

BORDER BITES

“Digesting the world’s borders

...One bite at a time”

In early December 2017, Iwashita Akihiro, professor of both Kyushu University and Hokkaido University, and I embarked on a brief but successful visit to Mexico’s Chiapas state, in order to experience first-hand the dynamics playing out along the border between Mexico and Guatemala. Eager to learn in the field from a long-established scholar of border studies, I was most grateful to receive Professor Iwashita in Mexico. I knew that I could add to my overall knowledge of borders, which in my case stemmed from my research on East Asia, by sharing this experience with him.



Mexico as a Buffer Zone between Central America and the US: The Chiapas border

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I was determined, through preparation and meetings with the right people in Mexico City and the field, to have this Mexico-Japan team make a substantial contribution to future studies. While there has been a great deal of research done on the dynamics of the US-Mexico border, probably because it is the most important border between the industrialized North and the global South, I still have the impression that much sociological and ethnographical work remains to be done regarding Mexico’s southern border. Unlike in the case of Canada, Mexico also serves as a buffer zone. It is situated between the US and Central America, the point of origin for thousands of illegal migrants, not only coming from these countries but also other nationalities that, using the region as springboard, have for decades moved northwards in search of a better life for themselves and their families. These days – in fact since the Obama administration – this flow is not only

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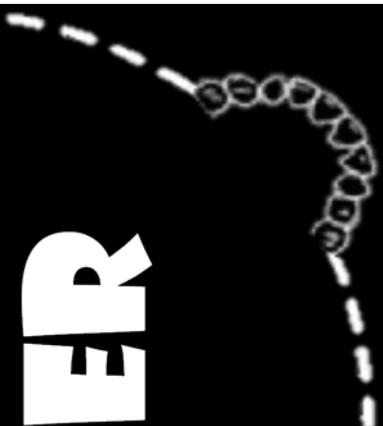
being stopped but even reversed, due to stringent immigration policies and stricter enforcement. In 2017 alone, Mexico, received around 500,000 illegal immigrants, 200,000 of them spending some time in official immigration detention centers. While 90% of those detained were Central American nationals, there were 91 different nationalities present in detention centers around Mexico that year. With the US doing an efficient job in protecting its borders and deporting illegals, the question for Mexico is how to cope with such an influx of people without suffering an eventual migratory crisis.

That question, in turn, is slowly leading academics, government officials, and NGOs to look south at Mexico's other border. How is a regular day at Mexico's southern border? What are the struggles faced by migrants, legal and illegal, when transiting in both directions? What can the Mexico-Guatemala border teach us regarding humanity's endurance in adversity, the perils faced as a by-product of globalization (like intense drug and arms smuggling), and the increasing difficulty for states of protecting and enforcing order in their territory? It was with these and others questions in mind that we set out on our short field trip to Chiapas.



Figure 1. Prof. Iwashita by the federal immigration station in Tapachula (All photos by the author).

It was early morning when we arrived by plane from Mexico City to Tapachula, the nearest mid-size city to the Guatemala-Mexico border. From here, the border post at Ciudad Hidalgo is 24 miles by car, although only 20 miles on foot. In Tapachula we paid a courtesy call to one of the head officers at the National Immigration



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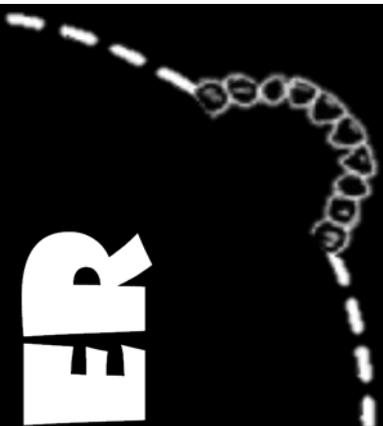
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Institute's regional office, arranged by a colleague well versed in border studies and himself an immigration official of some standing in the past.

After waiting for perhaps an hour, we were met by the Area Director and her staff, with whom we had an extremely open and interesting discussion. The Director was responsible for the day-to-day regulation of the activities of border officials at their posts, enforcing regular, orderly and secure migration to and from the migratory stations, and coordinating the processing of detainees. As was quickly clarified, these migrants, held at different premises for males, females and juveniles, are referred to not as detainees but rather as temporary migrants in the process of relocation to their country of origin. We received first-hand testimony of the difficulties and dangers facing illegal immigrants coming to Mexico, from the appalling conditions in which they are smuggled to the abuses and rapes they suffer at the hands of delinquent groups, organized crime, and other individuals. On reflection, though, what was particularly noteworthy was a contrast that became subsequently apparent. On the one hand, there was the tenacious determination displayed by these federal officials to enforce the law and to protect these immigrants if they happen to continue their travel to the US (a paradoxical humanitarian task done by the national Immigration Institute's Beta Group along the northern border with the US). On the other, as we saw the next morning, there is the overwhelming reality of illegal crossing from Guatemala, largely outside the control of the authorities, yet occurring no more than 50 meters away from their border checkpoints.

Before continuing on to the border station in Ciudad Hidalgo, we were invited by Father Flor Maria Rigoni to his House of Migrant-Bethlehem Shelter. This was in a building on the outskirts of Tapachula, a peaceful place partially surrounded by dense vegetation and partially by severe urban underdevelopment. The shelter hosts an average of 60 migrants per day, with each allowed to stay for up to three nights, and provides clean rooms, a fresh breakfast, water for washing clothes, dental basic services and spiritual comfort for the needy, primarily thanks to national and international donations. The shelter will probably be the only home



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that these men, women, and children hoping to reach the American Dream will find for months, if indeed they are lucky enough or have the means to support the long journey. In spite of this systemic adversity, the smiling and high-spirited staff, headed by Irmi and Jorge, received us with open arms, to show us the premises and the history of the shelter network. They shared with Dr. Iwashita and me the recent progress of their technical school, which had been established to provide immigrants wishing to learn with practical knowledge, a valid diploma, and eventually a short-term official permit to legally reside in Mexico if they wishes. Between the overwhelming reality of thousands of immigrants, particularly those escaping from violence in their Central American homelands, and the increasing difficulties of reaching the US, Father Flor's shelter is a place of peace, hope and defense for human rights. He was quoted in a 2016 Mexican newspaper interview as saying: "if you want to know a country, visit its borders, there is where all its problems combine, but also all its virtues". When we departed, we happened to see a woman arriving at the shelter by taxi – surely from the border – with nothing more on her: no husband, no children, no money, and no food or extra clothes. Such people only bring with them their determination to cross Mexico into the US, and their human dignity, something clearly understood by the shelter. Upon setting foot into his oasis of humanity, it was possible to see the embers of hope in the eyes of migrants, and we thank Father Flor and his wonderful staff for that moving experience.

The next morning, we planned to spend the whole day at the Ciudad Hidalgo-Tecun Uman, and Talisman-El Carmen border posts between Mexico and Guatemala, those furthest away from Mexico's three thousand plus kilometers continental border with the US. And I must admit, it was a fascinating experience. Being myself a careful observer of borders, I had thought that visiting my own country's southern border would provide a more familiar experience. This was strengthened in the course of some guidance I received from a relative who is himself well versed in trade and personal connections at the very same posts. However, it was still with a strange mixture of excitement and caution that Dr. Iwashita and I arriving at the first official border post,

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being well aware that the most interesting, and occasionally dangerous, dynamics occur just outside official purview. After a brief introduction by the Mexican officials of their roles, they politely cautioned us regarding the capricious power held by the Guatemalan border officials over to approve or not our departure from Guatemala, once we were to return to Mexico later in the morning. We were told that it was possible that a non-Mexican on the other side of that border might need to wait for up to 48 hours on the Guatemalan side before being allowed to re-enter Mexico. This led us to briefly reconsider whether we should enter and risk my Japanese friend being left alone on the other side of the border! However, we were able to exit Mexico without any delay, and were discretely advised to avoid any misunderstanding with their neighbors by declaring to them our intention to cross for a quick sightsee, a good Guatemalan coffee and breakfast, and appealing to their good common sense and honesty. After crossing the bridge on foot, and being surprised at the scale of open smuggling occurring on makeshift rafts – inflatable tires – just meters away from the bridge, we approached the Guatemalan immigration post. To our surprise, the immigration guards were extremely friendly!



Figure 2. Illegal trade and migrant crossing at the Suchiate River.

After evaluating our cases, we were allowed to enter the country by simply paying the 6 quetzals (less than one dollar) entrance fee; we even joked with them over how many beers and water bottles we should bring back to them after our short trip.

Some two hours of the finest street food, handicraft shopping and a couple of cold beers in Guatemala made us to forget that just besides the international bridge is the other border, in many ways the real one, used by illegal crossers from Central America and elsewhere. This forms a kind of no-man land where non-

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Figure 3. Prof. Granados and Iwashita departing in Guatemala border city of Tecun Uman.

official trade is done (with no taxes declared), and criminal enterprises – drugs, cash, weapons and human trafficking – flourish. We returned to the international bridge on our way back to Mexico (indeed bringing two beers and two water bottles, which we eventually didn't have to handle over), and after a brief Mexican customs check, we were finally back...the first time.

Soon afterwards, led by our local contact, we were approaching the trading posts along the Mexican side of the international river, only meters away from the international bridge. Thanks to the connections of my relative, we were able to simulate the 'real' border experience,



Figure 4. Prof. Iwashita on board a makeshift raft, Mexican side of the Suchiate River.

boarding a raft piloted by a young Salvadorian former member of the MS-13 gang, recently deported from the US. To our relief, he was polite to both of us and even eager to tell us his gang history in Los Angeles as we approached the median line of the river, though without crossing to the Guatemalan side. Of course, the novelty of the experience inevitably led us temporarily to forget the real danger a "normal" immigrant or a "returnee" might face at the border.

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As we watched the buzzing trade, involving trucks, motorcycles, rafts and smugglers, we also learned that, contrary to what you may expect, most of the everyday necessities originate in Mexico and are exchanged across the border for the strong Guatemalan quetzal. Confirming what I had previously seen in the Quintana Ro-Belize border, many Central Americans go to Mexico where commercial goods are usually cheaper. Even in Tapachula, low, middle and high-income Guatemalans alike use discarded US yellow school buses to visit big supermarkets, like Walmart or Chedraui, shop, and return across the border on the same day on a daily basis. As we realized, the border is a place where, with the right capital and connections, huge legal and illegal fortunes are made, forming a socio-economic ecosystem from which many can profit.



Figure 5. Suchiate river border, the illegal point of entry to Ciudad Hidalgo.

After this second approach to the border line between Mexico and Guatemala, we were invited to visit the Talsiman immigration post, some 22 miles away along the border. There we could observe a different sort of trading, mainly of used cars coming from the US – with probably a few stolen Mexican ones – and heading towards the markets of Central and South America. We learned there that it is possible for drivers to transit

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the cars from the US through Mexico in only three days, an imperative that leads to many an accident caused by exhaustion along roads near the southern border. The drivers of the trucks transiting these cars are also forced to contend with demands for bribes from corrupt federal, state, and, most voraciously of all, municipal police. On the international bridge, we were allowed to cross the bridge until the median line marking the international border, where we quickly took snaps with locals, Mexican and Guatemalans alike. Presumably, the deference offered us would be lacking if we were, for instance, to try and sell a product or export some goods.



Figure 6. Prof. Granados and Iwashita standing at the Talisman-El Carmen borderline.

Even as a Mexican, this was an eye-opening trip, one which gave me a greater appreciation of the struggles of both my countrymen and our Central American brothers to cope with the border between us. It was an honor to share the experience with Professor Iwashita, and I look forward to returning there to conduct a more systematic analysis of this amazing border region.