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There is this shot in the opening scene of the movie, Mississippi Burning, *where you see two water fountains. One is broken, and chipped, and water is dripping from it. The other is modern, and shining. A white guy goes up to the nice one, and the black kid goes up to the old one. I remember saying to myself, "If I was in the scene, where would I drink?"*

As a kid, I remember going to the theater and not knowing where I was supposed to sit. Blacks were segregated then. Colored people had to sit upstairs, and white people sat downstairs... I guess I was always considered marginal with whites and blacks.[1]

Raised in Clarksdale, Mississippi, Chinese-American Sam Sue has bitter memories about growing up not knowing how or where to fit in. Since their arrival in the American South over three hundred years ago, Asians have encountered an invisible racial barrier. Neither white nor black, Americans of Asian descent were somewhere in between with no fixed "place" in society.

Finding a Place

Beginning in the mid-1800s, a number of Chinese workers, called "coolies," were shipped to the American South from Cuba as a new source of cheap labor. The majority of Chinese who settled in the Mississippi Delta arrived between 1910 and 1930. Throughout this time, questions were raised about their role in society. In a racially polarized society where race was a matter of being white or black, the Chinese had no clear standing.

> 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. Negroes do not consider them exactly white; Caucasians do not consider them black. They are privileged and burdened with an ambiguous racial identity.[2]

This unique position of being apparently in between whites and blacks allowed the Chinese to "switch" from one racial group to another. This ambiguity, however, could not go unresolved.

A Politicized Economy

Central to the evolution of race relations between the white, black, and Chinese communities in Mississippi was politics. Many elite members of southern society sought to replace black workers with Chinese "coolies" in order to undermine the growing political power of freed blacks. According to Powell Clayton, governor of Arkansas during Reconstruction: "The underlying motive for this effort to bring in Chinese laborers was to punish the negro *[sic]* for having abandoned the control of the old master, and to regulate the condition of his employment and the scale of wages to be paid him."[3]

In the South, Chinese immigration was encouraged despite growing anti-Chinese sentiment in California and other parts of the West Coast. In the long run, white southerners believed that Chinese immigration would strengthen "white political power by displacing voting Negroes; for the Chinese . . . would not vote."[4]

With this in mind, white landowners hired Chinese laborers to displace black workers. The railroads, cotton and rice fields depended on an abundant supply of cheap labor. As the end of slavery appeared imminent, southern plantation owners searched for another source of cheap labor. Some favored importing Chinese workers. "Coolies" in Cuba and Peru were reported to be highly industrious and well-behaved. Some preferred black workers since they "worked harder, could be fired or disciplined with greater ease, and could be taken advantage of, financially, with little fear of retribution."[5] The high cost of transporting people from China and the economic competition from West Coast industries ultimately prevented great numbers of Chinese from settling in the South. Those who did arrive were shipped from either Cuba or China or migrated from the West Coast.

The Chinese Grocer

At first, the Chinese were treated the same as blacks. "The call for Chinese as replacements for Negro sharecroppers meant that they would be defined as the equals in status of the race they were to displace."[6] Soon, however, the Chinese entered the grocery business, which enabled them to attain relative financial success and challenge their racial status in society. Black businessmen could not do the same. They lacked the economic resources to establish their own businesses. Wholesalers refused to give them credit and, at the same time, many blacks preferred to shop at white stores in an attempt to improve their social status.[7]

In this way, the racist treatment of blacks by white store owners created an opportunity for nearby Chinese grocers. Chinese store owners discovered that they could do business with both whites and blacks. The Chinese grocery stores were the "only integrated milieu in the Delta. Negroes and working-class whites could sit around ...and drink beer."[8] In his book, *The Mississippi Chinese, Between Black and White,* James W. Loewen suggests that Chinese grocers functioned as social mediators between whites and blacks.

Over time, most of the businesses in the Delta, if they were not owned by whites, were controlled by the Chinese.[9] In the end, many of the Chinese in Mississippi became economically independent. Due to their economic success, the Chinese found themselves to be somewhere in between white and black—not quite white, yet not black.[10]

The relationship between the Chinese grocers and the black members of the community grew over the years. Not only did the Chinese run businesses in the black community, but they also lived there. Therefore, they were subject to the same discrimination and prejudice that blacks received from whites. Consequently, the Chinese grocers were more friendly than white grocers toward black customers. Most Chinese grocers, for instance, "did not require the deferential courtesy forms customarily demanded by whites."[11] The Chinese grocers were thus able to monopolize a portion of the market in the black community. For Chinese grocers, being in a position in between white and black was very rewarding, financially as well as socially.

On a community level, Loewen found that "these ties were...not discouraged until they hindered the advancement of the group into white institutions."[12]

Wanting More

Confrontations escalated between the Chinese and whites when the Chinese tried to send their children to white schools. The white community, according to some, would let the Chinese go to their schools " 'cause they don't know no better."[13] Since some of the Chinese parents had white friends, their children were permitted to attend white schools until later when some objected on legal grounds.

In 1809, however, the state supreme court decided that "it has been at all times the policy of lawmakers of Mississippi to preserve white schools for members of the Caucasian race alone."[14] By law, the Chinese were considered to be a "colored race." Therefore, Chinese children could no longer attend white schools.

Chinese parents refused to accept this ruling. They wanted more for their children. Chinese parents were now more concerned with getting their children into white schools than with achieving financial security. They rejected being labeled "colored" and sought to distance themselves from the black community. They were no longer comfortable with their racially ambiguous status.

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The United States Supreme Court case *Rice v. Gong Lum* bears this out. Mrs. Gong Lum, a resident with considerable standing in the white community of Rosedale, Mississippi, "got very angry with the Rosedale School Board because they kicked her children...out of the [white] school."[15] She argued that her children were not members of the "colored" race, and that they had a right to receive a "proper" education. In her opinion, they should be allowed to attend white schools. Although its ruling appears to contradict the Fourteenth Amendment, the Supreme Court supported the state court's ruling and refused to allow Chinese children access to white schools.

On the surface, whites in Mississippi had no particular reason for keeping Chinese children out of their schools. In *Where I Was Born and Raised,* David L. Cohn points out an important condition attached to giving Chinese access to white schools. If Chinese children are allowed to attend white schools, then the Chinese "themselves must see to it that no children of Chinese-Negro blood apply through their community."[16] The white community was not as concerned about admitting Chinese children to the schools as they were about admitting black children.

Whites feared that "if Chinese children were permitted to attend the public schools these Chinese-Negro half-breeds would go along."[17] White parents were well aware of the implications of such action. They refused to let anything happen that would eventually lead to the social acceptance of blacks. "'Aren't Chinese colored,' they asked. 'If we let them in, won't Negroes want to integrate?'"[18]

The issue, therefore, was not whether Chinese children should be allowed to attend white schools, but rather how can Chinese-black children and, consequently, black children be denied access to white schools. The actual percentage of Chinese men who lived with or married black women was never more than 20 percent.[19] The number of biracial children was also relatively low. Yet, whites firmly believed that intermarriage between Chinese and blacks was a growing threat to their social system.

Making a Choice

To respond to this fear which they saw as the main obstacle in their struggle for quality education for their children, leaders in the Chinese community made a choice. Rather than challenge racism, they distanced themselves from the black community. The Chinese believed that as soon as they could prove to the "satisfaction of the white community that the children whom they present for admittance to the white schools are racially pure Chinese," the white community would be willing to accept them.[20]

With this in mind, the Chinese attempted to eliminate all Chinese-black relationships in their community. By pressuring Chinese men to end their relationships with black women and to abandon their biracial children, or by forcing Chinese-black families to leave the community, the Chinese hoped to "eradicate the Chinese-Negro minority."[21] Interracial marriages were severely criticized and discouraged by the Chinese community as a whole. This forced many in the Chinese community to avoid interacting with blacks at all.

Central to the evolution of race relations between the white, black, and Chinese communities in Mississippi was politics.

The image of the Chinese in Mississippi slowly changed. And, as the image changed, treatment by whites did as well. In the 1940s, new laws were passed to allow Chinese children to attend white schools. In addition, China's alliance with the United States during World War II helped to end the exclusion of Chinese immigrants from white society and to combat much of the anti-Chinese sentiment felt across the country. In 1945, the president of the school board of Greenville, Mississippi, Henry Starling, announced that "children of native Chinese strain are pupils of high scholastic and character standards."[22]

Unlike their earlier association with blacks, the Chinese were no longer perceived to be a racial threat to the white community. A distinction between "pure" and "mixed" Chinese, however, still existed. Throughout this period, the white community refused to "set a precedent for equal treatment of all races."[23] In many ways, their refusal to allow blacks into the social system was rationalized by their acceptance of the Chinese. Whites reassured themselves that "their oppression of Negroes was called forth by that race's particular and peculiar lack of capacity."[24] Thus, in Mississippi, the integration of the Chinese gave even more cause to the oppression of blacks.

In Between and Invisible

The legal standing of the Chinese in Mississippi changed often over the years. In *Origins of the New South*, James C. Woodward suggests that the South allowed for the existence of only two racial groups—white and black. The social and political system did not accommodate those who were in between the races. The Chinese were neither white nor black and "the segregation system attempted to deal with them as exceptions."[25] In the end, it failed and they had to choose. To be in between was to be invisible.

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The choice that the Chinese in Mississippi made nearly sixty years ago to be white rather than black or another race has had profound implications for our society today. Are we two nations as the Kerner Report claims? Are we either white or black? In the end, the Chinese in Mississippi found that it was to their benefit to reject the black community in order to be accepted, however marginally, by the white community. The choice has had a price.

Notes

[1]Sam Sue, interview by Joann Faung Jean Lee in *Asian Americans, Oral Histories of First to Fourth Generation Americans from China, the Philippines, Japan, India, the Pacific Islands, Vietnam and Cambodia* (New York: The New Press, 1991), 3.

[2]James W. Loewen, *The Mississippi Chinese, Between Black and White* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), 2.

[3]Shih-shan Henry Tsai, *The Chinese Experience in America* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), 8.

[4]Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese*, 4.

[5]Ibid., 26.

[6]Ibid., 24.

[7]Ibid., 46.

[8]Ibid., 61.

[9]David L. Cohn, *Where I Was Born and Raised* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 189.

[10]Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese*, 39.

[11]Ibid., 64.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Robert Seto Quan, *Lotus Among Magnolias, the Mississippi Chinese* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 1982), 46.

[14]Ibid., 14.

[15]Ibid., 46.

[16]Cohn, *Where I Was Born*, 235.

[17]Ibid., 156.

[18]Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese*, 74.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Cohn, *Where I Was Born*, 157.

[21]Loewen, *Mississippi Chinese*, 76.

[22]Ibid., 98.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 99.

[25]Ibid., 2.

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