

【연구논문】

In Between: The Mississippi Chinese and the American Racial Structure

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In his famous study *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978), William Julius Wilson argued that despite racial oppression against African Americans, the change in the production system allowed them to acquire economic and political resources. In the post-civil rights industrial period, non-racial components, such as class, came to play greater roles than race in determining the life chances for blacks. His study opened up a rich field of research for many scholars. While Wilson's focus was primarily on socioeconomic aspects of black-white race relations, scholars like Sakamoto, Liu, and Tzeng (1998) and C. W. Reimers (1985) have expanded the scope of research to include Asian Americans and Latino Americans and their occupational attainment. Others have investigated educational, residential, or cultural disparities between blacks and whites and reasserted the continuing significance of race (Hughes and Hertel 1990; Wilson

2011). The prospect of a “postracial” America after the election of Barack Obama in 2008 once more drew attention to Wilson’s thesis. Has the significance of race and more broadly, of racial structure, been indeed declining in America?

Race¹⁾ is a socially and politically constructed category, and its definitions and meanings have changed over time and place. The process by which the category of race has been formed in America is closely related to the complex race relations that have shaped and influenced American society (Omi and Winant 1986). One of the examples that question the reification of race as a fixed and natural category and illustrate the process of race-making in America is the Mississippi Chinese. First receiving scholarly attention in James W. Loewen’s 1971 study *The Mississippi Chinese*, the small number of Chinese in the Delta revealed the possibility of racial transition in America. They came to Mississippi during Reconstruction to replace black sharecroppers, but as they found a niche in the market as small grocers and accumulated economic and cultural capital, they made successful transition from being identified as black to being considered almost white. Their example offers a microcosmic picture of the process by which American racial identities have been constructed and complicates the black-white binary through their in-between position in the American racial structure. In addition, the study of the Mississippi Chinese allows us to revisit Wilson’s thesis in the context of Asian Americans. Already in the 1950s, the socioeconomic success of the Chinese in the Delta mitigated the

1) This essay focuses on the racialization process of the Mississippi Chinese, but it also deals with Chinese “ethnic” identities.

impact of race on determining their life trajectories and enabled them to gain access to white privileges. However, their racial transition was much more complicated. The Mississippi Chinese had to negotiate a variety of issues to achieve racial mobility and carve out their place in between blacks²⁾ and whites in the region.

Taking James Loewen's study as a starting point, this essay explores the enduring power of the white dominant racial structure and the possibility of going beyond the racial binary of black and white in America. First, it discusses the process of racialization for the Mississippi Chinese in the early twentieth century. It examines their racial transition from black to white, investigates race relations in the Delta, and considers following questions. How did such racial transition become possible? How did blacks and whites participate in and respond to the racialization of the Chinese? How significant was and is the racial structure in America? Through the example of the Mississippi Chinese, this essay also investigates the meaning of the color line in the United States and the impact of the white racial structure upon recent immigrants. As a product of a specific time and place, the Mississippi Chinese defy generalization. Still, they illuminate possible changes in the American racial structure and directions it may take.

2) It uses "black" instead of "African American" to reflect the period when the Mississippi Chinese made their racial transition (pre-civil rights movement) and to emphasize the black-white binary racial structure in America.

1. The Mississippi Chinese in the American Racial Structure

In the 1870s, the Chinese began to arrive in the Mississippi Delta in response to the solicitation of southern planters, who had suffered from labor shortages and increasing economic and political problems of black sharecroppers in the Reconstruction era. The planters believed that bringing in Chinese immigrants—the “apolitical noncitizen coolie”—would help them gain back the docile labor force of slavery time (Loewen 1971, 23). Chinese laborers would also become a “threatening alternative” to blacks and prevent them from resisting planters’ demands (Loewen, 23). At the time of their entry to the American South, the Chinese were identified as black: they would replace black laborers by doing the same kind of work in plantations. Chinese laborers did not intend to settle in the Delta. Rather, they hoped to reap the most profits in the shortest time and return to their families in China, Cuba, or California. However, the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and a succession of immigration acts in the early twentieth century drastically reduced further immigration of Asians into the United States; the Chinese in the Delta gradually settled, raising families and making a living among blacks and whites in the region. They also began to look for other fields of employment because while working conditions were poor, sharecropping could not guarantee economic success. Soon, they found a niche in the market as grocers in black neighborhoods, where only a small number of white merchants had operated business.

The segregated system of the Delta and the strict racial caste separated blacks and whites and reified racial differences between

them. No matter how light skinned, blacks could not become white in the Jim Crow South, where the one-drop rule persisted. Upon their entry to Mississippi, the Chinese were classified as black or “colored” (Lee 2011), and they too encountered “the white power structure that determined the terms of racial mobility” (Koshy 2001, 178). As Chinese merchants and small grocers built and settled their community, the Chinese in Mississippi struggled to establish their place in the mainstream society. While managing successful enterprises and increasing contacts with white members of the Delta, they realized that image change and cultural assimilation with whites could lead to greater respect and prestige. Barred from white institutions, the Chinese built parallel institutions, such as a Chinese church or a cemetery, imitated the white way of life, and distanced themselves from blacks. By the mid-twentieth century, whites and blacks in the Delta rarely referred to physical differences as boundaries separating the Chinese from other members of the community. The Chinese were portrayed in terms of their groceries, money-making practices, traditions, education, and religion. As they made transition from being black to being white, the life chances of the Mississippi Chinese were determined not by their race but by their economic and cultural assimilation.

2. White Power in the Delta

According to James Loewen, the Mississippi Chinese could achieve racial mobility by accumulating occupational and cultural capital.

Through their small enterprises, the Chinese were able to build wealth and provide proper education for their children, who did well at school and became professionals afterward. In many ways, they were better off than poor or working-class whites in the Delta who could not have the same level of culture or education. What was equally or even more important than the occupational roles was the “etiquette system” of Mississippi. It allowed southern white elites to dominate the racial structure and maintain segregation through “cultural oppression”: “the mounting of a detailed attack on the identity and worth of the oppressed” (Loewen, 156-7). It shaped the lives of working-class whites and blacks in the region as well. The white community was heterogeneous in terms of class and ethnicity. For example, Italians and Jews were members of the white Delta but regarded as distinct from whites of the Old South. Loewen sketched the ranking of the various groups in the Delta at the time of his research as follows:

- Planter; landed businessman; old-resident professional
- Established small businessman; old-resident whites in various middle-class occupations; city officials
- Jewish merchants; highly successful businessman from other ethnic groups
- Italian farmers; Italian and other ethnic small businessmen; working-class whites
- Chinese merchants
- Poor whites; white sharecroppers
- Negro teachers, businessmen; other Negro middle class
- Mexican farm laborers
- Negro manual and farm laborers; domestics; unemployed. (13)

In this rank hierarchy, Jewish merchants and Italian farmers belonged to the third and fourth tiers, between white elites and Chinese merchants. This pattern fit the explanation of sociologists James Barrett and David Roediger (1997): “a whole range of evidence ... suggests that the native born and older immigrants often placed these newer immigrants [eastern and southern Europeans] not only above African and Asian Americans, for example, but also below ‘white’ people” (1). No one denied that Italians and Jews were “white,” but they had not been fully integrated into the mainstream white society even by the mid-twentieth century. In the Mississippi Delta, “whites” also operated a few small groceries in the black part of town, catering to a black clientele. As the Chinese took over the grocery business in black neighborhoods and became economically independent from the white community, however, the white merchants were “disastrously affected by their occupation” (Loewen, 49). White planters and landed businessmen believed that respectable whites did not do business with blacks: only Jews and Italians did. Loewen’s interview with the society editor of a Delta weekly showed what the white upper/middle class thought of Italians and Jews: “Occasionally you find a white merchant down there [black neighborhoods], but they’re usually either a Dago or a Jew!/[“They’re not very well thought-of, are they, if they have a store down there?”]/ “Oh no, huh-uh!” (50). The presence of the Chinese in the region, who excelled both economically and socially, hindered these “new” immigrants from gaining social mobility and threatened the prestige of whiteness among poor whites. Despite the racial caste that firmly subordinated blacks and Chinese, the category of “white” in the Mississippi Delta

was neither stable nor clearly set. Still, the Chinese had to overcome many obstacles to acquire the status of white. Working-class or poor whites might have belonged to a lower social stratum than the Chinese, but they were allowed to enter white-only institutions, from which the Chinese were excluded. Legal whiteness also guaranteed Italians and Jews eventual racial inclusion into the white mainstream. Even with their economic success and cultural assimilation, Chinese and other Asian immigrants remained “outside the pale of whiteness” (Foner 2005, 34).

More often than not, the task of defining whiteness fell to the legal system. The two cases of *Takao Ozawa v. United States* (1922) and *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* (1923) defined what “white” was, but at the same time, they confirmed “the falsity of natural notions of race” (Haney-Lopez 1996, 56). Through these cases, “persons of Asian origin were not only classified as nonwhite but also considered ineligible for U.S. citizenship” (Lee and Bean 2007, 564). In 1922, Takao Ozawa, a Japanese immigrant with excellent education, good command of English and Christian faith, filed for U.S. citizenship. He argued that his skin color made him a “white person” and eligible for citizenship; however, the Supreme Court ruled that he was not a Caucasian and therefore not white. In *United States v. Thind*, on the other hand, the Court reasoned that Bhagat Singh Thind, a Hindu who had fought for the U.S. in World War I, was a Caucasian but not “white” in the “common understanding” of Americans (Jacobson 1998, 234-6; Gross 2009, 240-6; Lee and Bean, 564-5). Immigrants considered cultural capital—language and education, for example—an important component of U.S. citizenship,

but “color” proved to be the very and only requirement to become American. The Mississippi Chinese in the 1920s were involved in a similar case, which again confirmed their “colored” status. Gong Lum, a well-to-do Chinese merchant in Rosedale, Mississippi, brought his case before the court when his daughter, Martha, was returned home from an all-white Rosedale public school for the reason that she was not a Caucasian. His lawyer contended that Lum’s daughter was “pure Chinese,” thus neither “a member of the colored race” nor “of mixed blood” (qtd. in Loewen, 67). The lower court ruled in favor of Gong Lum, but the Supreme Court overturned the decision, asserting that Martha should not be allowed to the all-white school because Chinese were not “white” but regarded as a “colored” race. While the category of “white” was still malleable in the early twentieth century, it was narrow, including only a select group of immigrants. In this case, however, the skin color or whiteness of Martha was not the real issue; white elites feared that Martha’s case might set a dangerous precedent for black children and their parents who hoped to seek admission to white institutions (Wong 1996, 35). Through the legal positioning of the Chinese in the racial structure, the Delta whites were to maintain the racial status quo and justify the racial hierarchy.

Even as they accumulated occupational and cultural capital, the Mississippi Chinese had to deal with economic and ideological opposition from whites (Loewen 1971). As Chinese grocers became prosperous, white small merchants and working class verbally and physically abused the Chinese and obstructed their involvement in white social activities and white institutions. However, the real power

behind such opposition was white elites. James Loewen explained: “The white upper class had no economic “self-interest” at stake in keeping the Chinese down... There were no objections to the Chinese based on economic interest, therefore, but there were serious ideological objections” (98). Indeed, the success of Chinese groceries did not hurt white elites and their enterprises. White planters and professionals in the Delta knew that no matter how hard the Chinese might try, these small grocers would never become their equals. Thus, Loewen claimed that the opposition against the Chinese reflected the fear of white elites that the Chinese might challenge the racial structure of the South and undermine their authority. This explained the decision behind *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927). The southern ideological opposition was derived from the binary racial structure of the Delta and the desire to preserve segregation between blacks and whites. Once the elites were assured that the racial structure would not be disrupted, there would be no opposition.

The Mississippi Chinese realized that they could no longer remain in racial limbo because “to be in between was to be invisible” (Wong, 35). For them, abandoning black and choosing white, if “not quite white,” was the right answer. Still, as racial outsiders with no room in the black-white binary, they found it difficult to form solidarity with those “not quite white”—Italians and Jews, for example. Despite the white opposition, they did not align with blacks, either, due to the ignominy of being black. Instead, the Chinese emphasized their “purity” as a race in their attempt to demonstrate their respectability, thereby protecting and preserving the white power system. They faithfully mimicked white cultural patterns: the

Mississippi Chinese spoke refined English, became Christian, and dissociated themselves from blacks (Quan 1982, 36). The older generation encouraged endogamy as a way to sever their ties with blacks and interracial couples. By such means, they changed their image, shed their “objectionable characteristics,” and reinforced their respectability in the South (Loewen, 98). The national status of China as an ally of the United States during World War II further improved the position of the Chinese in the eye of whites. By the mid-twentieth century, the Chinese gained access to all white institutions, joined white southerners in social events, and earned respect from both whites and blacks in the area. However, the example of the Mississippi Chinese was not a mere success story. Their transition was limited in a way that it came only within the ideological confines of the American racial stratification system.

3. “Racial Triangulation” of the Mississippi Chinese

In order to understand the ways in which the white ideological opposition subsided and the Chinese became “white,” it should be reasserted that the Mississippi Chinese, especially before desegregation of the 1960s, occupied a unique place in American history. Claire Jean Kim (1999) compares the Deep South with California and notes differences in terms of Chinese racial positions: “both the relative sizes of the White, Black, and Chinese American population in the two regions and the presence of a more rigid and established racial caste system (Jim Crow) in the South may explain why white

southerners felt they had less to lose than White Californians in permitting a slight shift in the racial positioning of the intermediate group” (112). The Chinese themselves struggled to construct their racial identity through hard work and effort and as a result earned a racial position close to white. However, as *Gong Lum v. Rice* demonstrates, it was white southerners who used the ideological objections to initiate the shift in “the field of racial positions” (Kim, 106). In a similar vein, Susan Koshy claims that the white structure was responsible for the racial formation of the Chinese and blacks in the Delta area (179). “In-between” groups, in this case Chinese, were allowed to enjoy a certain level of mobility within, as long as the dominant binary structure was maintained.

Then, would it be possible for the Mississippi Chinese, or Asian Americans in general, to go beyond black and white and find their place outside the American racial structure? Kim classifies the previous scholarship of going “beyond Black and White” into two groups of approaches: different trajectories and racial hierarchy (105-6). The former, most famously represented by Michael Omi and Howard Winant (1986), regards the experience of minorities in America as following distinct trajectories. Yet, this approach fails to see that Asian Americans have been racialized “relative to and through interaction with Whites and Blacks” (Kim, 106). The latter approach of racial hierarchy, which places whites on the top, blacks at the bottom, and others on the racial spectrum in between, ignores “how racialization processes are mutually constitutive of one another and how they can unfold along more than one dimension or scale at a time” (Kim, 106). Therefore, Kim claims that Asian Americans

have been triangulated vis-à-vis blacks and whites, aided by the view that they are both superior to blacks and permanently foreign. This “racial triangulation” has a long history, which goes back to the early period of Asian immigration. Even before the concept of a model minority³⁾ drew public attention, Asian immigrants were triangulated between blacks and whites through “relative valorization” (superior/inferior) and “civic ostracism” (insider/foreigner) (Kim, 107).

In spite of their unique experience in the American South, the Mississippi Chinese were not an exception to “racial triangulation.” The change in the racial status of the Mississippi Chinese was processed through their interactions with both whites and blacks; without either of them, they could not have become “white,” no matter how arbitrary and unstable the term might be. Koshy also argues: “the strategy of the Chinese was based on shifting the focus from their racial difference from whites to their cultural similarity to whites and their racial and cultural differences from blacks” (178). In addition, the Chinese could navigate the racial spectrum and climb up the social and racial ladder because “as outsiders, they were relatively oblivious to the nuances of the segregation code and had an alternative value system on which to base their self-esteem. They could therefore break the Mississippi code” (Loewen, 155). However, it does not mean that the Mississippi Chinese neglected or ignored the American racial structure. They acknowledged its enduring power

3) The term “model minority” first appeared in sociologist William Petersen’s 1966 *New York Times Magazine* article, “Success Story: Japanese American Style.” The thesis has been criticized for pitting Asian Americans against blacks by emphasizing Asian-American achievements and blaming blacks for not following the Asian-American model.

and readily embraced their new image, similar to what we now call the “model minority” stereotype. The Chinese asserted that they succeeded through hard work while blacks failed without utilizing the benefits of being insiders and long-time southern residents. According to Robert Seto Quan, many Delta Chinese he interviewed reiterated the argument that “blacks had had to work themselves up from the bottom as the Chinese had done in order to improve their position” (52). What they missed was that blacks were rigidly constrained by the racial caste. Occupational success hardly mattered for blacks. In the Jim Crow South, the black middle-class, in particular those who had extremely light skin, might have earned some respect from whites, but they were still “black” and lived in segregation. They were unable to imitate the process by which the Chinese cultivated their respectability and economic success—what Loewen called “the quiet rise” of the Chinese—since they needed more drastic and practical measures to get away from the racial and social restraints (100). Nevertheless, whites and Chinese denied that the lower social status of blacks was the product of the American racial structure. The Chinese moved from a black to a white status through their effort *and* the white complicity. Their racial transition was “relative valorization” in Kim’s term, which placed them above blacks but below whites. Persisting discrimination, on the other hand, against the Chinese—grocers endured derogatory attitudes of whites toward them, and their children were often discriminated in the job market despite excellent education—revealed the process of “civic ostracism” that continued to view them as unassimilable aliens and outsiders. Surely, their economic success diverted “attention away from the existence of

continued racism against Asians” (Foner 2005, 31), and made the Delta Chinese themselves oblivious to the discriminatory practices around them. Their small number (about 1,200 in the 1960s) and insulation within the Delta also helped them find “a new niche as a ‘white’” (qtd. in Wong, 35). The racial hierarchy of whites and blacks was not overturned as the Chinese moved along the racial line without influencing the established binary.

According to sociologist Nancy Foner (2005), Asians are “still viewed as racially distinct, marked off by physical features and, even when born in the United, often assumed to be newcomers or, in Mia Tuan’s phrase, thought of as ‘forever foreigners’” (30). Then, were the Mississippi Chinese “honorary whites,” or “forever foreigners”? As an answer to this question, Mia Tuan (1998) explains that “these dualisms [of honorary whites and forever foreigners] defy the complex nature of race relations” in American society (163). By the mid-twentieth century, the Mississippi Chinese had more things in common with southerners, sharing jokes with southern whites and blacks and having their own ways of life, distinct from those of other Chinese immigrants. In this way, they might have been considered “honorary whites.” However, they achieved near-white status only because they were outsiders, that is, “forever foreigners” without a say in the American racial structure. In the Delta, the Chinese also had to deal with the question of blacks. Since their racial position had been set in relation to whites and blacks, it is expected that the Mississippi Chinese would have fought against blacks for their almost-white status. Surprisingly, they maintained relatively amicable relationships with blacks during their transition

period. And their relationships are of particular interest here, because they shed light on the issue of interracial conflicts in the second half of the twentieth century.

4. Interaction, Conflict, and Change

As Kim argues, the white racial structure pitted the Mississippi Chinese against local blacks through the process of racial triangulation; however, it did not preclude the possibility of black-Asian solidarity in the Delta. Witnessing desegregation and the rise of black migration and black power movement in the 1960s, James Loewen contemplated the impact of the social change on the Mississippi Chinese. In the twentieth-first century, we can also look back and ponder what happened to racial and ethnic minorities when segregation was over. Did the end of segregation by any means reduce the chances for other in-between groups to become white? Did desegregation and, as a result, increased competition in the labor market bring about interracial conflicts between blacks and other minorities?⁴⁾

While doing his research in Mississippi in the 1960s, Loewen learned that black violence against Chinese merchants had increased in the region. The Civil Rights Movement awakened black consciousness and broadened the gap between Chinese merchants and their black customers. The riots of 1967 in Memphis and other cities

4) This essay intentionally leaves out references to the 1992 Los Angeles Riots and Korean-American and African-American conflict in order to remain focused on the Mississippi Chinese and their race relations.

in Mississippi suggested that the once amicable relationships between the two would soon be over. Along with other social, economic, and political changes of the period, the riots, in which blacks specifically targeted Chinese stores, might have led Loewen to believe that the Mississippi Chinese would become a thing of the past, no longer able to sustain themselves. There had always been a possibility of interracial violence in Mississippi. However, the fact that Chinese grocers did not vie for the same resources as blacks prevented the seed of violence from developing into full-blown conflicts. In the first half of the twentieth century when the Mississippi Chinese began to build their community through their small businesses, local blacks did not pursue or succeed in the same sector. They lacked capital to manage the business and a strong push toward enterprises. There were elements of competition between white small grocers and Chinese merchants in the black community, but blacks in the area were and remained clients, who hoped to receive respect and fair treatment. Of course, blacks had ambivalent attitudes toward Chinese merchants doing business in black neighborhoods. They respected the skills of Chinese entrepreneurs and acknowledged their hard work. At the same time, some of them resented the high price of Chinese groceries and showed derogatory attitudes toward the owners (Quan, 78-81). Still, the Chinese understood practices of their black clients and showed more respect toward blacks than whites did. Chinese groceries were an important part of black lives, and the two groups managed to live alongside each other. Even after the 1960s' riots, Robert Seto Quan, who conducted his study in Mississippi about a decade later, showed that the Chinese continued to occupy the market

as grocers and do business with blacks. The second and third-generation Chinese began to enter different social premises as professionals and leave the Delta for better opportunities elsewhere, but most remained close to home and maintained their ties with blacks and whites in Mississippi. Revisiting his subject twenty years after his research, Loewen noticed similar developments in the region. He also saw that the Chinese were now more fully integrated into the mainstream society. Over time, they would lose their distinctiveness as Chinese (Thornell 2008).

To a certain extent, the example of the Mississippi Chinese challenges discussions on the contemporary Black-Asian conflict (Lie 2004). John Lie acknowledges that the Chinese who settled and became shopkeepers in the Delta were, in today's term, the "middleman minority," whose presence has sparked interracial conflicts in many urban areas (Min 1996). However, prior to the 1960s, there was no overt conflict between Chinese and blacks despite the significant role the Mississippi Chinese played in the black community. One of the reasons was the presence of interracial couples of Chinese men and black women in the Delta. Early Chinese immigrants did not bring their families with them because they had no intention to settle. When the exclusionary immigration acts made familial union difficult, if not impossible, some of them formed intimate relationships with black women, who helped their Chinese spouses maintain alliances with the black community and facilitated their Americanization process. Racially-mixed children of Chinese men and black women also functioned as a social intermediary between the two groups. Into the mid-twentieth century,

the Mississippi Chinese, who claimed to be “pure,” severed their ties with the interracial families and the black community in order to earn white approval and near-white status. Like the Chinese, blacks too emulated the white standard of respectability. Many middle-class blacks shopped at white stores and hired help to do the chores, all in an attempt to improve their social status in the eye of white elites (Loewen, 46). However, as the Chinese moved from black to white, blacks—pariahs of the Delta—lost their competition for political and social recognition. The riots in the 1960s were its outcome; the racial status of blacks still determined their chances of survival in the region. The Delta was different from other urban centers with large immigrant populations, so the competition the Mississippi Chinese entered against blacks for social and political privileges was probably not as fierce as that of other Asian immigrants (e.g. Korean immigrants in Los Angeles). The Chinese merchants in Mississippi did not suffer greatly from desegregation and interracial violence, and the growing racial consciousness of the civil rights era did not result in long-lasting interracial tensions. Nevertheless, their experience suggests that the white racial structure was responsible for producing an atmosphere of conflict and opposition. Even though they did try hard to emulate the white way and ostracized mixed-race Chinese families, it was not the Mississippi Chinese who created an environment antagonistic to their relationships with blacks. At least in the context of the Delta, the black-Asian conflict was not a necessary condition of American race relations. Without the constraints of the white racial structure, tensions and conflicts between blacks and Chinese could have been eased.

Whether intra-racial or interracial, solidarity among different groups is hard to come by. Yet, the study of the Mississippi Chinese hints that interracial conflicts do not preclude the possibility of interracial solidarity. While the experience of the Mississippi Chinese is different from that of Asian immigrants in many parts of the United States, the ways in which they achieved whiteness—following white cultural patterns, using mixed-race families as a buffer, and distancing from them eventually—are pertinent to today's race relations. The obstacle is and has been the dominant racial structure. Here, one may wonder whether it would have been possible for the Mississippi Chinese to challenge the southern racial caste by forming interracial solidarity with blacks. More broadly speaking, can Asian Americans form solidarity with blacks against whites? Will they be able to resist the prestige associated with whiteness and willing to create union with blacks across the color line? Will the American racial structure, which supports the racial triangulation of Asian Americans, continue to be salient?

5. Changes in the American Racial Structure

Mia Tuan claims that Asian-American experiences “stand on their own and must be assessed based on criteria unique to their circumstances” (164). Claire Jean Kim’s “racial triangulation” also requires nuanced approaches to Asian-American experiences at a specific time and place. Given their assertions, the Mississippi Chinese do not represent Asian Americans and their experiences in

the American racial structure. The Delta Chinese shared more similarities with southern and eastern Europeans than with other Chinese or Asian immigrants in urban areas. As the National Origins Act of 1924 virtually terminated Asian immigration and drastically reduced the number of southern and eastern Europeans into the United States, the decrease in the flow of new arrivals “facilitated assimilation by depriving Jews and Italians of constant, large-scale reinforcements” (Foner, 35). Similarly, the Mississippi Chinese had greater opportunities to become acculturated into the mainstream society because the Delta in the early twentieth century had no significant in-migration or out-migration. Their accumulated wealth and stable social status were not disrupted by the “new” immigrants, who had to start from scratch, often at the cost of compromising the progress of the “old” immigrants. Insulated within the Delta, the Chinese lived alongside blacks and whites and devised various ways to cope with opposition and conflict. They understood the racial line that divided whites and blacks and struggled to cross it over. Can their experience be replicated in other parts of the United States, for recent, post-1965 immigrants not only from Asia but also from Latin America and Africa? Considering the contour of immigration in current American society, it may also be possible for Chinese or other Asian immigrants to go beyond the binary racial structure to realign themselves in the field of racial positions.

Kim’s racial triangulation theory challenges the binary racial hierarchy and emphasizes the multidimensional process of racialization. And immigrants from Latin America and Africa as well as Asia further problematize the existing color line. One of the

questions that Kim asks at the end of her article is: “Must Asian Americans still attempt to be White in order to get ahead?” (129). There seems to be no clear answer to this question. However, many new immigrants have keenly felt the stigma of being identified with blacks and chosen to align themselves with whites. The color line has influenced not only the existing structure but people’s self-identification as well. Already in the first half of the twentieth century, the Mississippi Chinese witnessed the power of the color line. Initially, they were forced to acknowledge their “colored” status, but soon they saw leeway in the category of white, which stretched just enough to include well-off Chinese merchants but not middle-class blacks or mixed-race people in the Delta. Once they reached the “white” post, however, they could no longer move along the racial spectrum, perhaps until the new influx of Chinese or Asian immigrants reshuffled the racial structure. The possibility of solidarity between the Chinese and blacks also diminished with the expansion of the white category and due to the historical stigmatization of being black in America.

Sociologist George Yancey (2003) thus claims that the way we define “white” is changing and expanding and that the United States seems to be moving from a white/nonwhite divide toward a black/nonblack division. Similar to the Mississippi Chinese, Asian Americans and Latinos are more likely to adopt mainstream attitudes and identify themselves as white. For them, the significance of their race in between blacks and whites has declined, and now they can rely on their ethnic identities, rather than their racial affiliations. Nancy Foner too suggests that a black/nonblack divide is a

possibility, but she warns that such a forecast “sees the boundary dividing blacks from other Americans as most intractable in the nation, and blacks being consigned, once again, to racial exclusion” (39). The Mississippi Chinese were able to make a racial choice primarily because they were protected from the influx of new immigrants. Many recent, post-1965 immigrants have found it difficult to make the same choice. For example, West Indian or African immigrants in the United States have formed their own ethnic, social, or political identities distinct from those of blacks (Waters 1999). Yet, they are still delineated as black no matter how light-skinned and how well-educated they are; for them, the category of black has remained rigid in relation to that of white (Lee and Bean, 567-68).⁵⁾ It is also possible that new immigrants may find a different racial category to define their racial positions. The increase of mixed-race people and their self-identification (Tiger Woods, for instance, identified himself as “Cablinasian”—Caucasian, Black, American-Indian, and Asian) can make the current American racial structure meaningless. It is also possible that this move toward a seemingly postracial society may not come in any time soon because, instead of moving beyond race, it may end up merely shifting the color line.

These discussions do not indicate that ethnic or racial minorities in America will be free from racial discrimination. Even with the 2008 victory of Barack Obama and the expectation for changes, the U.S. has faced problems of race, which continues to shape the experience

5) Eduardo Bonilla-Silva (2004) advocates a tri-racial stratification system of “whites,” “honorary whites,” and “collective blacks.” While this system is intended to move beyond a biracial paradigm, it still maintains the black and white racial categories.

of minorities. Moreover, racial or ethnic heterogeneity makes it hard to tell what kind of standards (e.g. economic status or phenotype) can now be applied to define one's "racial" category. For example, there has been a double standard operating for Latino and Asian Americans. Latinos with a significant percentage of African ancestry may find it hard to enter the dominant culture, while Asian Americans with few economic and educational resources may not achieve the same position as more successful others (Yancey 2003; Zhou 2004; Lee and Bean 2007; Xu and Lee 2013). Then, will it be impossible for dark-skinned Latinos to enter the mainstream even with economic success? Or, can Asian Americans be part of the white community even if they are not well educated? For the Mississippi Chinese in the first half of the twentieth century, becoming white and displaying their non-blackness was the only way to move ahead. Today's immigrants may walk the same line, or find a different path. The racialization process will keep occurring as long as there are newcomers who do not fit into the dominant racial structure, and the structure itself will change, going through numerous revisions. The proliferation of multiracial and multiethnic communities has also given us an illusion of a postracial America, but there exists a concrete, if shifting, racial line. We still need to take into account the enduring power of race and the white racial structure, which continue to maintain their strong grip on minorities in America. Predicting the future of the American racial structure is never an easy task. However, one thing is certain: there will always be an effort to negotiate racial positions in America and perhaps to truly move beyond race, no matter how hard it may be.

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Abstract

In Between: The Mississippi Chinese and the American Racial Structure

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Through the example of the Mississippi Chinese, this essay explores the enduring power of the white dominant racial structure and the possibility of going beyond black and white in America. During Reconstruction, a small number of Chinese arrived in Mississippi as plantation laborers, replacing black sharecroppers. Soon, they found a niche in the market as grocers and succeeded in acquiring the status of white through their economic independence and cultural assimilation. Their racial transition from black to white reveals the in-between position of Asian immigrants in the black-white binary and the process by which they reproduced and maintained the American racial hierarchy. Triangulated (in Claire Jean Kim's term) under the racial stratification that had no room for Asian immigrants, the Mississippi Chinese had to make a choice between black and white. Instead of challenging the American racial structure, the Chinese in the Delta emulated white cultural practices and distanced themselves from blacks to achieve an almost or near-white status. Despite their small number, insulation from the influx of immigrants, and "middleman minority" position, their interactions with Mississippi whites and blacks in the first half of the twentieth century also shed light on the possibility of interracial solidarity and of changes in the black-white racial binary. The continuing immigration from Asia, Latin America, and Africa and the increase in multiracial and multiethnic communities in America may bring about a shift in the color line from a white/nonwhite model to a black/nonblack divide with an expanding white category. Or, they may even present an opportunity to

move beyond race and materialize the vision of a postracial America. What will become of the American racial structure, however, still remains to be seen.

Key Words

Mississippi Chinese, racial structure, racial triangulation, white/nonwhite divide, black/nonblack divide

