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My Generation Will Never Forget:
Oral Histories of Chinese American Students in “Separate but Equal” Oriental Schools

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If we are lucky, the end of the sentence is where we might begin. If we are lucky, something is passed on, another alphabet written in the blood, sinew, and neuron; ancestors charging their kin with the silent propulsion to fly south, to turn toward the place in the narrative no one was meant to outlast.

—Ocean Vuong, *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*

Abstract

Asian Americans occupy a contradictory position in the American educational landscape, at once glorified for their academic success and vilified for their “invasion” of White academic spaces. This narrative first took root in the 19th century, when the California Supreme Court ruled in the 1885 case *Tape v. Hurley* that Chinese American youth had a right to public education. Simultaneously, the state legislature declared that Chinese Americans must be educated in separate facilities from Whites. The first segregated “Oriental school” opened in San Francisco Chinatown that year. This study explores the oft-erased history of Asian American school segregation in San Francisco and the nearby Sacramento Delta through twelve oral history interviews with Chinese American alumni of Oriental schools. Put into conversation with each other, their oral histories show how racism permeated their schooling experiences, exemplified by school demographics, English-only rules, and student-teacher dynamics. Narrators’ nuanced memories and emotions about their Oriental school experiences further reveal the deep personal impact of segregation. Drawing on these firsthand accounts, and informed by Orientalism and racial triangulation theory, I argue that Oriental schools are an essential case study for understanding how the U.S. educational system creates and reinforces Asian American racial identities.

Keywords: school segregation, Oriental schools, Asian American education

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This study was built by the contributions of oral history narrators, interviewers, and family historians in the Chinese American community. I would especially like to express my gratitude to Ron Chan, May Tom-Chan, Al Chan, Sharon Wong Fong, Lynne Hasz, my uncle Grant, my uncle Byron, and my aunts, Auntie E and Auntie Lou. I am honored that you entrusted me with your stories and connections. Finally, I am grateful to my family, who inspired me to take on this research and appear throughout the study in both overt and implicit ways. This thesis would not have been possible without you.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

During my college summers, I lived with my grandma. After our improvised dinners of Chinese and American dishes, she would tell me stories about her childhood in rural California. One time, she mentioned that she went to a segregated school.

A segregated school? I had learned about those in history class, but only in relation to Black students and the American South. “Oh, sure, the Oriental school,” my grandma said. It was no big deal to her—the entire town of Walnut Grove, where she grew up, was already segregated. Asians were on one side; Whites were on the other. That was just the way it was.

Segregation was normal, and even helped strengthen her sense of community in certain ways. Surrounded by Chinese neighbors and friends, she picked up several Cantonese dialects when she was young. She didn’t visit the doctor but said that her father could write prescriptions for strategically placed Tiger Balm that could cure any ailment. Like most of her classmates, her main after-school activity was to return home and help her parents work; in her case, that meant making noodles at the restaurant below their home. Set against this context, I could understand why segregation felt unexceptional, and I didn’t ask further questions.

Of course, there is more to the story. My grandma’s experience in segregated schools was shared by Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, and other Asian American students across the Sacramento Delta, a string of rural towns along the Sacramento River in Northern California. It was also shared in San Francisco, the epicenter of the early Chinese population in America and, uncoincidentally, of the earliest anti-Asian movements. Segregation of Asian Americans continued as far east as Rosedale, Mississippi, where a young Chinese American girl named Martha Lum was the plaintiff in “the first U.S. 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” (Berard, 2016, n.p.). But these students’ stories have been erased from the record: they do not fit into the tidy image of Asian American upward mobility, nor the limiting framework of the Black-White racial binary.

What did these students experience at their segregated schools? Did they feel the weight of legalized discrimination? Harbor resentment towards the White students? Understand that they were not considered true Americans? Or were they relieved to be surrounded by classmates who shared their heritage, knew what it was like to have parents that didn’t speak English, and wouldn’t make fun of their eyes? Perhaps the truth lay at neither extreme, but somewhere in the ambiguous middle. After my grandma passed away, I wished that I had asked her.

Statement of the Problem

Upon hearing the phrase “separate but equal” from the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*, most people rightfully think of Black Americans who were relegated to inferior train cars, public schools, and other facilities. While it is true that Black Americans were the primary targets of this racism, fewer people know that Asian Americans were also singled out for school segregation in the *Plessy* era. As a review of the literature for this study revealed, the history of these segregated “Oriental schools” has remained hidden, rarely appearing in educational studies, United States history, or Asian American history texts. It is necessary to explore the effects of school segregation on Black American students, but by omitting Asian American students from this narrative, the discourse about civil rights and educational equity reifies a Black-White racial binary. This deepens Asian Americans’ “ambiguous position” in the U.S. racial landscape and renders Asian American students invisible (Okiihiro, 1994, p. 53). This invisibility is worsened by the model minority myth, a contemporary stereotype that portrays Asian Americans as universally successful. In educational contexts, this myth has led to an

overemphasis on investigating Asian American educational achievement, and an underemphasis on understanding the challenges that Asian American students have faced across history.

Background and Need

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said writes, “In many ways my study of Orientalism has been an attempt to inventory the traces upon me, the Oriental subject, of the culture whose domination has been so powerful a factor in the life of all Orientals” (p. 33). This study is my own attempt to “inventory” and make sense of the interaction between segregation, schooling, and racial identity for Asian Americans. I highlight Oriental schools as a case study for understanding the invisibility of Asian Americans in the Black-White racial dichotomy of U.S. history. Within this case study, I focus on Chinese Americans, the earliest and most denigrated targets of school segregation amongst Asian Americans.

Chinese immigrants were the first group in U.S. history to be barred from entry on the basis of race, with the passage of the Page Act in 1875 and the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 (Lee, 2015). In 1885, facing an imminent California State Supreme Court decision that allowed Chinese and Chinese American children the right to education, the California State Senate hastily passed a bill endorsing “separate but equal” schools so as not to “abandon the education of our [White] children to provide that of the Chinese who are thrusting themselves upon us” (*Evening Bulletin*, 1885, as cited in Wollenberg, 1978, p. 41). In recent years, a small number of scholars and community members have attempted to chronicle this history. Still, their scholarship has leaned heavily on the legal documents attached to a few exceptional cases in which Chinese American families challenged school discrimination in court. With access to White, English-speaking lawyers, these families were not representative of the majority of Chinese Americans; moreover, the families were largely unsuccessful, so the paper trails left by their cases tell the

stories of the racist victors. As Kuo (1998) writes in one such review of these documents: “With limited historical texts based on school reports written by biased school officials, newspaper articles, and discriminatory statutes, *the story about exclusion and segregation omits the voice of the Chinese American community from their own perspective* [emphasis added]” (p. 212). As a result of these overlapping erasures—Oriental schools from U.S. history, and Chinese Americans from their own narratives—little is known about what Chinese American youth experienced during their time as Oriental school students.

Purpose of the Study

I seek to advance scholarship on Oriental schools in two ways. First, I answer Kuo’s (1998) call to action, when she wrote that she hoped to “encourage more research and analysis in order to fully understand the complete picture of almost a century of discrimination against Chinese Americans” in schools (p. 212). Through new oral history interviews with two Oriental school alumni, plus an analysis of ten existing interviews, I center the voices of Chinese Americans and facilitate the sharing of their stories. Though I cannot unwrite the laws that vilified Chinese Americans, I can use my platform as an educator, learner, and activist to preserve our history. I can also draw upon the power of community collaboration: for this thesis, I worked with the Chinese Historical Society of America, the Center for Sacramento History, and the Isleton Historical Society, in the formerly segregated town of Isleton, CA. Sharing my research with these organizations will allow Chinese American community members and the public at large to learn from this study’s narrators.

Second, I connect the history of Oriental school segregation to the broader school segregation context. I explore what Oriental schools and Chinese American students can teach us about Asian Americans’ racial identity in the U.S., and about the way that U.S. schooling

operates to create racial hierarchies. I also explore whether Oriental schools can be viewed as a project of both anti-Asianness and anti-Blackness and how this dynamic is part of the ongoing legitimization of White supremacy through schooling.

Research Questions

The principal question for this study is: What were the experiences of Chinese Americans in Oriental schools? Following this, I sought to explore how the nuances of these subjective experiences support or challenge dominant historical narratives.

More broadly, I sought to understand: What can Chinese American students' experiences in Oriental schools teach us about how the U.S. educational system creates and influences Asian American racial identity? What can these students' experiences teach us about the role of White supremacy and anti-Blackness in schooling?

Theoretical Framework

To ground the theoretical framework for this study, I begin with Edward Said's (1978) theory of Orientalism, which posits that Western conceptions of Asia and Asians have rarely been based in facts. Rather, the concept of the backwards "Orient" was invented as a foil to the progressive "Occident," and used by Western powers to maintain an imperialist "upper hand" (p. 15). By this definition, both the West and the East are social constructions designed with the ultimate goal of subjugating "Orientals" in a variety of ways—politically, socially, philosophically, economically, academically, and in aesthetic culture and the arts. It is not a coincidence that during the height of anti-Asian rhetoric in America, Asians were called "Orientals," and the segregated schools that isolated and shamed Asian American students were called "Oriental schools." Said was Palestinian; his writing drew from his upbringing in the British colonies of Palestine, Egypt, and the United States. Yet his framework is a useful

foundation for understanding how Orientalism in all its forms is part of a greater imperial-colonial project of oppression.

Claire Jean Kim's (1999) theory of racial triangulation brings these entanglements to light. By examining the specific ways that Asian Americans have been racialized *in relation to* White and Black Americans, Kim localizes Said's Orientalism. Kim posits that Asian Americans have been "racially triangulated" relative to Whites and Blacks through two interconnected processes:

(1) processes of "relative valorization," whereby dominant group A (Whites) valorizes subordinate group B (Asian Americans) relative to subordinate group C (Blacks) on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to dominate both groups, but especially the latter, and (2) processes of "civic ostracism," whereby dominant group A (Whites) constructs subordinate group B (Asian Americans) as immutably foreign and unassimilable with Whites on cultural and/or racial grounds in order to ostracize them from the body politic and civic membership. (p. 107)

In other words, Asian Americans are not simply Orientalized as a separate, third racial category apart from Whites and Blacks. Rather, they are pawns of White supremacy and anti-Blackness drawn into a triangle-shaped web of racial oppression: simultaneously lauded over Blacks for their purported cultural and racial superiority, but alienated from Whiteness for their supposed inability to assimilate into hegemonic culture, politics, and standards of citizenship. Pushed and pulled between these two limitations, Asian Americans occupy a "triangulated" position of racialization. This damages the relationship between Asian Americans and Blacks, between Asians and Asian Americans, and between Asian ethnic subgroups (p. 107). By illustrating the contingency and complexity of these racialized relationships, Kim's theory builds upon and

challenges two canonical theories of Asian American identity: Omi & Winant's (1994) theory of racialization as a process that plays out separately for each racial group, and against Okimoto's (1994) suggestion that Asians fall somewhere on the linear spectrum of a White-Black racial hierarchy.

Racial triangulation theory is particularly relevant to Asian American students because of how they are both valorized and ostracized in educational contexts. This triangulation is the basis of Oriental school history, and is prominent in cases like that of Mamie Tape. Mamie was the American-born daughter of Chinese immigrants and the plaintiff in the 1885 California Supreme Court case *Tape v. Hurley*, which was sparked when Jennie Hurley, an elementary school principal, prohibited Mamie from entering the schoolhouse on the first day of class. As the case rose through the courts, "the school board... rushed through the California legislature an act authorizing separate schools for 'children of Chinese and Mongolian descent'" (Ngai, 2010, p. 54). The Tape family won their case, which affirmed Mamie's right to attend a public school, but the new act meant Mamie and other Chinese Americans were still barred from Hurley's school. Mamie and her siblings were forced to attend a newly-opened school for Chinese students in San Francisco's Chinatown, setting a precedent for the "separate but equal" concept that would be upheld eleven years later in *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

These schools evolved into the Oriental schools that other Asian and Asian American students were also forced to attend. This was especially offensive to the upwardly mobile Tape family, who strived to be perceived as White and wealthy. Like many 19th- and 20th-century cases that legislated the racial identity of Asian Americans (e.g. the U.S. Supreme Court cases *Takao Ozawa v. United States* [1922], *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind* [1923], and *Korematsu v. United States* [1944]), *Tape v. Hurley* tried to establish Chinese Americans as

basically-White; argue that Chinese Americans, while not White, were still definitely not Black; and assert that even though she was clearly Chinese, Mamie Tape possessed a “lack of Chinese-ness” and an “assimilated character” that made her worthy of inclusion (Ngai, 2010, p. 52). In an indignant open letter to her local newspaper, Mamie’s mother wrote, “You had better come and see for yourselves. See if the Tape’s is not same as other Caucasians, except in features... I guess she is more of a American then a good many of you that is going to prewent her being Educated [sic]” (Ngai, 2010, pp. 55–56). Her assertion that Mamie was even “more of a American then a good many of you” did not convince lawmakers.

This argument was repeated in 1927 during *Lum v. Rice*, which is credited as the first U.S. Supreme Court case to challenge separate-but-equal public schooling in the South (Berard, 2016). Martha Lum was a child of Chinese immigrants and had attended White schools in Mississippi in the early 1920s. In 1924, legislators passed the Johnson-Reed Immigration Act, a xenophobic law which aimed to expand the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act by preventing all immigration from Asia. Under this hostile environment, school officials prohibited the Lums from enrolling in the White school, insisting that they must move their children to the local school for Black children. The Lum family retained a White lawyer, but he did not challenge segregation in and of itself. Instead, he argued that the Lums were not “colored,” and therefore should be eligible to attend the White school (Patterson, 2001, p. 41). Already disempowered by the anti-Asian legislation of the times, and with no choice but to work with a White lawyer, the Lum family’s case became an example of anti-Blackness within anti-Asianness.

The arguments of these Asian Americans and their White lawyers reflected the material reality, and the material racism, of the times. Whites’ school resources far exceeded those in non-White schools—a 1917 study found that the Oriental School in San Francisco received \$10 less

per pupil than other schools, equivalent to over \$220 per pupil today; around the same time, the city architect found that the Oriental School lacked sufficient doors for students to exit in case of fire. Non-White families wanted access to the well-funded, structurally sound resources of White schools. One legal route would have been to argue for the abolishment of segregation and equitable distribution of educational resources; another was to posit that Asians were actually White. The court cases of the Tapes and the Lums were a manifestation of philosopher Lewis Gordon's (1997) principles of survival in the U.S.: "(1) be white, but above all, (2) don't be black" (as cited in Kim, 2018, p. 226). Oriental schools thus provide a key example for understanding how Asian Americans, as a non-Black racial minority, have been positioned such that they can only access limited privileges of Whiteness if they deny solidarity with Blackness.

Methodology

In designing the methodological approach for this study, I was guided by my commitment to highlighting Chinese American voices. Previous research on Oriental schools has emphasized the lack of student perspectives in historical accounts, and was a catalyst for me to seek out methods that would re-center the stories of those pushed to the margins. My prior work experience at the Angel Island Immigration Station Foundation, in San Francisco, exposed me to the power of oral history as a means of capturing complex, emotional, and highly personal experiences, and showed me how oral history can make space for the multilingual and transnational histories of the Chinese diaspora. My positionality as a third- and fourth-generation Chinese American and granddaughter of Oriental school alumni also influenced my decision to use oral history interviews for this study. While there is ample evidence of oral narrative traditions in Chinese culture (see, e.g., Børdahl & Wan, 2010; Børdahl, 2013), my inspiration

came from an even more direct source: the memories I have of evenings spent listening to my grandmother tell stories over the dinner table.

These intellectual and personal convictions led me to seek approaches to oral history that are rooted in liberation. For this study, I drew upon queer and Black feminist oral history methodologies that “[resist] linear, progressive, or stable renderings of any one ‘history’” (Johnson, 2019, p. 46). I found inspiration in the performance studies-informed work of D. Soyini Madison (as cited in Johnson, 2019), who writes:

Oral history performances... do not function as factual reports or as objective evidence, nor are they pure fictions of history. Instead, they present to us one moment *of* history and how that moment *in* history is *remembered* through a particular subjectivity... It is as the matrix of materiality, memory, subjectivity, performance, imagination, and experience that memory culminates in oral history performance, a culmination of layers that are all mutually formed by each other. (p. 57; emphasis in original)

In accordance with Madison’s work, my oral history interviews were not focused on painting a complete historical snapshot of the Oriental school era. Rather, I chose oral history as my research method precisely because it makes space for individual voices, subjective experiences, and the interpersonal dynamic between the storytellers and myself in each interview.

My search for interview participants began with the elders in my own family. Although they were not open to being interviewed, they acted as a bridge to other connections in the small community of Oriental school alumni. Although I had never met them before conducting the oral history interviews for this study, when I introduced myself to my narrators, Alfred “Al” Chan and May Tom-Chan, we discovered that Al had been childhood friends with one of my grandfather’s cousins, and May had been childhood friends with one of my great-aunts. Later,

we found a photo of Al's father and my great-grandfather sitting next to each other. Al and May's son, Ron, remarked, "The fact that [your great-grandfather] is sitting next to my grandfather must mean this interview was meant to be!" (personal communication, March 15, 2022). Leaning into these relationships for my interviews was another "rebellious act" that drew upon feminist and activist critiques of research (Thrasher, 2019, p. 244). Instead of forcing a depersonalized relationship with outside interviewees, I built upon the trusting relationships I have as a direct descendent of Oriental school alumni. This helped humanize both myself and the narrators, and "minimize power differences between researcher and participant" (Kumashiro, 2002, pp. 14–15). While conducting this research, I often thought about my grandparents, who would have been about the same age as Al and May if they were still alive today. This challenged me to be more intentional, forthcoming, and transparent in my oral history interviews and in the overall research process for this study.

Delimitations and Limitations of the Study

This study is centered around the segregated schooling experiences of Chinese Americans living in San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta region, both in Northern California. It does not explore the experiences of Chinese Americans who attended non-segregated schools in parts of California where the Asian student population was not large enough to sustain segregation, such as in Berkeley (Ngai, 2010) or San Diego (Wollenberg, 1978). Although they are not the focus of this study, it is worth noting that Japanese Americans, Filipino Americans, Korean Americans, and other Asian American children were collateral targets of Oriental school segregation. In particular, Japanese American students endured vicious discrimination, and their role is important to the eventual desegregation of Oriental schools: when Japanese Americans

were ordered into incarceration camps during World War II, Oriental schools were forced to integrate due to low enrollment (Beneli, 2012; National Park Service, 2004).

Due to the limitations of the COVID-19 pandemic, time constraints, and resource constraints, this study does not include interviews related to Asian school segregation outside of California, except in the review of literature about Martha Lum, who was from Mississippi, and of the *Gong Lum v. Rice* Supreme Court Case that arose from her experiences (Berard, 2016).

Participants for this study were identified through convenience sampling. Their contributions shed light on the experiences of Chinese American students during the segregation era, but are not necessarily generalizable to the entire Chinese American student population.

Significance of the Study

A survey of the literature for this study revealed that amongst the limited historical studies focused on Oriental schools, very few works emphasize the experiences of the students. This project thus holds significance for researchers and historians interested in gaining a holistic, student-centered perspective on Asian American history and Oriental school segregation.

This study also contributes to broader discourses on Asian American racialization in U.S. schools. Using the example of Chinese Americans in Oriental schools, I emphasize that schools have long been a place where Asian American racial identity is constructed and contested.

Finally, this project is significant for former Oriental school students, their families, and the broader Chinese American and Asian American population because it sheds light on their—our—experiences within an overlooked chapter in the history of Asian American discrimination.

Definition of Terms

Asian American: The term “Asian American” was coined in May 1968 by activists Yuji Ichioka and Emma Gee, both students at University of California, Berkeley (Lee, 2015). It was meant to

“stand for all of us Americans of Asian descent” (Ichioka, as cited in Lee, 2015, p. 304).

Originally stemming from a goal to unify different ethnic groups under one political umbrella, the label has since become a point of contention within the community for its inability to fully capture the wide range of experiences, cultures, and languages that it represents. Invented after the integration of Oriental schools, this term and related labels, such as “Chinese American,” were not used in the historical primary sources cited here. Although I use these terms throughout the paper, Oriental school alumni themselves were more likely to refer to their racial identity as “Chinese” or “Asian.”

Oriental school: “Oriental school” is a term that has been used both colloquially and in formal school names and legal documents to describe segregated primary (typically grades 1-8) schools that enrolled Asian American and other non-White students. Oriental schools began appearing in San Francisco and elsewhere in the 1850s, a harbinger of anti-Chinese discrimination in the decades leading up to the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882. Oriental schools were forced to close in the 1940s, when the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans depleted Oriental school student populations. In San Francisco, the Oriental School was originally called the Chinese Primary School. Its name was changed when other “Oriental” students, particularly Japanese Americans, became targets of segregation alongside Chinese Americans. In this paper, I use the term “Oriental school” to refer generally to segregated schools that were established with the intent to separate Asian Americans from Whites.

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I contextualize the history of Oriental schools. Beginning with the forced migration of Chinese laborers to America, I trace the evolution of anti-Chinese practices that led to the passage of the Chinese Exclusion Act in the late 1800s. This set a precedent for legalized racial discrimination in the decades to come, and galvanized the rise of segregated schools for Chinese Americans. Next, I spotlight the Chinese families who protested the segregation of their children. These families contradict the racially triangulated stereotype of Chinese immigrants as subservient, politically apathetic subjects, but they were not successful in their legal battles. In fact, the specter of segregation then spread into other Asian immigrant communities, and the following section explains how Chinese segregated schools became Oriental schools. Finally, I review the limited literature on the fall of Oriental schools. This context serves as the backdrop against which students' experiences, presented in Chapter III, take place.

The Origins of Chinese Exclusion

Chinese American history is tied to “the web spun by European capitalism” and the role of European and American colonialism in Asia (Okimoto, 1994, p. 38). The earliest known Asians in the United States were Chinese and Filipino workers who labored on Spanish trade ships and arrived in Louisiana in 1763 (Okimoto, 1994). Following the termination of the African slave trade in the early 1800s, Chinese “coolies” were brought in to do grueling labor in Cuba and Peru (Lee, 2015). Back in the U.S., the 1849 Gold Rush brought a wave of Chinese immigration to California. The opportunity to strike it rich in America coincided with imperialism, war, and political turmoil that afflicted China, particularly the province of Guangdong. Of early Gold Rush migrants, 96% hailed from this province, and amongst these new arrivals, most came “from just eight districts” in the coastal hub known as the Pearl River Delta (Lee, 2015, p. 66).

The arrival of Chinese migrants engendered Whites' anti-Chinese sentiment, and then the codification of this sentiment into anti-Chinese law. Chinese women and poor Chinese laborers were among the first to be targeted: the 1875 Page Act barred Chinese women who were "suspected of prostitution" and contract laborers from "China, Japan, and any Oriental country" (Lee, 2015, p. 67). Seven years later, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act became the first U.S. law to ban a group based on race or nationality. As historian Erika Lee notes, the 1882 Exclusion Act implicitly continued the gendered and class-based discrimination of the Page Act. She writes, "Although they were not explicitly barred from the United States, the exempt categories listed in the exclusion law—merchants, students, teachers, diplomats, and travelers—were professions that were held almost exclusively by men in nineteenth-century China" (Lee, 2015, p. 67). And although even the earliest Chinese immigrants had been met with trepidation, now that U.S. lawmakers had officially condoned anti-Chinese discrimination, Chinese communities faced increasing prejudice, harassment, and outright violence. The Exclusion Act was reinforced and renewed for eighty-three years, until the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965 brought comprehensive immigration reform (Yung, 1999, as cited in Lee, 2015). Generations of families, including my own, have been forever marked by the persistence of this discrimination.

The Rise of Chinese Segregated Schools

The broad anti-Chinese sentiment of the 19th and 20th centuries facilitated a more specific anti-Chinese movement within the American public school system. Stereotypes about Chinese immigrants' unassimilable nature transferred into schools, and Chinese American children—most of them U.S. citizens by birth—became the newest subjects of discriminatory education law. California was home to over 80% of America's Chinese population by 1870, and San Francisco was a port of entry for immigrants crossing the Pacific and a budding center of

Chinese American culture (Kuo, 1998). The Northern California region thus became the “focal point” of anti-Chinese school segregation (Kuo, 1998, p. 186).

When Chinese immigration to America began, however, education was not a salient issue. Most immigrants were single male laborers who intended to return to China and did not bring along wives or children. So when a few wealthy Chinese families asked the San Francisco Board of Education to provide schooling for their children in 1857, the Board agreed. In September 1859, the first Chinese public school opened at the intersection of Stockton and Sacramento Streets (Dolson, 1964, and Chang, 1936, as cited in Wollenberg, 1978). But less than a year later, in April 1860, superintendent James Denman visited the school and declared that it was a waste of taxpayer money. Denman was especially upset that resources were being squandered on a population who was “almost hopeless” due to their “idolatry” and poor character (Wollenberg, 1978, p. 32). The school was converted into a night school. In 1871, Asians (then referred to as “Mongolians”) were omitted from the state legislature’s list of racial groups that had a right to education. Denman interpreted this as a loophole, declaring it was no longer necessary to educate Chinese students (Chang, 1936 and Sandmeyer, 1939, as cited in Wollenberg, 1978, p. 33). Once the school at Stockton and Sacramento was shuttered, Chinese residents in San Francisco had two remaining options: private missionary schools or Chinese language schools. Missionary schools focused on teaching English and the Christian faith to adults, while Chinese language schools taught a standardized curriculum from China to children. Neither was a replacement for American public education. Wollenberg (1978) reports, “In 1877 1,300 Chinese residents [of San Francisco] petitioned the state legislature” and “estimated that 3,000 Chinese school-aged children in California were being deprived of public education” (p.

37). But with anti-Chinese aggression surging and the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act just around the corner, the petition floundered.

Chinese Resistance to School Segregation

These failed attempts to organize against the state legislature did not deter the Tape family, an upwardly mobile Chinese American family who became prominent challengers to school segregation. Joseph Tape (who chose an Anglo name to echo his Chinese name, Jiu Dip 趙洽) and his wife, Mary, were both Chinese immigrants who made significant efforts to blend in with White, middle-class Californians. They were Christians, lived in a White neighborhood in San Francisco, and spoke English at home. They believed that their children had equal rights to public education, and after trying at-home tutoring, Mary decided to enroll her eight-year-old daughter Mamie in Spring Valley Primary School, the local elementary school. Although its principal, Jennie Hurley, was herself an immigrant from Canada and the child of immigrants from Ireland, the Tapes were unsuccessful in enrolling Mamie or her younger brother, Frank. The Tapes' former tutor encouraged them to bring the case to court, and with Joseph suing on Mamie's behalf, they became plaintiffs in the 1885 California Supreme Court case *Tape v. Hurley*. On March 3, 1885, the California Supreme Court upheld a lower court's ruling that Mamie had a right to education. Ngai (2010) writes that the judge's "ruling was comprehensive, citing the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, state law, and the fact that Chinese paid school taxes" and stated that "the provision for excluding children of 'filthy and vicious habits' was meant to apply to individual cases, not racial groups" (pp. 53–54). Determined to keep Chinese Americans out of their halls, the school board hastily drafted an act authorizing the segregation of "Chinese and Mongolian children," putting them alongside the African American and Native American students who were already attending supposedly

separate-but-equal schools (Ngai, 2010, p. 54). By the end of March 1885, the school board announced the opening of the Chinese Primary School in San Francisco Chinatown. Mamie and Frank were the first students to arrive at its doors on opening day.

Mamie Tape's case set a precedent for other Chinese Americans to bring their anti-segregation arguments to court. In 1902, Dr. Wong Him petitioned the United States Circuit Court asserting that his daughter, Katie, should be allowed to attend the Clement School, located near his office in the Richmond District of San Francisco. Katie had attended the school for less than a year before the principal declared that she must relocate to the Chinese Primary School in Chinatown. In a departure from *Tape v. Hurley*, Dr. Wong Him did not assert Katie's likeness to White students, but instead drew parallels between Katie and the Black, Native American, and Japanese children who were *not* required to be segregated in San Francisco schools at the time. Unconvinced, the court sided with the school board in upholding Section 1662 of the Political Code of California, which read:

...and also to establish separate schools for children of Mongolian or Chinese descent.

When such separate schools are established, Chinese or Mongolian children must not be admitted into any other schools. (*Statutes and Amendments to the Codes*, 1885, as cited in Low, 1982, p. 85)

Dr. Wong Him again objected to this ruling, calling Section 1662 discriminatory and arguing that, since the family did not live in Chinatown, Katie should not be required to attend school so far from home. As Low (1982) writes, the United States District Court judge who heard Dr. Wong Him's case was not sympathetic:

The attempt by Dr. Wong Him... was viewed by the judge as a plea similar to the unsuccessful pleas blacks had been making in the courts since the Civil War. The

problem had been addressed in the case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*... Thus, the Chinese Primary School in San Francisco was legally reaffirmed. (p. 86)

The judge contended that Dr. Wong Him had not claimed that the Chinese Primary School's facilities were unequal, and Katie was not being deprived of education; rather, she was being provided a "separate but equal" education, allowable per the ruling in the 1896 Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson*.

Although the ruling in *Wong Him v. Callahan* was unsatisfactory, it did spur a new wave of Chinese community organizing against segregation. The Chinese Six Companies, a leading political and social association for Chinese immigrants in San Francisco, issued flyers protesting the school board and raising awareness about the inequities faced by Chinese children. Tong Fay, a Chinese merchant's son, presented the Six Companies' arguments in front of the Board of Education. But instead of generating support for Chinese students, Tong Fay's visit unearthed an even broader anti-Asian sentiment amongst the Board. The *San Francisco Examiner* reported that School Director Lawrence Walsh responded to the visit by stating, "I am not only opposed to having the Chinese attend any school other than that specially provided for them, but I would also like to see the same rule applied, were it possible, to the Japanese" (as cited in Low, 1982, p. 87). Unfortunately, Walsh's wishes soon came true.

Growing Anti-Asian Sentiment and the Renaming of Oriental Schools

As Dr. Wong Him pointed out, while Chinese American students in San Francisco were forced to attend the Chinese Primary School, Japanese Americans were initially allowed to attend White public schools. This changed at the turn of the 20th century due to several factors: the new San Francisco mayor was elected on a school segregation platform; the school board was asked repeatedly by White constituents to review the practice of allowing Japanese students

in White schools; and a new group called the Japanese and Korean Exclusion League formed to “work against all Oriental immigration” (Low, 1982, p. 89). With the population of Japanese American students growing large enough to rekindle White families’ rancor, in 1906 the superintendent “simply changed the name of the Chinese Primary School to the Oriental School” (Low, 1982, p. 93). Two weeks later, San Francisco’s legislators passed a resolution that formally directed all Japanese and Korean American students to attend the Oriental School.

Segregation of Asian and Asian American students continued throughout the following decades. The National Park Service (2004) reports that in August 1921, the School Law of California was revised with the following language:

The governing body of a school district shall have power to exclude children of filthy or vicious habits, or children suffering from contagious or infectious diseases, and also to establish separate schools for [Native American] children and for children of Chinese, Japanese or Mongolian parentage. When such schools are established, [Native American] children or children of Chinese, Japanese or Mongolian parentage must not be admitted into any other school. (n.p.)

This clause renewed the implication that there was an equivalency between “filthy or vicious” children and those who had Native, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asian heritage. It also spurred *de jure* segregation (segregation by law) in many locales where *de facto* segregation (segregation in practice) was already in place. In accordance with this new law and following San Francisco’s earlier lead, several towns in the Sacramento Delta region of Northern California also established Oriental schools. This did not mean that Oriental school students received new resources: in the predominantly Japanese American town of Florin, in Sacramento County, segregation law galvanized the construction of a brand-new school—for White children. The Japanese and other

Asian American children were relegated to the old building. The 1921 amendment would stand in the school code for another 25 years.

The Fall of Oriental Schools

By the 1940s, Oriental schools in both San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta had been closed down or desegregated. Community activism and changing—though not necessarily improving—attitudes towards Asian Americans both contributed to this move towards integration.

In San Francisco, seismological concerns presented an opportunity for Chinese American activists to argue their case for integration. The Oriental School, which had been renamed Commodore Stockton School but remained segregated, was due for earthquake safety modifications in 1933, and students were relocated to nearby buildings. Neighboring Washington Grammar School had already been fitted for earthquake safety, and a White community leader proposed to the school board that the building be officially designated for Oriental school facilities to further contain the growing Asian American population. At a school board hearing on this proposal, two Chinese American community groups protested this change. The Cathay Post of the American Legion (美國退伍軍人會), founded in 1931, argued, “The only way our children can become good American citizens is to mingle with American people” (as cited in Low, 1982, p. 131). The Chinese American Citizens Alliance (美洲同源總會), established in 1895, added that segregation was “un-American... and unnecessary in that it would engender a feeling of resentment in the hearts of these children” (as cited in Low, 1982, p. 131). The North End Improvement Association, which served the North Beach area bordering Chinatown, also “went on record” rejecting the expanded segregation proposal and asserting the Americanness of Chinese American youth (Low, 1982, p. 131). Thanks to the combined efforts of these three

organizations, the school board rejected the Washington School segregation proposal. As Low reports, “one final attempt at segregation” came in 1935, when a White female student at nearby Francisco Junior High School became pregnant. A civic club “went so far as to appear before the mayor of San Francisco to claim that a Chinese boy was responsible for the act and demand segregation in no uncertain terms” (Low, 1982, p. 131). The Chinese American Citizens Alliance protested and called for an investigation by the juvenile courts. When the investigation absolved the Chinese boy of blame, public support of segregation diminished.

In the 1940s, mainstream attitudes towards Chinese Americans began to improve. As Low (1982) explains, “The pivotal event was World War II. Americans were impressed with China’s heroic struggles against Japanese aggression” (p. 133). When Soong Mei-ling (宋美齡), also known as Madame Chiang Kai-shek, addressed the United States Congress in 1943, she advocated for the abolishment of discriminatory immigration laws. The Magnuson Act of 1943 repealed the Chinese Exclusion Act that had been in effect for 61 years. After the war, this perspective shift influenced legislators to reconsider public school segregation. In 1947, the superintendent of San Francisco public schools ordered the words “Oriental School” to be removed from the Commodore Stockton School building. The state legislature and the governor followed suit, and on June 14, 1947, *de jure* segregation of Asian Americans in California was repealed.

World War II also played a critical role in the desegregation of Sacramento Delta Oriental schools. When Japanese Americans were incarcerated in 1942, the Oriental schools experienced low enrollment and financial instability. At least one Delta Oriental school, in Walnut Grove, closed by 1943. The National Park Service (2004) also states that “a Japanese family challenged the constitutionality of California's separate school provision” after returning

from their incarceration. In their case, “The Los Angeles County Superior Court concurred that segregation on the basis of race or ancestry violated the Fourteenth Amendment” (n.p.). The statewide repeal of race-based segregation in 1947 solidified these efforts. However, as Low (1982) points out, *de facto* segregation continued through the still-inequitable public school system, which assigned children to schools based on gerrymandered neighborhoods—a problem that persists in the present day.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have outlined the history of anti-Chinese exclusion in the U.S. educational system, particularly in San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta. Chinese belonging in America has long been contested, and Chinese segregated schools existed prior to the passage of the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. After the Exclusion Act, legislators further reinforced “separate but equal” schooling by passing laws affirming the need to keep dirty, inferior Chinese American children away from White children. When this discrimination spread to Japanese and Korean American communities, Chinese segregated schools were rechristened “Oriental schools.” Despite challenges in communities and in courts, Oriental schools existed through the 1940s. During World War II, White lawmakers began to look more favorably upon Chinese Americans, and simultaneously strengthened their racism against Japanese Americans culminating in their mass incarceration. Both changes led to the closure and integration of Oriental schools. But what was it like to be a student in an Oriental school during these vitriolic times? In the next chapter, I will explore Chinese American Oriental school students’ lived experiences through their oral history interviews.

CHAPTER III: ORAL HISTORIES

The purpose of this study is to document and explore the experiences of Chinese Americans who attended Oriental schools. In the following chapter, I first chronicle the challenges I faced while trying to collect oral history interviews for this study, and explain why I used a combination of existing interviews alongside those I conducted myself. I then introduce the narrators, whose experiences are the centerpiece of this chapter. Next, I highlight common themes that connect the narrators' unique personal stories, including what their testimonies tell us about the demographics, languages, and teacher-student dynamics at the Oriental schools. The final section of this chapter is focused on how narrators remember and make sense of segregation. Although all narrators seemed aware that racial discrimination impacted their childhood, they did not universally agree that this impact was negative.

Challenges in Collecting Data on Oriental Schools

In this section, I share some of the challenges I encountered while conducting research for this study. I hope that my transparency can assist other researchers who seek to document the stories of Chinese Americans and other marginalized groups.

I conducted the research for this study during the 2021-22 academic year, exactly 100 years after the School Law of California was amended to exclude Chinese children and 75 years after Oriental schools were integrated. This meant that any living alumni of Oriental schools would be in their eighties or nineties. With the added context of the COVID-19 pandemic, I knew that it would be difficult to find narrators who remembered their childhood years, were open to being interviewed, and felt comfortable meeting in-person. I initially identified two of my nonagenarian great-aunts as potential narrators and aimed to interview them in January 2022. In a non-pandemic year, I would have seen them twice over the winter holidays and been able to

slowly introduce my study, but because of health concerns during a COVID surge, these family get-togethers were canceled. Without this bridge, I had trouble helping them understand the purpose of my research, and they declined to be interviewed.

When these interviews fell through, I reached out to a contact whom I had met through an Asian American Studies Facebook group. She connected me to the director of the Isleton Historical Society, located on the former Chinese block of the segregated Sacramento Delta town of Isleton, California. The director lent me several cassette tapes that she had found during a recent remodel of their small museum. The tapes had never been transcribed, and their technology was outdated. I took them in anyway, hoping that they would contain relevant information for my study. From there, my visit opened the door to a series of discoveries that helped me see how my research could only have been done with the dedication and collective effort of the Chinese American community.

First, I learned that my uncle Byron lived in Isleton. He joined my father and me for our tour around the Delta, and when I showed him some historical photos of Isleton, he remarked that Marion Owyang Wong, a community leader featured in one of the images, had visited his mother's funeral. Marion was the narrator on one of the interview tapes I had picked up at the historical society, but the tape content stayed locked away for many days because its technology was outdated. Because of business closures during the COVID-19 pandemic, I had trouble getting in touch with tape conversion services that could have transferred these tapes into digital formats. By another stroke of luck, my parents were cleaning out their old belongings around this time, and I discovered that I could play the tapes back either on their 1990s camcorder or on my childhood cassette deck. I was able to play back, transcribe, and include one videocassette—an interview of Marion by her daughter, Sharon Wong Fong—in this project. I gave up my goal of

conducting new interviews and decided to amalgamate excerpts from other interviews like Marion's. These interviews often traced a narrator's entire life story and only contained one or two questions about Oriental schools, so finding enough information would still be a challenge.

The next set of contingencies fell into place when I described these twists and turns to my genealogist uncle, Grant Din. He turned out to be acquaintances with Sharon, and they had even traced our family history back to discover that they are seventh cousins, once removed (making me Sharon's eighth cousin, once removed). He introduced me to Sharon, who was supportive of my research. She offered to connect me with yet another acquaintance, Ron Chan. Ron's parents, Al and May, had both attended Oriental schools as children, and Ron, an avid genealogist himself, understood the power of oral history. Still, he was skeptical of interviews that would extract his parents' stories for outside benefit. Because of my family ties to Oriental schools, I had already approached this study knowing that I had a responsibility to my grandparents, their siblings, and other members of their generation to share their stories in the most humanizing way possible. When Ron agreed to help me speak with his parents, he challenged me to be even more forthcoming with these intentions. His feedback helped me improve my interview questions and sharpen my pre-interview preparations. Thanks to his support, I had wonderful conversations with both Al and May. In addition to adding key insights to this study, our dialogues have become cherished memories for me. In the next section, I will introduce Al, May, and the ten other narrators whose voices are at the heart of this research.

Table of Narrators

The following table provides an overview of the oral history narrators whose voices are featured in this study. This table also illustrates the diversity of interview sources that this study drew upon, including family interviews, community history archives, and academic projects.

<i>Narrator's name</i>	<i>Date of birth</i>	<i>Narrator's relation to author</i>	<i>Location of Oriental School(s) attended</i>	<i>Interviewer(s) and relation to narrator, if any</i>	<i>Interview project or sponsor</i>	<i>Date of interview</i>
Alfred "Al" Chan	1924	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Courtland, Walnut Grove	Kelsey Owyang, Ron Chan (son)	Interview conducted for this paper	2022
Connie King	1923	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Isleton	Patrick Ettinger	The Locke Oral History Project	2007
Gene Owyang Chan	1932	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Locke	Christopher J. Castaneda	The Locke Oral History Project	2007
Harry Sen	1933	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Locke	Patrick Ettinger	The Locke Oral History Project	2007
Ella Joe Owyang	1927	Paternal grandmother	Sacramento Delta - Walnut Grove	Kelsey Owyang (granddaughter)	Personal communication	No interview; informal conversation, approx. 2013-15
Esther Owyang	1929	Paternal great-aunt	Sacramento Delta - Courtland	Grant Din (son), Tyler Pon (nephew)	Family history	2007
Louise Owyang	1926	Paternal great-aunt	Sacramento Delta - Courtland	Grant Din (nephew), Tyler Pon (nephew)	Family history	2007
Marion Owyang Wong	1916	Eighth cousin	Sacramento Delta - Isleton, Walnut Grove	Sharon Wong Fong (daughter); transcribed by Kelsey Owyang	Family history; later donated to the Isleton Historical Society	2007
May Tom-Chan	1928	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Isleton	Kelsey Owyang, Ron Chan (son)	Interview conducted for this paper	2022
Ping Lee	1917	No relation	Sacramento Delta - Locke	Maya Beneli	The Locke Oral History Project	2007
Thomas W. Chinn	1909	No relation	San Francisco	Ruth Teiser	The Bancroft Library archives at the University of California, Berkeley	1990-91
Thomas Wai Sun Wu	1915	No relation	San Francisco	Laurene Wu McClain (daughter)	<i>Chinese America: History and Perspectives</i> , a journal of the Chinese Historical Society of America	1994

Student Experiences in Oriental Schools

The following section will focus on key findings from a review of existing oral history interviews, interwoven with an analysis of two interviews conducted for this thesis. Existing oral histories were conducted between 1990 and 2015, and additional details are outlined in the table above. I conducted interviews in March 2022 with Alfred “Al” Chan and May Tom-Chan, whose voices added depth and richness to this section. All interviews were conducted with individuals who grew up in San Francisco Chinatown or in the Sacramento Delta Chinese community, including the towns of Courtland, Walnut Grove, Isleton, and Locke, during the early 20th century.

Interviews were conducted in English, although some were interspersed with phrases in Cantonese. Many narrators described learning English in elementary school and speaking Cantonese at home. Raised in this bilingual environment but without the support for bilingual education that exists today, many of them speak with Cantonese-inflected English. This reflected differently across narrators, but often influenced their accent, grammar, or diction. In the interviews I conducted or transcribed, I preserved the narrators’ speech as much as possible, adding small edits in brackets only when necessary to aid the readers’ understanding.

As shared in previous sections, existing histories of Oriental schools have relied on legal documents, newspaper articles, political statements, and other commentary representing a hegemonic point of view. Narratives of students’ experiences in their own words are far more limited, indicating the persistence of Chinese Americans’ marginalization within their own history (see Kuo, 1998). Re-centering their voices in this study is an act of resistance, and an homage to the family and community elders who raised me on their stories of early Chinese America.

Anybody Who Was Non-White: Oriental School Demographics

The student demographics at Oriental schools varied by location, but one thing that stayed constant was that *all* non-White students, no matter if they were Asian or not, attended the Oriental schools. Ping Lee stated that the students at Locke’s Oriental school were primarily Chinese and Japanese (Beneli, 2012). But Louise Owyang, a former resident of Courtland, said that the Oriental school she attended was designated for “Anybody who was non-White,” including Black and Filipino students (Owyang & Owyang, 2007, p. 1). Gene Chan also stated that the Oriental school in Walnut Gove had “blacks and Mexicans, I think Portuguese, Philipinos [*sic*], with the Chinese and Japanese” (Beneli, 2012, p. 94). Other narrators testified that migrant workers’ children and mixed-race children were sent to the Oriental schools. Enforcement of segregation for mixed-race children was similar to the “one-drop rule,” or the notion that “one drop” of Black blood defines someone as Black (Rockquemore, 2007). This “rule” was manufactured to exclude mixed-race African Americans from White spaces. Similarly, these testimonies indicate that Oriental schools became a catch-all repository for students who were Orientalized—constructed as the subjugated “other”—even if they were not the children of the Chinese or Japanese immigrants targeted by school segregation laws.

Although White legislators lumped a variety of non-White Americans under the “Oriental” label, divisions by ethnic group existed inside the segregated schoolhouse, particularly between Chinese and Japanese Americans. Thomas W. Chinn attended the Oriental School in San Francisco beginning in 1915, but did not recall having Japanese American classmates. Since records indicate that Japanese American students attended the school at that time, we might guess that Chinn, like many other narrators, did not make friends across ethnic groups. Whatever the reason was, Chinn attributed his experiences to the complicated

relationship between China and Japan: “the Chinese would have nothing to do with the Japanese anyway, because they have always been opponents; the two countries have never gotten along” (Chinn, 1993, p. 22). Chinn was one of several narrators to refer to the longstanding power struggles between China and Japan, which came to a violent head in the First Sino-Japanese War of 1894-1895. Several narrators recalled that these interpersonal tensions increased in 1937, after Japan’s invasion of China brought on the Second Sino-Japanese War of 1937-1945. Differing linguistic backgrounds also contributed to the divisions between Chinese and Japanese American students, as multiple narrators shared that they spoke their heritage languages with friends when not in class.

These narrators’ experiences demonstrate the inaccuracy of Orientalism, which paints Asian “others” as a monolith. Legislators saw Chinese American and Japanese American students as equally inferior subjects, and sent both to the same Oriental schools. Yet students did not shed their transnational histories, nor did they unite under a shared Asian American umbrella—the term “Asian American” had not even been invented yet. Orientalism, codified into school segregation policies, attempted to flatten Asians and Asian Americans into a uniform—and uniformly inferior—group. But student interviews point to the three-dimensionality of their experiences, a harbinger of the contradictions and tenuous solidarities that would only multiply in coming decades as Asian immigrant groups diversified.

We All Spoke Chinese in School: Navigating Bilingualism

Oriental schools were a site of othering, but also a site of assimilation. According to Chinese American narrators, this meant that although they were not allowed to mix with White students, they were also punished for speaking Chinese at school. Yet most narrators recalled that they relied on their home language—for Chinese Americans, this would have been one of

many Cantonese dialects—for socializing and surviving. This became an unwitting act of resistance against a system that hoped Chinese Americans would discard their Chinese culture. As Thomas Wai Sun Wu (2013) reported, outside of his English-only classes, “Whether they allowed us or not, we all spoke Chinese in school. We never spoke English in school” (p. 53). Harry Sen remembered speaking so much Chinese at his Oriental School in Locke that he was required to stay after-hours and eventually to stay back a grade to improve his English. Ping Lee, whose father was one of the founders of the Chinese community in Locke, even recalled that his father did not send him to school at first, because “He didn’t believe in segregated school... [because] he believed that I can’t speak good English if I go to the Oriental school and speak with, just like the old Chinese” (Beneli, 2012, p. 460-461). Lee’s father understood that within Oriental schools existed a tension: while families (and legislators) hoped that students would learn English and American customs at school, the irony of segregation was that many Chinese Americans became more deep-rooted in their communities because they were able to communicate in Chinese outside of the classroom.

Some students devised creative methods for preserving their Chinese-speaking agency at school. Al Chan said that he and his friends would huddle together and whisper to each other in Chinese, with one person acting as the “watchman” to look out for the teacher; teachers would constantly threaten to “wash your mouth with soap” if students were ever caught speaking Chinese. May Tom-Chan insisted that she did not speak Chinese at school, but later relented. She confided: “If we want to speak Chinese, we go to the bathroom! Talk all we want.” May could speak or understand four Cantonese dialects, adding to her playful mischievousness.

Thrust into a mixed-language environment, Thomas W. Chinn (1993) recalled how he and his classmates navigated their developing bilingualism at school. He explained:

I had a hard time trying to speak broken English and got all mixed up. Every sentence [my classmates said] would begin with Chinese and end with poor English, or start with poor English and end up with Chinese. So your mind just kept trying to understand them. As youngsters, it took years for us to get used to it. (p. 23)

Chinn continued by giving Ruth Teiser, his interviewer, an example of a mixed-up sentence:

‘Ruth Teiser, how about coming to Chinatown and *tung ngoy yum gah feh* [having coffee with me]?’ ... How could we listen to the front part and not understand the Chinese part?

These little things made it very, very difficult for us in the beginning. (p. 23)

Chinn’s early experience with “Chinglish” would be shared by diasporic Chinese for generations to come, and the challenges he experienced while learning English would later be reflected in the Supreme Court case *Lau v. Nichols* (1974). Filed on behalf of Chinese American students in San Francisco, *Lau* became the basis for bilingual education and English as a Second Language education across the nation. Unfortunately, this monumental legal triumph came several decades too late for Oriental School students.

The interaction between language and identity in Oriental schools can be understood through Kim’s (1999) racial triangulation model. Chinese Americans’ backwardness, impurity, and non-Whiteness had been guiding arguments for creating segregated schools (civic ostracism). But the English-only rules reported by students suggest that educators and legislators still saw Chinese American youth, and Asian Americans more broadly, as assimilable subjects (relative valorization). Oriental schools reflected the tension between these two conceptualizations of Chinese Americans.

They Were All White: White Teachers and Alice Fong Yu

In both *Tape v. Hurley* (1885) and *Gong Lum v. Rice* (1927), Mamie Tape and Martha Lum were expelled from their schools by White women faculty. When starting this research, I wondered if any of the Oriental schools hired Chinese, Japanese, or other Asian American teachers. If White vitriol towards Asian Americans was so strong, wouldn't the school board want Asian American pupils to be siloed and taught exclusively by Asian American teachers? However, according to Thomas Wai Sun Wu and Louise Owyang, all Oriental School teachers were White. Like me, Wu's interviewer assumed that the Oriental School might have an all-Asian faculty, but Wu quickly corrected her, saying, "No, no. We never had Chinese schoolteachers" (Wu, 1994, p. 53). Similarly, in Louise and Esther Owyang's interview, the pair mentioned a memorable teacher named Mrs. Horton. When their nephew clarified, "She was a white teacher?" Louise replied matter-of-factly: "They were all white" (Owyang & Owyang, 2007, p. 2).

Thomas Chinn's time at the San Francisco Oriental School overlapped with an important exception to the otherwise consistent history of all-White faculty. He explained:

There were no Chinese teachers... [until] 1926, I think it was, when Alice Fong Yu became the first qualified Chinese teacher who was finally hired. But in the beginning she was not hired as a teacher; she was hired as a teacher, but she was never given a chance to teach. She was, you might say, the principal's secretary—in other words, she did office work... When teachers got sick or something she filled in, and gradually, when they felt enough confidence in her—that she would not start talking Chinese to her Chinese students [she became a teacher]. (Chinn, 1993, p. 22)

Chinn's story is not the only example of Alice Fong Yu rebelling against the White supremacy of the school system. To circumvent discriminatory policies and administrators at San Francisco State Teachers College, Yu lied and said that she planned to return to China to teach English. In her certification exams, Yu described how "they tried some tricky questions like 'How do you dream?' hoping I'd say something in Chinese" (Wong, 1981, p. zC-2). Yu was a pioneer in Asian American education and an important source of educational, linguistic, and emotional support for her mostly Chinese American students. Still, in an interview with the *S.F. Examiner*, Yu assured journalists that she was encouraging her students to embrace their heritage in order to help them assimilate:

The Chinese boy or girl who wants to make a good American citizen cannot be one unless he retains the fineness and restraint of his own race. I am going to try to make this plain to all the girls and boys I teach! ("First S.F. Chinese Teacher Takes Desk: Alice Fong Achieves Her Life Ambition," 1926, p. CC)

Yu's troubling journey to her role as the first Chinese American public school teacher revealed the depth of anti-Asian exclusion and the usefulness of emphasizing Asians' ability to assimilate.

Oriental schools' White teaching staff, and the hoops that Alice Fong Yu jumped through to become San Francisco's first Chinese American teacher, are evidence of Kim's (1999) racial triangulation in full effect. Asian American students were despicable enough to be segregated, representing their civic ostracism and inferior status to Whites. At the same time, they were considered valuable enough to be potential subjects for assimilation who should be taught by White, English-speaking faculty, or at least by a Chinese American who understood how the "restraint of his own race" could make Asians into better American citizens. As Kim (1999) has

shown, this represents a relative valorization of Asians as cultural subjects who possess positive attributes such as “restraint” and acquiescence.

This relative valorization also contrasts with the staffing of segregated schools for Black children in the “separate but equal” era, when a strong cohort of highly qualified Black teachers “resulted in many all-Black schools as places where children received an excellent academic education, along with schooling from their Black elders in ‘the ways of the world’” (Lash & Ratcliffe, 2014, as cited in Lutz, 2017, p. 2). As these scholars and many others (e.g. Foster, 1998) point out, Black teachers played an essential role in educating Black youth and encouraging them to celebrate their Blackness. Oriental schools, on the other hand, offered no such opportunities for cultural enrichment or community guidance. This history has contributed to a disconcerting lack of Asian American teaching faculty: today, nearly 100 years after Alice Fong Yu’s monumental hire, fewer than 2% of American public school teachers identify as Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander (Schaeffer, 2021).

Students’ Thoughts on Segregation

Were the students aware that they were being educated in segregated facilities? All interviews conducted or reviewed for this study indicated that yes, students were aware of segregation—but they did not all share the same reaction to this fact. Narrators’ comments fell into two broad camps on this issue. One category of comments normalized school segregation, noting that it was no different from other institutional and residential segregation they experienced. Another category of comments, though, was inflected with more pain. Narrators remembered realizing, as young children, that they were being denigrated. Many narrators made both types of comments, struggling to reconcile their place in a difficult history.

We Were Already Segregated So We Didn't Know

When narrators expressed indifference about their Oriental School experiences, they explained that segregation was merely a reflection of the broader geographic and social isolation they experienced in their youth. Marion Owyang Wong echoed my grandmother's comments, which I shared in the introduction to this study: since her hometown of Isleton was already segregated, attending segregated schools did not stand out as worrisome. At the time, Isleton was split into a White area and an Asian area, with the Asian neighborhood further split into Chinese and Japanese blocks; in a crude sense, the Oriental School was more integrated than the residential community. Marion also remembered being mixed together with White students on only one occasion—graduation day—but did not hold disdain towards those White students or their separate school. In an interview with her daughter, she explained that her attitude did not change even when her family moved to another Delta town: “Well, at that time it doesn't matter to us, because we were used to being segregated. I also went to school in Walnut Grove, it was segregated too” (Wong, 2007). Louise and Esther Owyang agreed. When asked if they “felt” like their school was segregated, Esther responded, “We didn't know any better.” Louise added, “That's the way it was” (Owyang & Owyang, 2007, p. 2). Other narrators repeated these phrases, emphasizing that they had little agency as elementary school students.

When Gene Chan was asked if he ever questioned the cultural differences between himself and that of his teacher, a German woman who was also the school principal, he replied:

No. She was very well liked. She's strict, but she's very well liked. And everybody respects her. Like I said, we grew up in a town where we never thought of things like segregation. We were already segregated [residentially] so we didn't know. And it didn't matter anyway; we had all the friends there to play with. See we never got out into the

world, in a sense, until like me; I went to Sierra College and boy! It was a new world for me! (Beneli, 2012, pp. 106–107)

In Gene’s world—at least until he went to college—segregation was normal, and attending segregated schools only further normalized this form of discrimination for him. His nonchalant attitude stems in part from his experience with his teacher: she represented a White authority figure who treated him with dignity, even though discrimination brought them together.

Knowing about segregation wasn’t enough to change segregation, and for some students, acceptance was the only logical response. At 95 years old at the time of our interview, May Tom-Chan could still remember detailed anecdotes related to segregation. She described how the White school in her hometown of Isleton had a “huge playground” and a “beautiful” school building. Despite this, she chose to stay positive and focus on the things that were within her control. In her interview for this study, she explained:

We have to just grin and bear it and just do the best we can and don't do anything that we're not supposed to. ... In those days, we don't know anything like that [about segregation]... we're all young, just play with each other. And it was nice.

Still, she acknowledged that race relations today have improved: “Now, it’s different... it’s getting better.” The contradictions in her answers reflect the complex mental gymnastics that many students—especially ones as optimistic and accepting as May—went through to make the best of a difficult situation.

At That Time It Was Very Hard for Chinese People to Be Anywhere

When narrators remembered how they were ostracized, they recalled their encounters with racism in vivid detail. For many, memories of segregation started with the physical differences between the two schools. Connie King explained how the Whites’ school in her

native Isleton was “beautiful... a big building, very, very beautiful with shrubs and lawn,” while the Oriental school was “nothing but a gray building and no lawn, but gravel ground” (Beneli, 2012, p. 173). Reflecting further, she added:

We were treated very good, but we didn’t understand why we couldn’t go to school with the white children, see. We couldn’t understand that because we were too young to know the problem that the Chinese have to, and the Japanese have to be segregated from the white kids. (Beneli, 2012, p. 173)

She added that she enjoyed playing with White children after school, adding to her confusion about why they had to be separated during their lessons. May Tom-Chan, though she was accepting of segregation overall, also characterized the White school in Isleton as a “beautiful brick building” almost every time she brought it up. Harry Sen remembered that the White school and the Oriental School in Locke were identified with overt markings to ensure that no one got them confused:

The Oriental school was painted yellow, the white school was painted white. The Oriental school had a big iron plate there [in] the shape of a junk [ship], a Chinese junk, and that’s how they recognized our school as an Oriental school. (Beneli, 2012, p. 606)

Here, “junk” is a term referring to a type of Chinese sailing ship, not the condition of the Oriental school. Nevertheless, it is clear that the Oriental schools were poorly constructed compared to the White schools.

The inferior facilities at the Oriental schools were especially noticeable in the Sacramento Delta towns. Given the small size of each town, Oriental school students often had to pass by the White school, a daily reminder of discrimination. In Courtland, where Louise Owyang lived, there was only one school bus servicing both the White school and the Oriental school. The bus

had a single drop-off location at the White school, where all of the Oriental school students were required to disembark and walk the additional three-quarters of a mile to their building (personal communication, September 12, 2021). Oriental school students sometimes gained limited access to White school resources, but at a cost. Al Chan told a story about taking trumpet lessons at the White school, which involved an arduous “rain or shine” trek from the one-story Oriental school that was “way in a boondock,” through a field and school bus garage, and finally into the two-story Whites-only school building. Though both Louise and Al did not say so explicitly, their tones of voice expressed the indignation and embarrassment that they still hold onto nearly ninety years later.

Some narrators also recalled the overt racism expressed by their White teachers, who used culturally insensitive threats to discipline their students. Esther Owyang remembered that her White teachers would “remind you, if you were misbehaving, ‘If you don’t stop that, I’m going to send you back to China’” (Owyang & Owyang, 2007, p. 2). Al Chan imitated his teachers’ menacing tones as he recalled how they would threaten to “wash your mouth with soap” if students were ever caught speaking Chinese. He said that the poor treatment he received from his teachers curtailed his willingness to speak up against injustice:

We're just a little young kids. We don't know we're being discriminated. But somehow we know we're different because [when] we go to school we cannot speak but English only... We knew something was wrong. But we don't dare. We don't dare say anything. Because the teacher, the teacher, what she does, she put fear in us... She treat us Oriental students as if we're nothing. *Nothing*. She come in her door. She don't say good morning. She just kinda—[Al imitates a teacher glaring around the room]. And... we know we're different. We know we're different.

So many of us remember the impact that our elementary school teachers had on our early self-concepts. Unfortunately, for Oriental school students, this sometimes meant they were exposed to indelible experiences of racism as elementary school children.

In the previous section, I highlighted several narrators who rationalized school segregation by explaining that it was no different from the other institutional and residential segregation they experienced as children. By contrast, Thomas Wai Sun Wu and Al Chan also drew connections between their school experiences and social inequity—but emphasized that this was indicative of broader anti-Chinese racism. Thomas’s parents chose to send him to a private school run by the Presbyterian church so that he could first learn English, before transferring him to the San Francisco Oriental school in his second-grade year. When asked why his parents chose this route, his reply was blunt: “They were afraid that I might not be treated well at the Oriental school. At that time it was very hard for Chinese people to be anywhere because Caucasians or non-Chinese didn’t care for Chinese people” (Wu, 1994, p. 53). He went on to describe experiences of segregation even outside of his Oriental school, such as being prohibited from entering the school cafeteria while he was a student at San Mateo Junior College. Wu connected his grammar school experiences to a social pattern of anti-Chinese discrimination that continued even after he left his Oriental school. Likewise, Al Chan shared an emotional testimony of growing up in segregated America. He told me:

And those days, we knew we're discriminated, but not really, really know how bad we will be discriminated. But we were young, and we roll along with it. But even starting school there [at the Oriental school], we knew something was wrong. Something was wrong.

Al was 98 years old at the time of our interview, and his voice took on a sorrowful tone when he told me about discrimination against the Chinese community. Like Thomas, he also connected his treatment at the Oriental school to later experiences of anti-Chinese discrimination, particularly being refused service at movie theaters and restaurants. I was most moved by the end of Al's interview, when he reflected on how times have changed since his Oriental school days. He began to cry as he told me how grateful he is for the Black community who, through the Civil Rights Movement, finally did "speak up for us" and improve conditions for all people of color in America. Still, he told me: "My generation will never forget."

Conclusion

This chapter reports the experiences of Chinese Americans who attended Oriental schools in San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta. Across twelve oral history narrators, several themes emerged. Tracing the demographics of Oriental schools, which included not only Asian American students but also Black, Mexican, and mixed-race students, revealed how all non-White youth were "Orientalized" in this context. Narrators' memories of being forced to speak English at school, and of subverting these rules by finding creative ways to keep speaking Cantonese, point to an example of racial triangulation: Chinese American students were expected to accept their place in segregated schools, but also to assimilate to a White, English-only norm of Americanness. Although one narrator remembered the story of pioneering Chinese American teacher Alice Fong Yu, she was an exception. The vast majority of Oriental school students were taught by an all-White faculty who were unable and unwilling to provide culturally supportive teaching.

Turning to narrators' reflections on segregation, I highlighted two types of comments: those which rationalized segregation as a normal part of life in the early 20th century, and those

which shared how anti-Chinese racism was manifested and made personal at the Oriental school. Notably, neither type of comment characterized segregation as harmless. Additionally, some narrators made comments that fell into both categories within the span of one oral history interview. This contradiction was representative of a greater tension in this study: although I attempted to organize these oral histories by theme, they are complex narratives that resist neat academic categories. The oral histories shared in this chapter represent the nuanced, personal, and sometimes conflicting experiences of Chinese Americans who, in Al Chan's words, "took the brunt" of anti-Chinese racism.

CHAPTER IV: HOW DO YOU DREAM?

This study sought to use oral history interviews to center the voices of Chinese Americans who attended segregated Oriental elementary schools. Existing literature focuses on the legal and political documents attached to Oriental school segregation, without considering the experiences of the students themselves. In response to this erasure, I used oral history—a methodology that invites subjectivity, memory, and emotion into a dynamic research process—to highlight former students’ experiences and put those experiences in conversation with each other. The twelve oral history narrators included in this study hailed from San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta region in Northern California, and as a granddaughter of Sacramento Delta Oriental school alumni, I embraced my personal ties to their stories. Narrators held multiple memories and feelings about their experiences in Oriental schools, leading to complexities in their responses as they tried to make sense of what it meant to be targets of racist discrimination at such a young age. The nuance in each narrator’s contribution enriched this study.

The analytical goal of this study was to relate the history of Oriental school segregation to themes in Asian American history and racial identity development. Throughout Chapter III, I drew connections between Oriental schools and Claire Jean Kim’s theory of racial triangulation, which posits that Asian Americans have been “triangulated” as racial subjects who are inferior relative to Whites, yet superior relative to Blacks. Using testimonies from oral history narrators, I explored how Oriental schools illustrated this triangulation. The English-only policies and all-White teaching staff at Oriental schools, for example, indicated that Asian American students were seen as too uncivilized to be schooled alongside White students, yet worthy enough to be assimilated into White American norms. A brief survey of Chinese Americans’ legal challenges

to school segregation in Chapter II also demonstrated how, advised by White lawyers, they attempted to claim White proximity to avoid being further subjugated alongside Blacks.

Future studies on this subject may wish to explore the experiences of other ethnic groups who attended Oriental schools, such as Japanese American, Filipino American, Black American, and Mexican American students. Some narrators reported that the children of migrant workers and mixed-race children also attended Oriental schools, and further research is needed to understand their experiences as well. Future researchers could also delve into the histories of Oriental schools outside of Northern California, or the experiences of Asian Americans who lived in less-segregated regions and did not attend Oriental schools during this era. Additionally, deeper comparative analysis between Oriental schools and Black-only segregated schools would enrich our understanding of segregation in America. I hope that this study is just the beginning of a new wave of research focused on student experiences in Oriental schools.

This study is also a compassionate call to action to others who are already working to preserve the histories of Chinese Americans and other marginalized groups. Some of the most important testimonies in this study came from oral history interviews that were buried in outdated cassettes or saved on the personal computers of narrators' relatives. I urge all of us—myself included—to find ways to share these stories in accessible, up-to-date ways so that future generations can continue to learn about our communities. Additionally, we can promote these histories by supporting museums, community archives, Asian American Studies research centers, and other institutions where preservation efforts are already underway.

I invite fellow educators to use this study to develop curricula that will deepen students' understanding of American racism. Research across a variety of contexts, including my research on Oriental schools here, has shown that schools hold immense power to teach young people

how our history impacts our present day and why the fight for racial justice matters to—and requires contributions from—all of us. In California, we have a timely opportunity to incorporate the history of Oriental schools into public school curricula: in fall 2021, the California State University (CSU) system began requiring ethnic studies of their graduates. Beginning in the 2025-26 school year, California high schools must also offer ethnic studies courses, which will become a graduation requirement starting with the class of 2030. Other states and institutions may soon follow California’s lead. Instructors can use this wave of public support for ethnic studies to invest in nuanced lessons that complicate students’ understanding of Asian Americans’ place in U.S. history. Instead of providing a one-dimensional story of racial oppression ending in “victory” after the Civil Rights Movement, educators can use Oriental schools to talk about themes such as: the history of U.S. xenophobia; the impact of *Plessy v. Ferguson* and *Brown v. Board of Education* on not only Black Americans but also other communities of color; the confluence of anti-Asian laws that led to Oriental school segregation; and the resilience and resistance of Asian American communities. Teachers can also incorporate the oral histories featured here in their lessons, allowing students to learn about segregation, racial discrimination, and human rights from narrators in their own words. The curriculum packet created by Amie Dryer (2021) of Calvert High School in Prince Frederick, Maryland, provides an excellent example and introduces connections between Oriental school history and the Common Core standards.

The original impetus for this study was to uncover a “forgotten” chapter in history. However, it is essential to emphasize that *none of these stories have been forgotten by the narrators themselves*. Rather, their experiences were overlooked by academics and historians.

This study thus seeks to challenge scholars, archivists, and readers to remember these names, share these stories, and contend with the narrators' voices and experiences.

To close, I would like to return to the question that Alice Fong Yu, the first Chinese American teacher, was asked in her employment interviews. Nearly 100 years ago, white school administrators tried to catch Yu in a lie and "out" her as a Chinese-speaking teacher, by asking her, "How do you dream?" But this question is useful when reframed with different intentions. Together, we can wonder "How do you dream?" expansively, inclusively, and with a goal to honor the past and imagine a new future. "How do you dream?" can guide us to envision what lies beyond historical erasure, beyond Asian American invisibility, beyond discriminatory segregation, and into a more liberated future.

AFTERWORD

This research would not have been possible without the support of fellow scholars and students, Chinese American community leaders, dedicated members of my family, museum educators, genealogists, and many more supporters. I am humbled to be in community with these individuals and hope to share my resources with others who are interested in the past, present, and future of Asian America. I invite readers to reach out to me, particularly for help with transcribing, digitizing, archiving, or publishing oral histories; research on Oriental schools; historical accounts of Asian American life in San Francisco and the Sacramento Delta; or any of the themes present in this project.

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