Communities Created through the Production of Scale: Controversy over the Renaming of "Jap Road" in Texas

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Introduction

In the U.S. landscape, naming streets after minority figures is important for the minority group in the sense that it shows the minority group has been accepted by the mainstream as contributors to national historiography. For example, Martin Luther King Jr., the most recognized leader of the Civil Rights Movement, has been commemorated in various forms across the U.S. However, his commemoration has often been controversial. Many non-African American residents have been opposed to changing a street name to Martin Luther King Jr. Street because they did not want to be thought of as a part of a black community.[1] In this way, street names have been considered one of the most important aspects of local identity for those who live on the street and in the surrounding neighborhood.

In this paper I will look at a recent controversy over the renaming of "Jap Road," located in a small country town in East Texas. I argue that this controversy led to the creation of different communities, and that those communities produced different scales, "local" and "national". From 2004 to 2005, three streets named "Jap" in Texas all had their names changed in response to actions taken by several Japanese American and other civil rights organizations and activists. This paper will focus on the first case, which occurred in Jefferson County. This case attracted the most attention from the national media and led to the other two street names also being changed.[2]

The "Jap Road" controversy in Jefferson County, Texas

The origin of "Jap Road" in Jefferson County goes back to the early 20th century. It was named after a Japanese rice farmer, Yoshio Mayumi.[3] His neighbors called him "Jap" and his farm "Jap Farm" in a friendly spirit, and around 1910 named a nearby street "Jap Road" to show their appreciation of his contribution to the state economy. In that time and place, Mayumi and his neighbors found nothing hateful to himself or Japanese people in general in the street name but rather respect. The street name remained after he went back to Japan in 1915 and even after "Jap" came to be widely regarded as a slur on Japanese Americans because of World War II.

In 1993 the name "Jap Road" became a problem for the first time. A Texas-born third generation Japanese American was shocked to find the street when she moved into Beaumont City, which was located about 20 miles away. She wrote a letter to the county commissioners requesting that the street name be changed. But the commissioners rejected her request on the basis of the claim that the street did not intend any harm to Japanese Americans but had in fact demonstrated respect for a long time, and that the residents did not want to change it.

Ten years later, this issue appeared again. The Japanese American Citizens League, the Anti-Defamation League, and others filed a discrimination complaint to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and the Department of Transportation to demand the renaming of Jap Road. They complained that in any context "Jap" had become offensive to all Japanese Americans. Most of the residents on Jap Road opposed the changing of the street name for the same reason they had ten years before. However, this time the activists effectively appealed to the national media. A variety of media, from local newspapers such as the *Beaumont Enterprise* and the *Houston*

Chronicle to national media such as the *New York Times* and *CNN* covered this story as an example of existing racism.[4] Although the activists did not point to the residents as racists, the media coverage seemed to produce predictable consequences. Portrayed as racists, the residents of the small town were terribly shocked and angered. One resident lamented, "It seemed to me the whole world is looking at our little Southeast Texas town and portraying us as prejudiced."[5] Some residents wished the street name would be changed as soon as possible because they were heavily embarrassed by the media coverage.[6] On the other hand, they realised that if they granted the request made by the activists, that meant they would admit they had been living with a racist street name and in that sense they were racists. In order to prove they were not racists, some residents emphasized how Mayumi's legend had been handed down from generation to generation in the neighborhood. After heated discussions for six months, the county commissioners finally decided to change the street name and told the Jap Road residents to choose a new name by vote. The activists hoped that the residents would choose "Mayumi Road," or at least a Japanese-related name, as an appropriate form of commemoration. However, the residents chose "Boondocks Road" using the name of a famous catfish restaurant that used to be on the street. Part of the reason they did not choose a Japanese-related name was that they felt that the activists had destroyed their calm village life by giving them a terrible reputation in the national media.[7]

"Local" and "National" Communities

Through this controversy, two separate communities appeared: the supporters of changing the street name and the opponents of the change. In the coverage of

several media, these two communities were portrayed as extremely different in many aspects. The opponents to changing the name were long-time residents on Jap Road or nearby. Racially, they were predominantly white. On the other hand, the supporters of changing the name were multi-racial and -ethnic, including not only Japanese Americans but also other Asian Americans, Latinos, African Americans, and Caucasians. They lived in other parts of Jefferson County or Texas or outside of the state, in places such as California, Washington, D.C., and Hawaii, and got to know the "Jap Road" controversy through their nationwide networks. The kinds of memories the two communities associated with the term "Jap" were also different. For the supporters, especially Japanese Americans, "Jap" was a racial slur. For the opponents, the word "Jap" in Jap Road was associated with the beautiful local legend of Mayumi and was a part of their own nostalgic memories. As for connections to Mayumi, the supporters of changing the name had ethnic and family connections with him. They included not only many Japanese Americans but also Mayumi's great grand daughter, who grew up in Japan but had been living in Los Angeles for the previous ten years, working for an overseas branch of a Japanese newspaper as a researcher. Although not taking the street name personally, she had come to understand why the street name hurt many Japanese Americans through her experiences in Los Angeles.[8] On the other hand, the opponents to changing the name shared memories of Mayumi through material objects. A couple who had been living on Jap Road for over 30 years had built their house with lumber from Mayumi's original house. Some residents still kept china that Mayumi's brother had given away when he returned to Japan. These residents tried to demonstrate their respect for Mayumi by showing those objects. In this way, the contrast between these two communities became very clear.

Most importantly, the supporters of changing the name were seen as a national community while the opponents were seen as a local one, because they spoke out from their own *locations*. The opponents to changing the name drew a line between "insiders" and "outsiders," and insisted that outsiders should stay out of insiders' business. This was based on the notion that outsiders could not understand an insiders' issue, because they did not live "here." On the other hand, the supporters of changing the name claimed that Jap Road could not be allowed to be a part of the landscape of Texas or U.S.[9] Wherever they came from, as American citizens living "here" in the U.S., they could not accept the existence of Jap Road. This concept was important especially for Japanese Americans in the sense that they were not foreigners but Americans. Insisting on their opinions, the supporters and the opponents located themselves in different scales, "local" on the one hand, and "national" on the other. In addition, the media coverage emphasized the distinction between the local and national. The locations of the bodies of the supporters and the opponents were understood to determine whether they belonged to a "national" or "local" community. The supporters of changing the name were portrayed as a "national" community to represent the "national" standard in contemporary U.S. society. On the other hand, the opponents to changing the name were portrayed as a "local" community in order to represent the interests of those living in a particular local space. The county commissioners sustained this distinction in a different way. They followed the "national" standard, but gave the right to choose the new street name only to those who lived on Jap Road.

The Production of Scale

Where did this binary local/national scale come from? Did it already exist? Or was it something imagined into existence to make it easier to understand this controversy? According to the geographer Andrew Herod's theoretical argument concerning scale, a scale is not a rigidly defined unit but an active process produced by social actors.[10] The activists, residents, national media, and Jefferson County, can all be understood in these terms as involved in the process of producing the scale. Figure 1 shows the scale produced by those social actors.

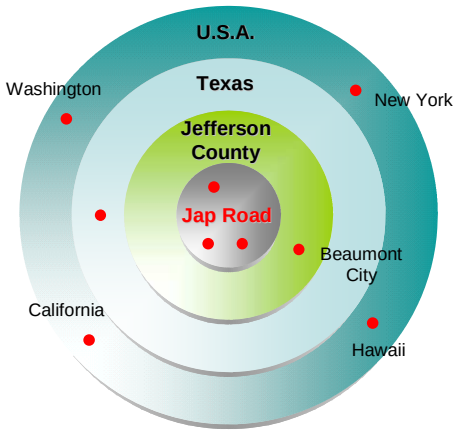

Figure1. The Production of the Scale by Locations

Fig.1

This may look like a natural way to grasp the relationship between the supporters and opponents in this Jap Road controversy. However, in fact, the distinction, for example, between local and national, is so ambiguous that it is impossible to point out where "local" ends and where "national" begins. Each social actor produced the scale arbitrarily as follows. First, the distinction between "insiders" and "outsiders" that the opponents defined was very ambiguous. Changing the street name was also supported

by many people from Beaumont City, just a 20-minute drive from Jap Road. When the residents defined "outsiders" as those not living "here," where was "here"? Second, the fact that someone from California or New York supports changing the name does not mean that they represent the opinions of people in California or New York. By taking advantage of their locations, the activists emphasized Jap Road as a part of the U.S. landscape rather than as part of the neighborhood and were engaged in producing a national scale. Third, the national media also played an important role in producing the scale by locating the activists and residents in specific geographical spaces. By illustrating the surrounding neighborhood of Jap Road as an area of racists, the media forced all the people living there to take a clear position, supporting or opposing the changing of the street name, unwillingly identifying themselves as "racists" or "not racists," regardless of their interests and relations to this issue. Fourth and finally, Jefferson County compellingly defined who had the right to choose the new name of Jap Road by limiting the vote only to those who lived on Jap Road. Unless they were actually living on Jap Road, "local" people were not given a vote whatever connection they may have had with Mayumi.

Is there any other way of conceptualizing the different positions in the Jap Road controversy beyond the clear binary of local/national scale? The approach to space and place suggested by the geographer Doreen Massey could offer one alternative. According to Massey, it is crucial to see places as the products of intersecting networks.[11] In other words, in this case it would be possible to change the focus from people's *locations* to their *relations* to Jap Road. As Figure 2 shows, each individual or organization has a different relation to Jap Road, and their relations are connected to each other like a web.

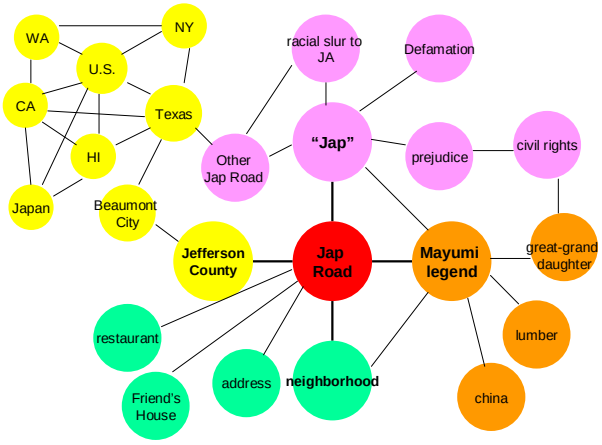

Figure 2. Relations to Jap Road

Fig.2

For some Jap Road residents, Jap Road is an important part of their residence and a connection to Mayumi, but for the other residents, it may be just a part of their address or one country road. Japanese Americans have a relation to the street through the meaning of "Jap." Thus, by tracing connections to each person's relations to Jap Road, the supporters of and opponents to changing the street name might have reached a compromise in order to resolve this controversy.

Conclusion

In the case of the Jap Road controversy, several social actors were engaged in producing scale, which led to the creation of "local" and "national" communities. While Jap Road residents claimed the legitimacy of keeping the street name by distinguishing "insiders" from "outsiders" according to residential location, the activists advocated changing it by representing themselves as the "national" standard. The

boundary between the two communities was made clearer not only by the media coverage, which illustrated those communities by contrasting them, but by the county commissioners, who determined who had the right to select the new name. Despite the absence of a clear-cut distinction between local and national, those social actors located the supporters and opponents and arbitrarily produced the scale.

As a result, this controversy had bitter consequences for both the supporters of the name change and its opponents. For the former, although they succeeded in forcing the change, Mayumi's history disappeared from the street name. For the latter, their memories associated with Jap Road may well have dramatically changed from an honorable local legend to an awful experience of being labeled as racists. These consequences will lead to reproduction of the scale based on the boundary distinguishing "we" from "they." However, by changing the focus from the locations of those social actors' bodies to their relations to Jap Road, it might have been possible for the activists and residents to open a dialogue on their various relations to the street name before they built that boundary. Then, they could have worked together to reconstruct Mayumi's story as a part of the "local" and/or "national" history.

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[1] On MLK street, see Derek Alderman, "A Street Fit for a King: Naming Places and Commemoration in the American South," *The Professional Geographer* 52 (2000): 672-684; and "Street Names as Memorial Arenas: The Reputational Politics of Commemorating Martin Luther King Jr. in a Georgia County," *Historical Geography* 30 (2002): 99-120.

[2] After Jap Road in Jefferson County was renamed, Jap Road in Fort Bend County was changed to Moore Ranch Road, and Jap Lane in Orange County, which was named after Kichimatsu Kishi, a Japanese rice farmer, was also divided to three streets and named each Duncanwoods Lane, Cajun Way, and Japanese Road. On details of those two streets, see Eric Hanson, "Second Jap Road quietly renamed," *Houston Chronicle*, September 29, 2004, http://www.lexis-nexis.com/; Jamie Reid, "Lane's change," *Beaumont Enterprise*, July 6, 2005, http://www.southeasttexaslive.com/. In addition, Jap Rock,

a surf spot in Florida, was changed to Yamato Rock right after Jefferson County's street became widely known. On Jap Rock, see "'Jap Rock' Receives New Name," *Pacific Citizen* 39 (2004): 3.

[3] Yoshio Mayumi's granddaughter's husband, Hellmut Klicker, a German, wrote Mayumi's biography after the name of Jap Road in Jefferson County was changed. His article can be found on the website of JACL Houston chapter with some pictures. See Klicker, "A Road in Texas," available from http://home.att.net/%7Ehirasaki3/ Mayumi/Mayumi_History.htm.

[4] Simon Romero, "Texas Community in Grip of a Kind of Road Rage," *New York Times*, 16 July 2004; Reuters, "Groups sue to change name of 'Jap Road,'" *CNN.com*, December 3, 2004, http://www.cnn.com/. *Christian Science Monitor* relates this Jap Road controversy to brutal hate crimes occurring in Texas several years earlier, see Kris Axtman, "In an East Texas town, the fight is all in a name," July 29, 2004, http://www.lexis-nexis.com/.

[5] Dee Dixon, "Name controversy nears the end of the road," *Beaumont Enterprise*, December 16, 2003, http://www.southeasttexaslive.com/.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Dee Dixon, "What will it be?" *Beaumont Enterprise*, July 21, 2004, http://www.southeasttexaslive.com/.

[8] Beth Gallaspy, "Japanese farmer's relative glad road is changing," *Beaumont Enterprise*, July 28, 2004, http://www.southeasttexaslive.com/.

[9] Romero, *New York Times*, July 16, 2004.

[10] Andrew Herod, "Scale: The Local and the Global," in *Key Concepts in Geography*, eds. Sarah Holloway, Stephen Rice, and Gill Valentine (London: Sage, 2002), 229-247.

[11] Doreen Massey, *For Space*, (London: Sage, 2005).