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Black, white, Chinese meet in 'Triangle'



A crew films "Mississippi Triangle" on location in the Delta.



Allan Siegel co-directed and edited "Mississippi Triangle."

By DEBORAH SKIPPER
Clarion-Ledger Staff Writer

From sharecropping to owning small grocery stores, the Chinese-Americans of the Mississippi Delta have played an integral part in the development of that region's economy for more than 100 years.

At the same time, the about 900 Chinese-Americans here have come to grips with some of the realities of Delta life — civil rights, education, labor, politics, religion and class.

Through rare historical footage, personal interviews and vignettes, this community is captured in *Mississippi Triangle* — a feature-length documentary making its world premiere Sunday in Clarksdale.

The film, a Third World Newsreel release financed primarily by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities, will be presented at 3 p.m. at the Carnegie Public Library. Admission is free.

Project director Christine Choy, one of the most prominent Asian-American filmmakers in the United States, spent about three years researching and making the 110-minute film. The documentary offers a portrait of life in the fertile agricultural triangle in northern Mississippi where white, black and Chinese meet in a complex world of cotton, work and racial conflict.

The Chinese community was born in a post-Civil War climate in which wealthy planters feared the South's defeat would mean the loss of the black labor that had transformed the Delta swamplands into one of the richest agricultural areas of the South. They sought to replace these black laborers with Chinese immigrants.

Not content to remain as sharecroppers, however, many Chinese opened small Delta groceries that catered primarily to black plantation workers.

Reached by phone at her New York office, Choy said the film will tackle many thorny issues and probably will stir some controversy.

"But I'm a filmmaker and my subject matter is controversial, anyway.

"In one way, you can look at this as controversial, but you also can look at it as a new way of looking at things. . . It's important we begin to see each other as

human beings and respect each other," she said.

A potentially controversial aspect of the film deals with the peculiar status of black Chinese in the Delta, she said.

"In early times, because (Chinese) men weren't allowed to marry white women — and emigration of (Chinese) women was restricted — they lived, married or cohabited with blacks," Choy said. "Now these black Chinese are not too welcome by the Chinese community anymore. They are considered more a part of the black community."

The black community accepts them, she said, but "they do not feel they are black. They feel they are more Chinese."

Choy, who emigrated to America from Shunang Hai, China, in 1965, said this prejudice against black Chinese stems from a desire for racial purity — an attitude apparent in Chinese-American communities all over the country.

Yet the status of pure Chinese in the Delta remained only slightly above that of blacks until the 1950s, she said. The Chinese were forced to attend separate churches and schools from the white community, she said, adding their status did not change until the civil rights movement. And because most Chinese were not active in that, Choy said, it "created resentment among blacks."

Eventually, the Chinese-Americans began to be accepted as an economic force, she said. *Mississippi Triangle* attempts to examine the history of the Delta through the emergence of the Chinese community. At present, that community is racked by questions of economic survival, cultural identity, assimilation, intermarriage, social isolation and the flight of the young.

Choy, who has more than 10 years experience in documentary production, chose to premiere *Mississippi Triangle* in Clarksdale rather than a larger city like New York because "it's more important for people there to see it first."

The film is scheduled to be presented Monday in Montgomery, Ala., Dec. 6 in Hattiesburg; Dec. 7 in New Orleans; and sometime in February in Jackson. It also has been accepted for the Berlin International Film Festival, to be held in February.

Diverse Delta audience attends premiere of 'Mississippi Triangle'

By LAURA CAUTHEN

The Clarksdale and Coahoma County Carnegie Public Library became a theater seating 200 for the Sunday premiere of 'Mississippi Triangle.' A full house attended the first showing and over 150 were present for the second showing. Both audiences represented a cross section of the Delta's population — Chinese, white, and black.

The film, which raised many questions among those attending, reflected the diverse culture and the richness of the Delta. Opening with an old black man singing "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," and including other blues and gospel songs, the film showed scenes common only to the Mississippi Delta.

Sid Graves, director of the library, said "the film will show other parts of the country that the population in the Delta is very diverse, a complexity they most people think is only common to the big cities, but is very prevalent in the Delta."

Many of the Chinese who attended were interviewed and ap-

peared in the film. Sid Graves, director of the library, said that he was very pleased with the attendance, especially the out-of-town visitors.

"We were honored to have the premiere here in Clarksdale, as well as the many visitors who attended," said Graves.

Chinese from Greenville, Greenwood, Cleveland, Rosedale, Belzoni, Louise, West Helena, Memphis, and Marks along with a couple who now live in California but were in the Delta to visit relatives and many Clarksdale Chinese were among the audience.

The film was presented in an original, non-Western way, rather than editing the scenes in a linear style.

Christine Choy, producer, said that although it is traditional to have some narration in a documentary, she chose a different approach. "I let the people speak for themselves," said Ms. Choy, although none of the people interviewed are identified. She also chose not to edit the film in chronological order, but does in-

clude some historic archive material and old photos.

"The changing economy is one element," said Ms. Choy, "and I wanted to show the political reality of today."

After the film had been shown, Ms. Choy said she would make a few minor changes. "I will probably include a brief comment at the beginning of the film," said Choy, "to explain that the film shows only a small part of the story in the Delta."

The film crew operated out of Clarksdale during the two years of filming.

Ms. Choy said that she liked the Delta. "It is much more calm and clean than New York. The people are very warm. The Chinese community gave us a lot of help," said Ms. Choy, "as well as everyone else. I'm happy to see so many familiar faces."

Attending the premiere with Ms. Choy were associate producers Yuet Fung Ho and Pearl Bowser; Worth Long, co-director with Ms. Choy and Allan Siegel; and Ludwig Goon, unit cinematographer.

In a brief intermission between the two showings, refreshments were served at a reception by the Friends of the Library.

Jimmy Harris of the Sound Center provided the sound system for the movie, which was excellent considering the acoustics of the library. Ronnie Wise, of the Cleveland and Bolivar County Library, was the projectionist.

'Mississippi Triangle' received major funding support from the National Endowment for the Humanities with additional funding from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts.

The film will be shown tonight in Montgomery, Ala., and Tuesday in New Orleans. It has been accepted to be shown at the prestigious Berlin International Film Festival in February, 1984. It will also be shown on PBS sometime next year.

Graves said that the library will receive a videotape of the final edited version for the library.