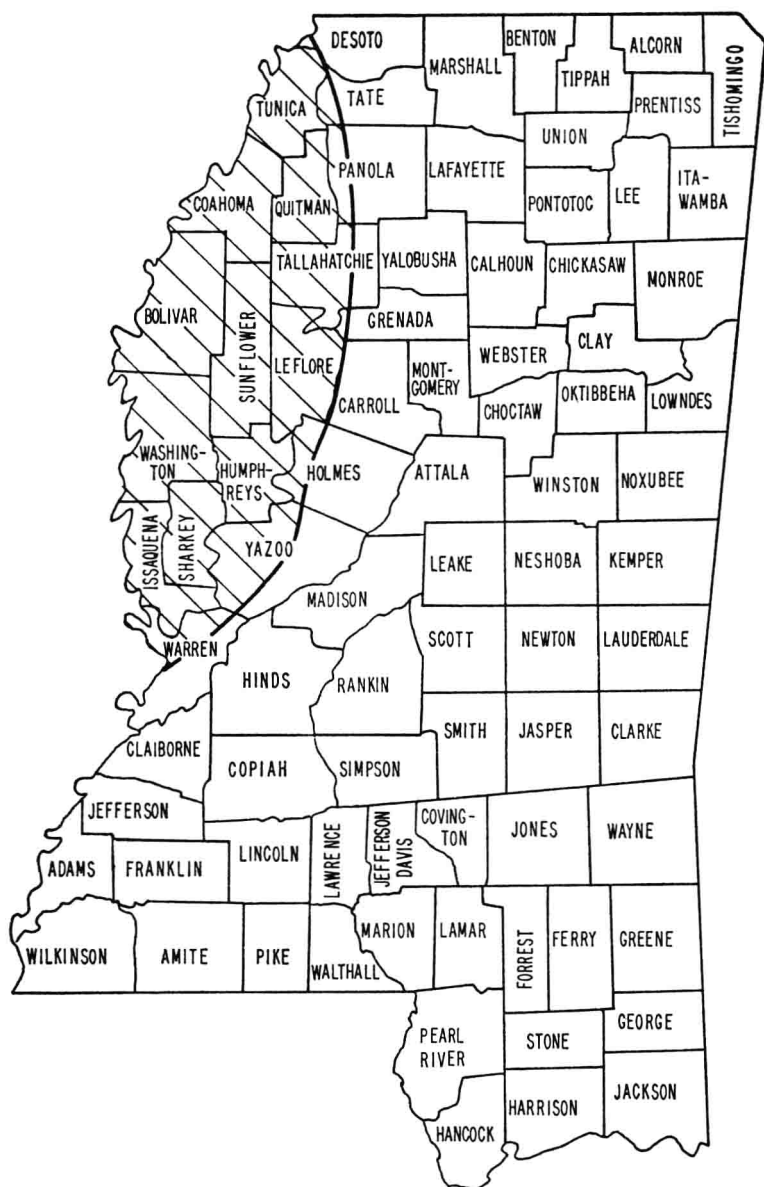
Soon after their arrival, however, the Chinese forsook the cotton fields to become merchants — small grocers — and over the ensuing decades they rapidly improved their economic position. They became richer, and their social position showed corresponding improvement. No longer were they clearly of “Negro” 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-

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1. The Mississippi Delta.

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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