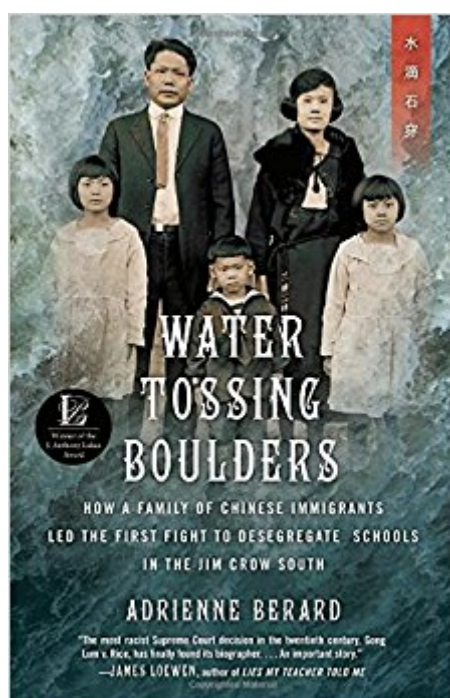


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# Water Tossing Boulders: How A Family Of Chinese Immigrants Led The First Fight To Desegregate Schools In The Jim Crow South



## Synopsis

A generation before *Brown v. Board of Education* struck down America's "separate but equal" doctrine, one Chinese family and an eccentric Mississippi lawyer fought for desegregation in one of the greatest legal battles never told. On September 15, 1924, Martha Lum and her older sister Berda were barred from attending middle school in Rosedale, Mississippi. The girls were Chinese American and considered by the school to be "colored"; the school was for whites. This event would lead to the first US Supreme Court case to challenge the constitutionality of racial segregation in Southern public schools, an astonishing thirty years before the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Unearthing one of the greatest stories never told, journalist Adrienne Berard recounts how three unlikely heroes sought to shape a new South. A poor immigrant from southern China, Jeu Gong Lum came to America with the hope of a better future for his family. Unassuming yet boldly determined, his daughter Martha would inhabit that future and become the face of the fight to integrate schools. Earl Brewer, their lawyer and staunch ally, was once a millionaire and governor of Mississippi. When he took the family's case, Brewer was both bankrupt and a political pariah—a man with nothing left to lose. By confronting the "separate but equal" doctrine, the Lum family fought for the right to educate Chinese Americans in the white schools of the Jim Crow South. Using their groundbreaking lawsuit as a compass, Berard depicts the complicated condition of racial otherness in rural Southern society. In a sweeping narrative that is both epic and intimate, *Water Tossing Boulders* evokes a time and place previously defined by black and white, a time and place that, until now, has never been viewed through the eyes of a forgotten third race. In vivid prose, the Mississippi Delta, an empire of cotton and a bastion of slavery, is reimagined to reveal the experiences of a lost immigrant community. Through extensive research in historical documents and family correspondence, Berard illuminates a vital, forgotten chapter of America's past and uncovers the powerful journey of an oppressed people in their struggle for equality.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“In an engaging bit of social history, Berard rescues a forgotten part of Southern history and brings it to light, offering readers a rare glimpse into Chinese immigrant life and the way segregation affected so many for decades. Flush with telling details and backed by meticulous research, a piece of near-forgotten Chinese-American history is retold.” —Kirkus

“Surely the most racist Supreme Court decision in the twentieth century, *Gong Lum v. Rice* has finally found its biographer. Adrienne Berard, who lives about twenty miles from where it all happened, has unearthed fresh facts and brought them to life to tell an important

story.” —James Loewen, author of *Lies My Teacher Told Me* “With luminous prose and intricate research, Adrienne Berard has preserved an undeservedly forgotten battle in the struggle for racial equality...In Berard’s skilled and supple hands, the past speaks

eloquently to our American present.” —Samuel G. Freedman, author of *Breaking the Line: The Season in Black College Football That Transformed the Sport and Changed the Course of Civil Rights* “The human rights lessons offered up by the American South seem endless, and

Adrienne Berard has found a story that further universalizes our national drama of rights pitted against power. The failed landmark desegregation battle of the Chinese-immigrant Lum family to enable their daughter to attend a white-only school in the Mississippi

Delta might be called forgotten history if it hadn’t been virtually invisible in the first place. Which makes Berard’s exquisitely lush reconstruction of this liminal world remarkable as well as revelatory.” —Diane McWhorter, Pulitzer Prize

winning author of *Carry Me Home: Birmingham, Alabama, the Climactic Battle of the Civil Rights Revolution* “How could this chapter of history have remained buried for so long? Here is the shocking September day two Chinese American girls are sent home from school; and here, too, is a

family’s resolute fight to send them back—a fight that is heartbreakingly bungled all the way to the Supreme Court. Gripping, evocative, and packed with irony upon irony, *Water Tossing Boulders* is a page-turner to boot. Bravo!” —Gish Jen, author of *The Girl at*

the Baggage Claim: A Tale of Two Selves

“This book about the Lum family’s historic challenge before the US Supreme Court is an eloquent and needed reminder that the prejudice that drives racism and the courage to resist it know no ethnic boundaries.”

Paula J. Giddings, author of *Ida, a Sword Among Lions: Ida B. Wells and the Campaign Against Lynching*

Adrienne Berard is an award-winning journalist and graduate of Columbia University’s Graduate School of Journalism. She has been the Writer-in-Residence at Delta State University in Mississippi and now resides in Williamsburg, Virginia.

I accidentally stumbled upon this book. Since I actually live in Rosedale and I’m very interested in the history of Rosedale and Bolivar County, I chose to read it. I was not disappointed. I only knew vague details about the lawsuit. This book filled me in on the details and the outcome. It also gave me much insight into Rosedale and the smaller communities in the area. I can visualize the places the Lums and others lived, “follow” the walks to school and see some of the places of business described. Segregation tore apart many more lives than most people realize. I highly recommend this read for the story of the Lum’s lives and the history and detail of the area. Many thanks to the author for her work.

Excellent book describing context of first lawsuit against white only schooling in Mississippi in the 20s. Remarkable story of Chinese having the courage to bring a law suit and although they lost the suit was background for Thurgood Marshall and the Brown vs Board of Ed. that did end segregation. This story proves that immigrants and the “little person” can make a very large difference, even if not easily or quickly. Should be required reading for students. Authorised great research.

I have learned a great deal from this book ! Thank you !

*Water Tossing Boulders* is not only a fascinating story and piece of our history but entertaining as well. Ms. Berard does an outstanding job of developing characters, relaying facts and moving the reader to a place where they can relate to the family and the South. She is a literary genius and I hope she continues to share her talents again.

Excellent story about a little known part of our history. Loved the attention to detail; author clearly

followed every lead to make each situation real.

Very interesting & I found it very accurate as I am from the delta & have heard the stories from other sources!

I love these snapshots of history that are largely forgotten but make you see the period in an entirely different way. In *Water Tossing Boulders* (I don't recall seeing the explanation for that odd title), we learn about a lawsuit filed by a Chinese couple in Mississippi in 1924. Their daughters, who had attended the local elementary school for a year, were told at the beginning of the next school year that they were no longer allowed to attend. They had to go to the school for black children. The schools for black children were substandard by every measure and they were not accredited. The Lums wanted their children to have the opportunities that going to the white school would afford. It seems like a slam dunk case, but not in Mississippi, and not in 1924. In fact, although it was clear to the lawyer they took the case to and eventually, to the associate justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, that theirs was a winnable case. How the case eventually failed is an infuriatingly sad tale of ineptitude and bad luck. The book is short at only 146 pages of text (plus a slew of end notes and a cracking bibliography) and rounds out the tale of the Lums with background on life for Chinese immigrants in the Mississippi Delta and the stories of the lawyers who handled (or mishandled) the case. A well-researched and powerful bit of history.

Wow I'm so happy to see my family's story being told. The very nice author contacted and visited us 2 years ago for pictures and details. My grandmother Martha used to sit and comb my hair while telling me about her childhood. I am very proud of my family and the strength they had. My family received no monetary payments, just the honor of having our story published. This court case the last I heard is used at Harvard for law students. Thank you to Adrian for capturing this and thank you to everyone who reads it.

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