STANFORD UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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THE JAPANESE QUESTION:
SAN FRANCISCO EDUCATION IN 1906[1]

On October 11, 1906, a policy adopted by the San Francisco Board of Education intending to restrict Japanese students to 'Oriental schools' in San Francisco, created a national and international attention. On this day, the San Francisco Board of Education directed that school principals in San Francisco to send "all Chinese, Japanese and Korean children to the newly formed Oriental School."[2] While Chinese students had historically been excluded and segregated from San Francisco schools, this policy marked the first time that the segregation of Japanese students was enforced by school officials in San Francisco. This abrupt change in school policy angered Japanese individuals both locally and abroad in Japan: Japanese officials argued that the policy violated the Treaty of 1894, granting Japanese in the United States the same rights as U.S. citizens. The tensions caused by the newly adopted policy risked disrupting President Roosevelt's foreign policy objectives with Japan, a growing military power. Thus, what began as a local school segregation issue soon created a national and international controversy.

Historical Background

Japanese laborers began arriving to the California in the late 1880s after the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 essentially halted the immigration of laborers from China. While Chinese laborers began immigrating to the United States during the California Gold Rush in the early 1850s, the Japanese government held a strict isolation policy during this time. Despite growing external pressure for trade relations from European countries, the United States and Russia virtually no trade or immigration out of Japan had occurred until 1868 when the ruling Japanese government fell due to heavy political pressure. After the fall,

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[2] Wollenberg, 1976.

in the 1870s, American entrepreneurs immediately began to recruit contract laborers from Japan to work in agriculture fields and replace Chinese workers. Anti-Chinese sentiment in the United States had risen significantly and some thought Japanese laborers may be a better fit to work in the fields. In 1885, the first ship of Japanese laborers headed for Hawaii, then a territory of the United States, signified a new era of Japanese immigration to the United States. In the following decades, after the Chinese Exclusion Act prevented a new wave of Chinese laborers to fill industry demands, Japanese laborers were leaving for California and Hawaii in more significant numbers. As seen in the table below, the Japanese population in California increased dramatically in the beginning of the 20th century. At the same time, the population of Chinese stabilized after the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the Chinese population in California had grown exponentially from 1850-1880, from a population of 500 to more than 75,000.

*Population of Japanese and Chinese in California, and San Francisco, 1870-1900**

Year	California	San Francisco
1880		
Chinese	75,218	21,790
Japanese	86	45
1890		
Chinese	72,472	25,833
Japanese	1,147	590
1900		
Chinese	35,746	*n/a*
Japanese	10,151	1,781
1910		
Chinese	*n/a*	*n/a*
Japanese	41,000**	*n/a*

*Table prepared from U.S. Census Reports. Please note that in the 1910 Census, Indians, Chinese and Japanese were counted together. In 1910, there were 96,232 Indians, Chinese and Japanese in California and 15,256 in San Francisco.
** This number is an approximation taken from Thompson, 1931.

The Arrival of Japanese in San Francisco

While most Japanese in California worked in agriculture as contract laborers, in San Francisco, many Japanese opened businesses and restaurants. Japanese individuals lived in many different neighborhoods across the city and did not occupy a distinct ethnic enclave like the Chinese who were predominantly living in Chinatown. However, while they settled in different areas across the city, there were still some small clusters of Japanese families living in the South of Market Street area (SOMA) and near Chinatown.

Since the Japanese first immigrated to California after a climate of anti-Chinese sentiment, upon arrival they were looked at much more favorably than Chinese. One significant difference between the Chinese and Japanese immigrant populations was

demographics. The Japanese laborers were more likely to bring their families to settle in the United States than Chinese. In the 1880s, the Chinese were by in large a bachelor society, a population of predominantly male laborers. When they had first arrived in the United States, they were considered sojourners, or temporary visitors planning to return to China. Most wives of Chinese laborers remained in China. Since the laborers were seen as sojourners, Chinese were characterized as foreigners in society, inassimilable to American ways. Most Chinese lived In Chinatown, an isolated section of the city where few outsiders ventured. To non-Chinese, Chinatown, overcrowded with bachelors, was seen as a place of rampant gambling, prostitution and drugs. The few Chinese children who lived in Chinatown were thought to "live amidst immorality and debauchery."[3]

On the other hand, Japanese families in California came to the United States ready to build new lives for themselves. Because they did not intend to return to Japan, many Japanese readily adopted American customs and wore Western clothes. They also built social networks and organizations. By 1898, Japanese social and religious groups such as the YMCA, Japanese Methodist and Presbyterian churches were growing.[4] However, although they were assimilating into American ways, Japanese were excluded by United States law from becoming naturalized citizens. The Naturalization Act of 1870 that gave African-Americans the right to become naturalized citizens was not extended to include Asian immigrants such as Japanese and Chinese. This meant that although some Japanese lived most of their lives in the United States, they were still legally Japanese nationals and thus the responsibility of the Japanese government.

Segregation in San Francisco Schools

Most Japanese students attended the neighborhood schools closest to their homes. Because Japanese families lived all over the city, there was not a high concentration of Japanese students in any given school. In 1906, there were 93 Japanese students in 23 different elementary schools. Of these, only 2 schools had a population of more than 6 students. Although as far back as 1893 there was a policy established to create separate schools for Japanese children, it was never enforced due to lack of funds and the relatively small numbers of Japanese students in public schools. Japanese students were permitted to attend public schools as long as the parents of the white students did not object and there were was space in the school. Principals were only responsible to keep a list of Japanese students for the Superintendent's records. As far as Japanese students were concerned in the public schools, no complaints were officially recorded by principals, teachers, or parents of non-Japanese. In fact, one teacher had said that "they were among the very best of their pupils, cleanly in their persons, well-behaved, studious, and remarkably bright."[5]

While Japanese students attended neighborhood schools in San Francisco, Chinese students were segregated in the public school system. In 1885, the Chinese Primary

[3] Wollenberg, 1976.
[4] Japantown Task Force, 2005.
[5] Takaki, 1989.

School opened in Chinatown on a legal foundation after a court case decision mandated that Chinese students had the right to attend public schools in San Francisco. For fifteen years preceding this court decision, Chinese students had been excluded from San Francisco public schools altogether. The Superintendent of San Francisco schools at that time believed that the association of Chinese and white children would be demoralizing mentally and morally to white children.[6] Although segregation of schools on the basis of race was a practice that was well-established in many areas of the United States, in San Francisco, Chinese were the only racial group legally segregated in public schools. The "colored school," established in San Francisco in 1854 for African-American students, was abolished in 1875 due to the high operating costs of separate educational facilities.[7] African-American students were allowed to attend desegregated public schools.

Anti-Oriental Sentiment

As the Japanese population in California grew, Japanese immigrants began to inherit much of the anti-Oriental feelings that had long been long directed towards the Chinese. In the 1870s, during a time of economic depression in California, labor unions complained that the cheap Chinese labor was driving down wages significantly. Since these foreigners were willing to accept lower wages than white workers, Chinese were charged with causing wages in all occupations to decrease. Additionally, many societal problems were subsequently blamed on the rise of Chinese laborers. As a result, labor unions used their political power to influence politicians and create a hostile environment for Chinese immigrants in California. Anti-Chinese sentiment became a popular platform to run on for local and state politicians after Dennis Kearney's popularized his campaign slogan – "The Chinese Must Go!" in 1878. Kearney, running as a member of the Workingmen's Party, won elections based on a platform pledging anti-Chinese support – with labor unions representing his largest support base. Anti-Chinese sentiment in the 1870s, largely fueled by the powerful influence of labor unions, led to the passage of Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882.

With the rise of Japanese immigration in the early 1900s, anti-Orientalism was rekindled and targeted at the new imminent threat to white laborers -- Japanese. Organized labor unions again worried about job competition, low wages, and a new "yellow vigilance,"[8] and blamed social and economic ills on the Japanese. White laborers held the same argument for Japanese as they did Chinese: they feared that the increasing Japanese immigrant population would create too much job competition and undercut their wages. Also contributing to this anxiety was the large population of Japanese in Hawaii during this time. The high percentage of Japanese in Hawaii caused fear among Californians that the state would also be overrun by Japanese laborers if immigration was not halted. In addition, many Japanese laborers in Hawaii were coming to California instead of going back to Japan after their contracts had expired in Hawaii.

[6] Wollenberg, 1976.
[7] Hendrick, 1971.
[8] Wollenberg, 1976.

To some, the threat of Japanese labor was even greater than the Chinese. Since Japanese were better able to adopt American ways, they were seen by some as more threatening because this trait allowed them to be more industrious and competitive in the market. While their ability to assimilate was looked upon highly when they first arrived, as anti-Orientalism escalated, it was used against them as white laborers feared that Japanese may overrun the state in the United States if something was not done.

By the early 1900s, leaders of labor unions who still held much clout with local politicians, started pushing for measures to be taken against Japanese. In 1901, San Francisco Mayor Schmitz was elected on a platform which advocated, among other areas, that "all Asiatics, both Chinese and Japanese, be educated separately from other children in schools exclusively for themselves."[9] Although no immediate action was taken on this matter, Schmitz's election revealed a growing re-emergence of anti-Oriental sentiment.

The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League

On February 23, 1905, the *San Francisco Chronicle* formally launched an anti-Japanese campaign by printing a several feature articles on Japanese immigration fueled with anti-Japanese ideas. The underlying objective behind the media campaign is unclear. Some say that it was a move to rival competition with the *San Francisco Examiner.* Another explanation was that the proprietor of the *San Francisco Chronicle,* was hoping the issue would result in a political nomination, as previous politicians had run on anti-Oriental agendas successfully. In any case, the anti-Japanese newspaper articles filled with racial antagonism aroused and excited public opinion and resistance towards Japanese immigrants.

On May 7, 1905, a mass meeting was held to launch a new organization -- The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League. This organization was primarily concerned with the segregation and exclusion of Japanese since the Korean population at that time was extremely small. In 1905, there were only 3 Korean students in San Francisco public schools. The organization was spearheaded by labor union activist Olaf A. Tveitmoe, editor of the publication Organized Labor and Secretary-Treasurer of the San Francisco Building Trades Council. Ironically, Tveitmoe was himself, an immigrant from Sweden.

In addition to Tveitmoe, the other officers and members of the organization were also active in the labor movement. The ultimate goal of the organization was the exclusion of Asiatic immigrants by legislative enactment. In one year, they rapidly expanded in membership starting new chapters all over California and other states. The members of the organization believed that "the Caucasian and Asiatic races are unassimilable and the preservation of the Caucasian race upon American soil…necessitates the adoption of all possible measures to prevent or minimize the immigration of Asiatics to America."[10]

[9] Bailey, 1934.
[10] Takaki, 1989.

The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League adopted the following resolutions on May 14, 1905:

1. that the Chinese Exclusion Act be extended to include Japanese and Koreans
2. that members of the League should not employ or patronize any person or firm employing Japanese
3. that the action of the School Board in adopting a policy of segregating Japanese from white children, be urged
4. that a propaganda campaign calling the attention to the President and Congress to "this menace" be taken.[11]

As a first step in their agenda, the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League began repeatedly petitioning for the enforcement of the 1893 law to segregate Japanese in separate schools. They appeared before the School Board many times in 1905 in mass numbers to show support against Japanese in public schools. However, because of funding issues, the School Board had to continually dismiss these pleas. Although the Board agreed with the practice of segregation, construction of a new facility to accommodate just 93 Japanese students was neither practical nor economically feasible.

"The Great San Francisco Earthquake"

On April 18, 1906, a catastrophic 8.5 earthquake struck San Francisco. The city was on fire for three days and over 500 blocks in the center of the city were destroyed. Conservative estimates account for a death toll of 3,000 in San Francisco, but other estimates are as high as 6,000. In addition, nearly 300,000 residents were left homeless due to property damage. San Francisco Chinatown, which was located close to the downtown area, was almost completed destroyed in the fire during the ensuing days. As a result, many Chinese earthquake refugees fled to temporary camps that were set up in other areas of the city. Others decided to resettle since much of the damage caused by the earthquake would take months to rebuild.

The Chinese Primary School, the separate facility legally mandated for Chinese students in San Francisco, took six months to rebuild. When the school reopened in October of 1906, it was only at half capacity since many of the Chinese had left the area after the earthquake. San Francisco Superintendent Roncovieri realized that the vacancies could be used for the 93 Japanese students and the few Korean students who were enrolled in other schools in the city. Superintendent Roncovieri had been receiving much pressure from Tveitmoe and The Japanese and Korean Exclusion league to segregate public school facilities and he realized that this was an opportune time to enforce a school policy.

With the cooperation from the Board of Education, a school policy was quickly adopted on October 11, 1906. The resolution passed, stating the following:

"Resolved, that in accordance with Article X, Section 1662, of the School Law of California, principals are herby directed to send all Chinese, Japanese, or Korean children

[11] Thompson, 1931.

to the Oriental Public School, situation on the south side of Clay Street, between Powell and Mason Streets, on and after Monday, October 15, 1906.[12]

This policy renamed the Chinese Primary School as The Oriental Public School, and was an attempt to extend the school law that was already in existence for Chinese to Japanese. This policy solved both the low enrollment and capacity issue at the Chinese Primary School and appeased The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League whom had been exerting much pressure on the School Board and Superintendent Roncovieri in recent years.

Local and International Attention to Japanese Segregation in Schools

While the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League commended the School Board's actions and urged educational authorities in other states to follow suit, this sudden enactment of a policy by the School Board immediately angered local Japanese. The Japanese valued the education system very highly. In Japan, education was compulsory for all and the educational level and literacy rates among Japanese in California were very high. Because they valued education, they resented a school policy that offered what they felt was a less than adequate education. Accustomed to attending neighborhood schools, they also found the policy problematic as the Oriental Public School in Chinatown proved to be far from where many Japanese families lived. With limited transportation to Chinatown after the earthquake, many students could not even get to the Oriental Public School. This policy invoked much anger and passion in Japanese parents, causing them to petition before the School Board.

When Japanese were ineffective in bringing about a local settlement with the School Board, they initiated a legal suit. Many Japanese claimed that the segregation of Japanese in schools went against the Treaty of 1894 governing commercial relations between Japan and the United States. Although the treaty did not mention the right to the same education explicitly, the treaty did accord Japanese in the United States equal rights. In addition, Japanese individuals filed formal complaints with the Japanese Consul, K. Uyeno, and the Japanese Ambassador in Washington, Viscount Aoki, about this discrimination. Japanese community members met to determine strategies to best protest what they saw as an unfair and unjust policy.

The most effective technique used was the efforts aimed at invoking media attention in Japan to combat the discrimination in California. A member of the Japanese Association in San Francisco wired newspapers in Japan to inform them about the problems Japanese faced in San Francisco schools. Leading newspapers throughout Japan devoted editorials to the subject and aroused public opinion; many people insisted that the Japanese minister take a strong stand against these acts. Public meetings were also held in Japan to make a demonstration. Newspapers accounts widely attacked the United States for what was interpreted as an insult to their national pride and honor. Articles in the Tokyo newspapers were sensationalized and caused near hysteria in the days that ensued.

[12] Thompson, 1931.

While Chinese and Japanese were considered akin to each other in the United States, in Japan, Japanese were insulted by this comparison. One newspaper reported: "Japan has been wounded in her tenderest spot – her national pride. The Japanese regard themselves as the equals of any other people on earth. They believe themselves to be superior, intellectually, morally, and in every other way, to the Chinese. Anything which tends to place them on a level with the Chinese before the world is degrading and humiliating to them, and they will resent it."[13]

In addition, as a rising international military power, the Japanese government was highly concerned about their reputation overseas. Japan had just emerged victorious from the Russo-Japanese war in 1905 and had revealed their strength as a military power. Japan's presence as a military power brought international attention as it was the first time in modern years that an Eastern power was victorious over a Western nation. Japan wanted to protect their national image and saw Japanese in the United States as an important reflection of their national pride. As previously mentioned, without the right to naturalize, Japanese immigrants in the United States were still considered Japanese nationals and under their political jurisdiction. The Japanese government sought equitable treatment of Japanese in California to protect their pride.

This international controversy gained much media attention in the United States as well. With the School Board decision was driven largely by labor activists, some leading educators such as David Starr Jordan of Stanford University and the Superintendent of Los Angeles publicly spoke out in support of Japanese students and condemned their segregation in San Francisco public schools. In Los Angeles, the Superintendent explained that "Japanese students are given every opportunity to attend school that American boys and girls have. We find them quiet and industrious in their school work and such good students that our principals and teachers believe them to have a most helpful influence upon the other pupils with whom they associate."[14] David Starr Jordan also contended that Japanese students are "intelligent, docile, and clean – more so than the average children of most European immigrants – and no patrons of the schools have complained of their presence."[15] However, their public pledges of support against the segregation of Japanese students were overshadowed by widespread public hysteria that the event causing international tension would result in Japanese retaliation and possibly erupt into war.

On October 22, 1906, the American Ambassador in Tokyo informed Washington officials that a potential crisis was at hand.[16] Three days later, the Japanese Ambassador in Washington met with United States Secretary of State Elihu Root to discuss the situation at hand. After the conference, the Cabinet also held an emergency meeting to assess the severity of this situation. It was clear that Japan was concerned and insulted by the treatment of Japanese in San Francisco. President Roosevelt, who was involved as the

[13] Johnson, 1971.
[14] Johnson, 1971.
[15] Johnson, 1971.
[16] Wollenberg, 1976.

mediator between Japan and Russia in the Russo-Japanese War, was determined to do everything possible to keep "friendly" and "courteous" relations with Japan to avoid a confrontation and preserve a balance of power in that part of the world. Roosevelt wanted to prevent further Russian expansion in the Far East. The issue had quickly escalated from a local policy to an international dilemma risking interference with President Roosevelt's foreign policy goals; it was necessary for the President to intervene.

The Federal Government Intervenes

In regards to this situation at hand, President Roosevelt had three main objectives: to convince Japan that the sentiment in California did not reflect the feeling of the country as a whole, to compel the San Francisco School Board to withdraw its' segregation order, and to reach a solution to the Japanese immigration problem. He immediately began exerting pressure on the local San Francisco School Board to rescind the school policy for Japanese students. In an unprecedented move, he sent the Secretary of Commerce and Labor, Victor Metcalf, to investigate the matter in San Francisco firsthand and try to persuade the School Board during his visit to withdraw the Order. Metcalf visited California in December to intimidate the School Board and made a full report to President Roosevelt upon his return. He noted the small number of Japanese school children who were actually affected by the policy (93 students). Although his visit was informative, he was unable to accomplish the mission of overturning the school policy for Japanese. However, he did learn it was apparent that local officials were seeking a larger objective: Japanese exclusion.

Since the San Francisco officials were not budging, the President took the opportunity during his annual address to Congress to discuss the San Francisco School Board situation. In his speech, Roosevelt condemned the actions of the San Francisco School Board and policy in order to humiliate the local San Francisco officials. He also was careful to commend the Japanese government for their rapid economic and military growth and advancement. He later writes that his attempt was "To show all possible consideration for the Japanese, so as to soothe their wounded feelings and if possible get them into a frame of mind in consequence of which we may be able to get some mutual agreement between Japan and the United States reciprocally to keep the laborers of each country from the other.[17] Roosevelt sent a copy of his speech to officials in Japan in the hopes that the speech would please them. The speech claimed to have been applauded by Japanese officials.

Finally, Roosevelt took legal action again local school officials in San Francisco as well. During his speech, he called on the Attorney General to begin to take court action against the Board of Education in San Francisco. He hoped that this extreme measure would cause the local San Francisco government to withdraw the policy. However, President

[17] Bailey, 1934.

Roosevelt, seeking to alleviate the situation quickly, hoped for a diplomatic rather than legal solution.[18]

Despite these efforts, the local school board in San Francisco, the San Francisco Mayor, and the California Governor would all remained firm in their stance until something was done to mitigate further immigration from Japan. The local officials were also receiving strong pressure from labor unions and political supporters virtually forcing them not to budge. Thus, to end this standstill, in January of 1907, President Roosevelt invited Superintendent Roncovieri, School Board President Lawrence Walsh, the members of the Board of Education, and San Francisco Mayor Schmitz to Washington D.C. Throughout the beginning of February, these individuals met together with President Roosevelt and his Cabinet in order to resolve these issues. Mayor Schmitz was a key individual in the negotiation as he had appointed the majority of the School Board and was receiving much pressure from his friends on The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League.

The Gentleman's Agreement

On February 15, 1907, the parties announced a settlement: San Francisco schools would admit Japanese students to public schools so long as President Roosevelt could ensure that Japan would halt immigration of laborers to the United States. President Roosevelt consulted the Japanese government for further action. The Japanese government, wanting to protect their national pride, did not want to suffer the humiliation of a formal and legal exclusion from the United States like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Thus, they agreed to stop issuing passports to Japanese laborers bound for the United States mainland the following year. This agreement was formalized by a note from the Japanese government in 1908 outlining the mutual understanding. The Gentleman's Agreement was thus a formal agreement between Japan and the United States and was not written into federal law. However, it was still successful in accomplishing the goals of The Japanese and Korean Exclusion League as it prevented further immigration of Japanese laborers. This agreement was followed by the San Francisco School Board's formal withdrawal of the school segregation order for Japanese students on March 13, 1907. Japanese students were again allowed to attend their neighborhood schools as before.

This school controversy that led to international attention was significant historically and politically. Historically, the Gentleman's Agreement began the practice of excluding Japanese laborers to the United States that continued until 1965. In 1924, the Gentleman's Agreement was superseded by the 1924 Immigration Act which legally barred all Asians from entering the United States for the next forty years. Politically, this local and international event was also a precursor of the growing tension and fragile relationship between the United States and Japan in the first half of the 20th century. These tensions are later played out in the Second World War.

[18] Wollenberg, 1976.

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