

The Asian Diaspora in Latin America: *Asians in the Andes*

Three years ago, as a result of my studies in the dual major of Photography and Asian Studies, and motivated by my own personal experiences, I began a long-term commitment to document the Asian Diaspora in Latin America. In this project, which has so far taken me to Cuba and Mexico, I explore the presence and reveal the stories of the displaced and disregarded Asians of Latin America. I would use the opportunity given to me, should I be awarded a Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship, to continue this project in the Andean countries of Peru, Ecuador, Bolivia, and Chile. My intention as a photographer is to trace and record what has been overlooked or forgotten. Despite the undisputed Asian contribution to Latin American history, the economy and politics, their significance has been relatively neglected, as much by Asians¹ as by the world at large. This project will consist of photographic images and essays based on interviews and individual stories I will conduct while on location in and around Lima, Peru.

My exploration of the Asian presence in Latin America began when I came to New York City for my studies and I encountered Spanish-speaking Asian communities. The 2000 Census showed that 11,500 Hispanic Asians live in New York,² and Professor Evelyn Hu-DeHali, director of the Center for the Study of Race and Ethnicity in America

¹ Recognizing the ongoing debate amongst scholars to define what ethnicities the term "Asian" includes, I choose for this proposal and only for matter of clarity to stay focused on Chinese, Japanese, and Koreans.

² Erin Chen "Identity Stew" 09/05/2004 *New York Times*

at Brown University, estimates that 249,000 to 305,000 Chinese-Latinos live in the United States. In New York City I conducted field research, visiting and working closely with Asian associations, communities, and individuals. From this initial spark, I decided to embark on Latin America. Living in New York and experiencing multiculturalism first hand, where immigrants are perceived simultaneously as a nuisance and necessity, I see history repeating itself. Parallels can be drawn more or less everywhere on the globe and perhaps in every stage in history. My goal as a photographer is to produce a significant and thorough body of work that can explain the historical background, and present the lives of Asians in Latin America today. My project will introduce readers/viewers to Asians in their "brokered home"³ of Latin America, and raise awareness of the missing links in history. I hope to contribute to a broader understanding of the presence of Asians in modern Latin American society.

Inspired by my studies and with the support of my mentors in history and photography, I received the Freeman Foundation Traveling Fellowship in the year 2003 through the Asian Studies Program of CCNY. This gave me the opportunity to travel to Cuba and Mexico for two months, where I completed a photo essay on the presence of Asians in Cuba and Mexico, which was exhibited at The City College of New York, Stony Brook University (SUNY), and Casa de Artes y Tradiciones Chinas, Havana, Cuba. This was an overwhelming and inspiring experience, and it has compelled me to continue and expand my project.

³ This term was taken from the title "Brokered Homeland- Japanese Brazilian Migrant in Japan" by Joshua Hotaka Roth

Personal Interest

The idea for this project sprang out of an inner need to redefine my identity. The general assumption in Japan is that my birthplace, Hokkaido, is no different from mainland Japan. In Japan we are all considered Japanese citizens and national education never clearly mentions what exactly happened in Hokkaido. I was born and raised to believe that I was pure Japanese, which I'm probably not. In the 1870's, a large Japanese population was forced to move to a northern island called Hokkaido in a region known as Siberia. This migration was part of a strategic Japanese colonization plan that expanded to many islands surrounding Japan and even some parts of Mainland China and Russian territories. Most of the native Hokkaido population, the Ainu, were oppressed by the colonizers, and the few who survived were assimilated. I am from Hokkaido. I consider myself to be most likely an offspring of the mix. I identify with the culture of Hokkaido, which is distinctively different from Japan in ways of religion, customs, food, agriculture, and architecture. These cultural differences are hardly acknowledged in Japan.

Having an identity different from my nationality is the subject that took me on the road to find others who might have a similar background. I found Asian populations living in Latin America who have lost most of their connections to their roots. From Mexico to Cuba, I met people of Japanese descent in second and third generations who no longer speak Japanese, yet still carry the pride of their cultural origin. They saw Japan in me, a woman from Hokkaido carrying camera and pen. I saw little smiles of recognition, and I saw proud proclamation of national pride and belonging. I witnessed it all through the camera viewfinder and I realized that these images are firmly embedded in

my being. I came back to New York feeling a connection with these people and a desire to explore their unique experience further.

Historical Context:

The history of Japanese emigration began when the two-hundred and sixty-year period known as "the isolation era" ended in 1867. Japan was extremely overpopulated and a solution was needed quickly. Realizing the great demand for agricultural workers in Latin America, Japan planned its expansion, to a certain degree, in competition with Western nations' conquest of the Americas. Japanese colonization or "*Shokuminchi*," (植民地) or which literally means "implantation of people into new lands," began with sending groups of emigrants into government purchased lands in Latin America. The unsuccessful colonization plan, a miserable failure based on empty promises, became merely "immigration." The concept of Japanese immigration into Latin America as part of colonial and imperial expansion has never been included in either Japanese or Latin American history yet the Japanese-purchased lands in Latin America are still referred to by Japanese as "colonies." Evidence vanishes as time goes by, and soon this aspect of Asian history will completely disappear.

Japanese expansionism continued not only in Latin America but also in Asia, including Hokkaido, Okinawa, Taiwan, Korea, Manchuria (China). After Japan's defeat in WWII, many of those failed colonies became either independent or under the rule of China or Russia. In the aftermath of WWII international treaties allowed Japan to retain its former colony, Okinawa, primarily to accommodate U.S. military bases, and part of the colonized Hokkaido as a major agricultural land. Both prefectures have not been able to develop as well as the rest of postwar Japan due to lack of governmental support. The

Japanese left behind in Latin America, however, remained there as immigrants, but in fact they are living evidence of Japan's failed strategic colonization of Latin America. They were brought to a new land not necessarily by their own free will for future prosperity, but rather pushed by the social conditions of the times. Governmental offers clearly targeted certain populations, especially second and third-born sons (considered less valuable than first-born) and poor and unskilled youth or peasant populations from southern, rural areas. Today more than sixty percent of Japanese immigrants and descendants in Latin America are from Okinawa. The majority of the remaining forty percent are from southern Japan, and some scholars argue that such Southerners were oppressed Christians, since there was a concentration of Christians in Southern Japan.⁴

China began its immigration into Latin America much earlier than Japan. However, there are still many similarities between the two. The majority of Chinese in Latin America are from a single region, Canton Province, whose devastated economy provided little hope, with emigration as the only option. Upon arriving in the new land many were taken advantage of by Spaniards. They were kidnapped and shipped as indentured workers to Cuba and Peru creating a large concentration of Chinese in Havana and Lima. The working and living conditions for most Chinese indentured workers were very similar to African slaves.

Goals of the Project

It is interesting to see the Chinese community in Peru coexisting and merging with the Japanese community, which is the second largest outside of Japan. For that reason and because of its geographic convenience, I have chosen Lima to be my base for

⁴James L. Tinger. "Japanese Immigration into Latin America - a survey" *Journal of Interamerican Studies and World Affairs* (1989)

this project. I will travel to the adjacent countries, Ecuador, Bolivia and Chile, which also have high concentration of Asians. I will be stationed in Lima for a year, where I have already established connections for lodging and support. From Lima, I will travel to the Andes, by road on local buses to see the actual places where our ancestors lived, worked and traveled. I will spend six weeks in each location. After each visit, I will return to Lima where I have access to a photo lab and to academic historians who can assist me in my research.

I have established contacts with professors and other professionals, including Professor Amelia Morimoto, a Japanese Peruvian scholar and historian, and Mr. Raul Chong, the owner and publisher of the Peruvian Chinese magazine, "Peru Oriental." Mr. Cheng's publishing business, established in 1931, represents the oldest Chinese publishing house in Latin America. Another important contact is Professor Humberto Rodriguez, Director of Social Science Research at Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos. Professor Rodriguez has dedicated his professional life to studying marginalized communities in Peru, including those of Japanese, Chinese, and African descent.⁵

I will start by interviewing and photographing, especially the relatives of the Cuban families I met in my 2003 visit. I will seek help through Asian associations and institutions to expand my personal contacts to the local people. In my photography, I am especially attracted to the genre of environmental portraiture. I want to present the people I meet in a context that helps define who they are. I look forward to an intimate conversation in a place they call their own. The picture on the wall, the chair they sit on, the desk from where they work, or the shelf containing sentiments on display are all

⁵ Other contacts in Lima are Liz Torres, Hugo Melendez, Carlos Grageda, and in the city of Caraz is Jose Luis. They are familiar with Chinese communities in Peru and are willing to provide me accommodations and translation if necessary. Accommodation in Lima is also provided by a family of my friend from New York: Ana Cardenas Alayza

unspoken words of the story they tell me. My photographic portfolio will consist of portraits, house interiors, candid social interactions and landscapes.

Upon completion of this project on Asians in Andes, I hope to have a body of work solid enough to be sent to publishers, museums, galleries, and other media outlets. I am fairly literate in Chinese, and my Spanish is sufficient to conduct interviews without having to depend on English translators.

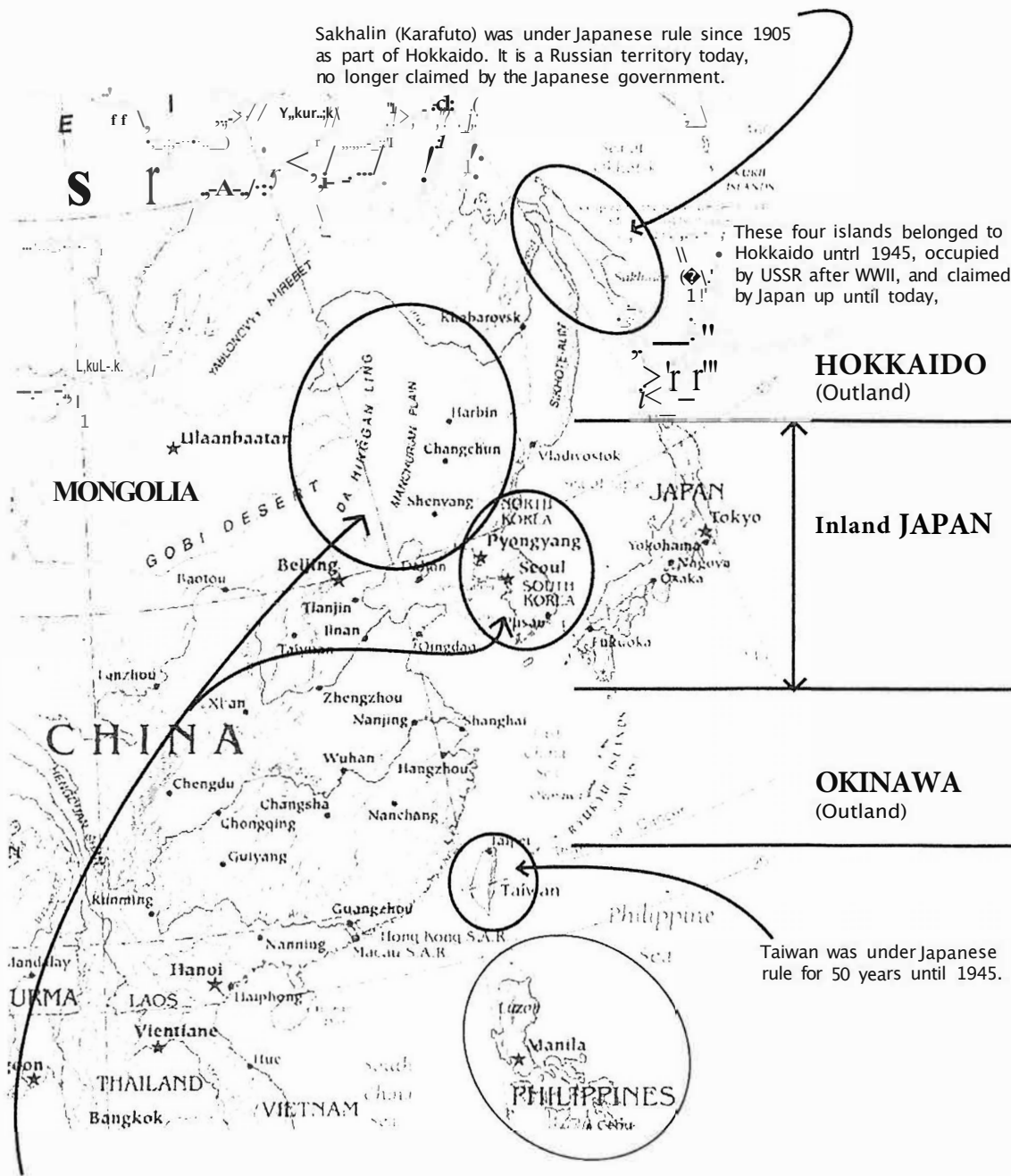
I cannot deny my fascination with the mere fact that there are Japanese/Asian populations living in the Andes. In pursuing this project my fascination has become more of a quest to understand how humanity has populated the globe and managed to blend ethnicities, only to create new ones. The importance of understanding the social environment that we inhabit beyond our own xenophobia cannot be emphasized enough. Sharing the outcome of this project will serve my goal as a photographer to show and unveil through my pictures what was once a mysterious Asian presence in the Andes and Latin America.

MAPI
Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship Proposal



Map 1: **Latin America.** From my base, Lima, Peru, I will visit Guayaquil, Ecuador, Antofagasta, Chile, and Santa Cruz, Bolivia.

MAP2
Mortimer Hays-Brandeis Traveling Fellowship Proposal



Manchuria (China) and Korea were also colonized by Japan,

Map 2: Japan, Russia, China, Korea, and Philippines