

CHINESE IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

FOR GRADES 3-7

RUN TIME: 130 MIN TOTAL
(OR 180-230 MIN WITH
EXTENDED ACTIVITY)

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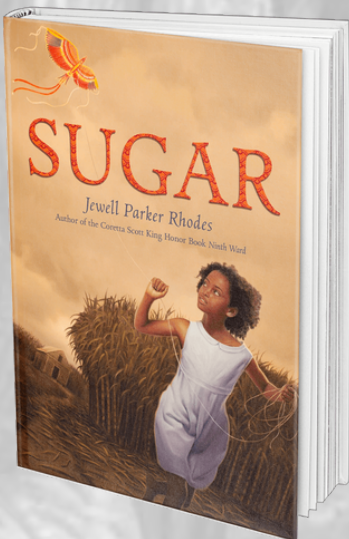
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Chinese people have been in the American South for over 150 years, starting with the first immigrants who arrived in the Mississippi Delta to work on sugarcane and cotton plantations. In this lesson plan, students will explore the history of Chinese in the Mississippi Delta through a variety of media sources and interactive activities. This lesson plan uses content from the book, *Sugar* by Jewell Parker Rhodes, which takes place on a sugar plantation during the 1870s Reconstruction era, when Chinese immigrants were brought in to replace Black labor following the emancipation of slavery. Students will focus on themes of migration and racial solidarity as they make historical connections between these stories and the real-life legacies of Chinese immigrants that built communities across the Mississippi Delta. This lesson plan is intended to accompany Little Brown Library's Educator's Guide for *Sugar*.

Image Credits

Left: Jewell Parker Rhodes

Background: Library of Congress

INSTRUCTOR'S QUICK SUMMARY

- Many Chinese immigrants came to the United States in the mid-1800s for the **Gold Rush** and to work on the **Transcontinental Railroad**. They traveled on ships for long voyages, often stopping at many port cities around the world, before reaching their final destination. Most of these laborers immigrated from the south China province of Guangdong. After their attempts at glory in the gold mines and the completion of the Transcontinental Railroad, many of these laborers sought employment elsewhere.
- Slavery was abolished in the United States in 1863 with the **Emancipation Proclamation** that ended the American Civil War. However, it took years for word of the Emancipation Proclamation to spread and freedom to be officially enforced. The holiday, Juneteenth, celebrates the day June 19, 1865, when the final enforcement was made in Texas.
- Many Black folks who had been enslaved now had the freedom to move from place to place after harvest seasons. Some moved to the **North** in search of greater freedom and others simply left after working under horrible planters.
- Chinese immigrants first entered the **Mississippi Delta** in the 1860s and 70s, when White, upper-class plantation owners were recruiting Chinese workers as a way to displace Black labor in the wake of emancipation. Chinese immigrants were used to replace the Black labor force and increase the power and wealth of White plantation owners.
- This pattern of using Asian Americans as a wedge between White and Black groups is a process known as **racial triangulation**. Chinese and Black laborers were pitted against each other in sugarcane plantations, but the characters in *Sugar* rejected these pressures and instead showed **racial solidarity**.

a note on language:

Using the term “**enslaved people**” instead of “slave” highlights the system of slavery that created the condition of being enslaved, rather than the identity of being a slave. The language we use to describe slavery matters in how we understand its history and honor the humanity of enslaved people.

INSTRUCTOR'S QUICK SUMMARY

- Once they arrived, the Chinese were put in the middle of a polarized segregation system, where they were classified as neither Black nor White. They were barred from attending White schools and institutions, and were treated with the same attitudes that White plantation owners and residents had used to exploit Black folks. Due to the **Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882**, Chinese people were unable to obtain citizenship or own land.
- **Reconstruction**, the era following the Civil War, was a turbulent time with conflict and labor shortages. Southerners disagreed over slavery and free labor sources. Some people argued that Chinese immigrant labor and indentured servitude were just another form of slavery. Many Chinese laborers were treated just as brutally as enslaved people.
- Most of the Chinese laborers were young adult men. Their goal in coming to the United States was to make money to support their families back in China, and later on, accumulate money to start their own businesses. However, they quickly learned that **sharecropping** would not bring them financial success.
- In 1937, the average sharecropping family received approximately \$300 for their combined labor during the year, and oftentimes would go most of the year without income. Instead of being paid in cash, plantation owners paid them in **furnish**, or food seed and other supplies, which were used to purchase goods from the plantation **commissaries**. This further locked Chinese laborers into having to stay and be dependent upon the plantation owners.
- The low pay and harsh working conditions on plantations led Chinese laborers to move away from sharecropping and toward alternative financial ventures. Many Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta opened laundromats and **grocery stores**. Laundromats were uncommon in the Mississippi Delta because laundry services were not popular in rural areas. However, as plantation-owned commissaries closed across the South, the need for grocery stores for Black customers rose. Unlike White grocers, Chinese grocery stores would extend **credit** to Black shoppers. This allowed Black customers to have necessary groceries and pay back their credit once they received their paychecks.

KEY UNDERSTANDINGS FOR STUDENTS

- Racism and anti-immigrant sentiment tend to spike in times of great emergency, such as labor shortages and political or economic crises. **Racial triangulation** occurs when various racial and ethnic groups are pitted against one another, such as in competition for jobs and resources. However, this overlooks the conditions that created limited resources for marginalized populations, including slavery and racism.
- There is a long history of racial and ethnic groups showing **solidarity** with one another, including collaboratively organizing protests and supporting each other's small businesses. It is important to highlight these examples of solidarity throughout history and in the present-day.
- **Migration** can often be traced through histories of transcontinental journeys and communities that persist through political turmoil and discriminatory policies. Alongside migration, the construction of racial groups can change over time and place.

Activity 1: Mapping Migration (*page 10*)

Students will map out and analyze the transcontinental route that many Chinese immigrants took to get to the United States. Can be adapted for grade level.

Activity 2: Forming Folktales (*page 11*)

Students will read the African folktale, "Br'er Rabbit Falls Down the Well," and make connections with *Sugar*. Can be adapted for grade level.

Activity 3: Sketching Storyboards (*page 13*)

Students will create storyboards speculating what happens to the characters after the book ends. Can be adapted for grade level.

Extension Activity: Students (grades 6-7) will conduct research on Chinese immigrants in the American South and write historical fiction stories.



this lesson plan contains:

- Customizable slide deck & student worksheets
- 3 hands-on student activities involving literary analysis
- List of further resources to guide teacher research & preparation

COMMON CORE STANDARDS

This lesson plan fulfills many Common Core standards in the areas of English & Language Arts. See below for a non-exhaustive list. For more information, please visit www.thecorestandards.org.

Grade 3

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.6
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.3.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.3.4

Grade 6

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.6.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.6.9

Grade 4

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.4.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.4.4

Grade 7

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.7.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.7
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.7.9

Grade 5

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.1
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.2
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.5
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.5.9
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.3
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.4
CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.5.9

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PRE-READING ACTIVITY

activity instructions

*Don't forget to download the
all the slides & handouts at
tinyurl.com/msdeltachinese*

1. (5 min) Present the slides to introduce the lesson (slides 1-6). Before reading, first watch the [book trailer video](#) for *Sugar* by Jewell Parker Rhodes. Review the vocabulary and note on language.



2. (10 min) Facilitate a classroom discussion on the following questions:
 1. What do you think of when you hear the word "sugar"?
 2. The main character's name is Sugar. Why do you think she hates sugar?
 3. Sugar says she wasn't supposed to make friends with the Chinese men because "they're different." What do you think "different" means?
 4. Before Sugar's mom died, she told her, "Do. See. Feel." What do you think this means?

VOCABULARY LIST

Sugarcane: the tall plant that is grown to make sugar

Plantation: a large property with farmland that grows crops to sell, such as sugarcane, where enslaved African and Black people were forced to work

Slavery: the business of owning, buying, and selling other human beings, treating them like property instead of people, and forcing them to work for free

Chinese: people who are from China, or whose ancestors are from China

Equal: when two or more people or things have the same value and are balanced

Solidarity: when people join together to support each other and fight for the same goals

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

I. Winter 1870

1. Reread the following excerpts from the book. What ideas did Sugar and the River Road folks have about Chinese people before meeting them?

Still, body swaying, hearing the *whoosh-whoosh* waves, seeing land pass by, the empty cane fields, I feel happy, free. Then I remember Billy's secret about Chinamen crossing the sea.

As if he knew what I was thinking, Billy murmurs, "Won't be long, Sugar. The Chinamen are coming."

The sun hides behind clouds. I can't help it. I shiver.

(Pirate Captains, pg. 36)

I wonder if Chinamen are anything like Africans. I wonder if they'll look like Mister Beale. Or me? Does China have hyenas? Rabbits and lions?

To Mister Wills, Chinamen are important – more important than "less-than-nothing" folks. Better than me?

(Okra for the Chinamen, pg. 63)

2. Reread the following excerpt from the book. How were the River Road folks feeling? What were they worried about?

"Just 'cause slavery's ended doesn't mean blacks, whites are equal," says Mister Wills.

"And Chinamen?" asks Mister Beale. "They equal?"

Mister Wills is surprised, caught off guard. Scowling, River Road folks grumble.

"No disrespect. Will Chinamen help your profit?"

"Yes, Chinamen," booms Mister Wills. "I need workers. Need to expand my crop. Times are hard. During the war, Union soldiers burnt crops. The stable and the mill."

"We gonna lose our jobs?" asks Mister Waters.

"Cane work is all I know," shouts Missus Celeste. "River Road is all I know."

Missus Ellie weeps, "Don't got nobody. Nothing." Reverend comforts her.

(Punishment, pg. 83-84)

a note on language:

Using the term "Chinamen" to refer to **Chinese people** is an outdated and offensive word that is now considered a racial slur. It is important to remind students that, while we may see or hear words like this in historical books and media, we must not say them to or about people in real life. The character, Beau, shows us a simple way to correct people who misuse this term on pg. 125 of *Sugar*.

II. Planting 1871

1. Reread the following excerpt from the book. Review the definition of solidarity. How did the River Road folks and Chinese men work in solidarity?

River Road folks are digging, planting cane. Working hard.

Chinese men are digging, covering cane. Keeping to our pace.

My body feels it first – everyone working in unison.

When the Chinese start to go faster, Master Liu says something only the Chinese can understand. Like pulling reins on horses carting cane, Master Liu is holding his men back. Keeping them from working faster.

Overseer Tom is scowling; he always scowls. Mister Wills is just happy.

The Chinese men won't make us lose our jobs. *I don't know how I know, but I know.*

(Tricksters, pg. 131-132)

2. Reread the following excerpt from the book and answer these questions:

- What is similar and different between the experiences of captured and enslaved Africans (like Mister Beale) and Chinese immigrant workers (like Master Liu)?
- What do you think mournful means and why do you think everybody feels this way?

"You came across the sea? Like Africans?" asks Reverend. "How long?"

Beau's eyes close, like he's unhappy, remembering. "Months. Bad," he says. "Very, very bad. Long journey."

"Mister Beale says Africans came to America chained, starving, and sick. Most weren't born here like me. Did folks die, Beau? Did they?"

Beau nods. "Some wanted to turn back. To go home. Back to China."

"Some did die," says Master Liu, looking straight at Mister Beale. "But we choose to come. Not captured."

Everybody's sad-eyed, mournful.

(Tricksters, pg. 140)

III. Harvest 1871

1. Reread the following work song Sugar wrote and answering these questions:

- What does it mean to "cut-cut" places like China and America, north and south?
- What do you think Sugar means by "If sugar can sail, I can, too"?

*Cut-cut-China. Cut-cut-ocean.
Cut-cut-America. Louisiana, too.
Cut-cut-north. Cut-cut-south.
If sugar can sail, I can, too.*

(Almost Done, pg. 230)

2. Describe how the Chinese men were viewed and treated when they first arrived on the plantation and at the end of the book. What led to these changes?

3. Even though the Chinese and Black people were from different parts of the world, how did they find similarities and share parts of their cultures with each other?

4. Compare and contrast Mister Beale's African folktale about Br'er Rabbit and Hyena (pg. 50-53) with Beau's Chinese folktale about Yellow Dragon (pg. 211-214) and answer these questions:

- How are the two folktales similar and different?
- Why do you think storytelling is important to the characters in the story?
- Do you have, or would you like to start, any storytelling practices? (i.e., bedtime stories, campfire tales, classroom story time, elder storytelling, oral histories, etc.)

5. How does Sugar and Beau's friendship change throughout the book? How does their friendship impact the relationships between everyone else at River Road?

6. How do the characters show solidarity for each other throughout the book? What are some real-life examples of how you can show solidarity with others?

*Don't forget to download the
all the slides & handouts at
tinyurl.com/msdeltachinese*



ACTIVITY 1: MAPPING MIGRATION

learning objectives

Students will be able to:

- Identify the transcontinental route that many Chinese immigrants took to get to the United States
- Consider the personal experiences and risks of Chinese immigrants in their migration journeys

activity instructions

1. (5 min) Present the section of the slide deck for Activity 1 (slides 14–18). Review the background information and vocabulary. Distribute the worksheet for Activity 1.

2. (15 min) Instruct students to follow the directions on the worksheet to identify the Chinese migration route.

1. Draw the route on the map.
2. Either give students computer access to look up the distance in miles between each location or provide them with the information.
3. Instruct students to add up the total distance of miles traveled, using scratch paper or calculators.

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3. (5 min) After completing their maps, instruct students to answer the reflection questions:

1. Why do you think Chinese immigrants made this long journey to come to the United States?
2. What do you think they hoped for?

VOCABULARY LIST

Migration: the movement from one place to another

Immigrant: a person who moves to another country to live permanently

ACTIVITY 2: FORMING FOLKTALES

learning objectives

Students will be able to:

- Interpret an African folktale and related vocabulary
- Identify connections between the characters in the Br'er Rabbit folktale and *Sugar*
- Consider the personal and cultural significance of folktales

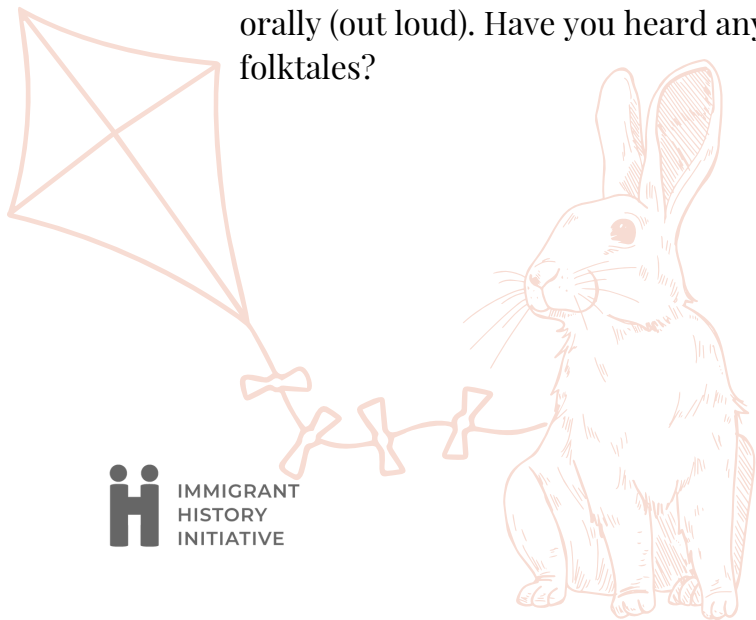
activity instructions

1. (5 min) Present the section of slides for Activity 2 (slides 19-23). Invite students to recall what they read about Br'er Rabbit in *Sugar*. Facilitate a brief classroom discussion on the following questions:
 1. What do you remember about Mister Beale's stories about Br'er Rabbit and Hyena?
 2. **Folktales** are stories that are passed down, usually through telling them orally (out loud). Have you heard any folktales?
2. (10 min) Read the folktale, "Brer Rabbit Falls Down the Well," translated by S.E. Schlosser. Students can take turns reading in a round or popcorn style, or the instructor can read aloud.

Don't forget to download the all the slides & handouts at tinyurl.com/msdeltachinese



Source: American Folklore



3. (20 min) Instruct students to use context clues in the text to brainstorm the meaning of each of the vocabulary words below. Then, review the vocabulary definitions (slides 22-23). Reread the folktale to further consolidate the vocabulary.

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4. (5 min) Facilitate a classroom discussion on the following questions:
1. What words would you use to describe Br'er Rabbit?
 2. What similarities do you notice between the Br'er Rabbit characters and the characters in *Sugar*?
 3. Why do you think people from all over the world tell folktales?
5. (Homework) Instruct students to write their own folktale story about Br'er Rabbit as a take-home assignment.

VOCABULARY LIST

Folktale: a story that is passed down, usually through telling it orally (out loud)

Tote: to carry something heavy

Brush: small trees and shrubs

Debris: loose pieces of natural materials, such as rocks, leaves, and twigs

Briar: prickly shrubs

Infected: affected with a virus or disease

Well: a deep hole filled with drinking water

Plummet: to quickly fall or drop straight down

Rascal: a naughty person

Puzzled: confused

Perk up: to get more energy, to become more cheerful

Score: a large amount of something

Muddy: to make something dirty

ACTIVITY 3: SKETCHING STORYBOARDS

learning objectives

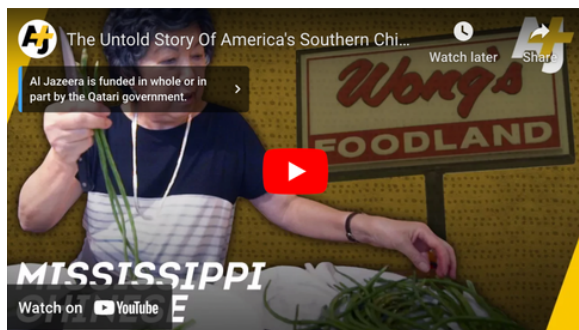
Students will be able to:

- Examine and speculate the trajectory of the characters
- Identify the meaning of historical fiction
- Explore the storytelling process through writing and storyboarding exercises

activity instructions

Don't forget to download the all the slides & handouts at tinyurl.com/msdeltachinese

1. (10 min) Present the section of slides for Activity 3 (slides 24-35). Watch the video, "[The Untold Story of America's Southern Chinese.](#)" Review vocabulary.



2. (5 min) Facilitate a classroom discussion on the following questions:
 1. What are the similarities and differences between the experiences of the Chinese immigrants shown in the video and in the book, *Sugar*?
 2. What examples of **solidarity** between Black and Chinese Southerners did you see in the video?

VOCABULARY LIST

Credit: buying items before paying, with the promise of paying it back later

Chinese Exclusion Act (1882): law that banned Chinese immigrants from the U.S.

Foreigner: someone from another country; stranger, outsider

3. (15 min) After reflecting on the video, prompt students to imagine what life after River Road might have been like for the Chinese characters in *Sugar*. Some may have stayed in the Mississippi Delta to continue working on plantations or open up grocery stores. Others may have left to find new opportunities elsewhere. Instruct students to select one of the following characters for their storyboard sketch: Beau, Master Liu, or Mister Zheng. Have students do an independent free-write imagining what they think happens to their selected character after the book ends, using the following guiding questions:

1. Where does this character go after the book ends? Do they stay or go?
2. What do they want to do? How do they do it?
3. What happens next?

4. (20 min) Distribute the worksheet for Activity 3. Introduce the definition of **storyboard**. Prompt students to imagine that they are writing a story about their selected character. Using the free-write they brainstormed, instruct students to chronologically fill in the blank storyboard with what happens to their selected character after the book ends.

Storyboard: a series of panels with drawings to plan out what happens in a story

Extension Activity

(Grades 6-7)

5. (7 min) Students will expand the storyboard activity into writing their own historical fiction stories. Introduce the definition of **historical fiction**. Watch the video, "[Award winning children's book author Jewell Parker Rhodes discusses historical fiction.](#)"



Historical Fiction:

a type of writing where the story is made-up, but is based on real events that took place in history

6. (50-100 min) Students will spend 1-2 class periods conducting research on the historical background of Chinese immigrants in the American South. Using the author's tips from the video, students will write historical fiction stories about their selected character. This assignment can be completed either in class or as homework.

Resources for students:

- [The Legacy of the Mississippi Delta Chinese \(NPR\)](#)
- [Mississippi Delta Chinese Heritage Museum](#)
- [Far East Deep South Documentary](#)

RESOURCES & READINGS

1. AJ+. "The Untold Story of America's Southern Chinese [Chinese Food: An All-American Cuisine, Pt. 2]." August 16, 2017. Video, 8:20. <https://youtube.com/watch?v=2NMrqGHR5zE>
2. Block, Melissa and Nadworny, Elissa. "The Legacy Of The Mississippi Delta Chinese." *NPR*, March 18, 2017. <https://www.npr.org/2017/03/18/519017287/the-legacy-of-the-mississippi-delta-chinese>
3. Foreman, P. Gabrielle, et al. "Writing About Slavery/Teaching About Slavery: This Might Help." Community-sourced document. Accessed August 8, 2023. <https://www.pgabrielleforeman.com/writing-about-slavery-guide>
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5. Jung, John. *Chopsticks in the Land of Cotton: Lives of Mississippi Delta Chinese Grocers*. Yin & Yang Press, 2008.
6. Jung, Moon-Ho. "Making sugar, making 'coolies': Chinese laborers toiled alongside Black workers on 19th-century Louisiana plantations." *The Conversation*, January 13, 2022. <https://theconversation.com/making-sugar-making-coolies-chinese-laborers-toiled-alongside-black-workers-on-19th-century-louisiana-plantations-173831>
7. Kim, Claire Jean. "The Racial Triangulation of Asian Americans." *Politics and Society* 27, no. 1 (March 1999), <https://library.fes.de/libalt/journals/swetsfulltext/6859319.pdf>
8. Lam, Larissa and Chiu, Baldwin. *Far East Deep South*. Giant Flash Media, 2023. 1 hr, 13 min. <https://fareastdeepsouth.com/>
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10. Lee, Erika. *The Making of Asian America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015.
11. Mississippi Delta Chinese History Museum. "Chinese History in the Mississippi Delta." Accessed August 8, 2023. <https://chineseheritagemuseum.org/>
12. Parker Rhodes, Jewell. *Sugar*. New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2013.
13. Schlosser, S.E. "Brer Rabbit Falls Down the Well." *American Folklore*. Accessed August 8, 2023. <https://www.americanfolklore.net/brer-rabbit-falls-down-the-well/>