

Chinese, Japanese, and Korean Immigrants and Their Descendants in Argentine Audiovisual Popular Culture

Christopher A.A. Gomez, Darrell B. Lockhart

University of Nevada, Reno, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures

DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.15629/6.7.8.7.5_1-1_F-2014_4

Abstract: Beginning in the 1970s, immigration from China, Japan, and Korea has steadily grown bringing approximately 200,000 immigrants to Argentina. With ethnic Chinese, Japanese, and Korean persons adding to the growing national population, are non-Asians Argentines aware of these new immigrants? To what degree are Asian cultures depicted in Argentine popular culture? Are there heavy Asian influences in the way characters are developed or how Asians are portrayed in film and television? This paper seeks to investigate the cultural presence of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants and their descendants in Argentine audiovisual popular culture. Research was carried out through the analysis of Argentine films, television programs, and YouTube video clips that portray Chinese, Japanese, and Korean persons. It was found that Argentine popular culture includes programs and films related to Japanese cuisine, Korean pop music, and Chinese characters. The majority of Argentines are accustomed to seeing actors of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean descent in main and supporting roles both in film and television. As Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants continue to move to Argentina, their role in shaping and defining Argentine popular culture has become more prominent.

Introduction:

Since the late 1880s, a flow of immigrants from Asia has arrived on Argentine soil. In just the last 40 years, a strong wave of immigration brought approximately 200,000 immigrants from Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and China in particular (“About Argentina”). Those immigrants now call Argentina their home and have assimilated into Argentine society. Nevertheless, immigrants do not completely dissolve ties with their homelands. Rather, parts of their homelands are brought to their new homes (Eckstein 1). These cultural differences are incorporated into their new communities as the world continues to be economically, socially, and politically connected (Rubin and Melnick 9). This research investigates the presence of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean immigrants and their descendants in forming Argentine audiovisual popular culture. Are there heavy Asian influences in the way characters are developed or how Asians are portrayed? The research takes into consideration Argentine films, television programs, and YouTube video clips that portray Chinese, Japanese, and Korean persons in Argentine popular culture.

Argentina is South America’s second largest country after Brazil in terms of both land mass and population (Central Intelligence Agency). Its people combine to form a rich, diverse population due to large waves of immigration. Argentines usually refer to the country as a *crisol de razas* (literally a crucible of races, or melting pot) (“About Argentina”). The first significant wave of immigrants to Argentina came from Europe between 1870 and 1930, but there continues to be immigration from regions all over the world including Asia and the Middle East. Of the nearly 43 million people living in Argentina, approximately 92% are Caucasian of Spanish and Italian descent (Central Intelligence Agency). At the terminus of the immigration wave in the late eighteenth century, approximately 50% of all European immigrants, approximately 2.3 million, came primarily from southern Italy (“About Argentina”).

I was inspired to write this thesis due to my travels to Argentina, in particular Buenos Aires. I had finished my study abroad program in Santiago de Chile and was excited to explore a new country. During my stay, I noticed the stark ethnic differences between Chile and Argentina: Chile’s is composed of Germans,

Spaniards, and the indigenous Mapuches while Argentina's incorporated ethnic Asians, Africans, and Arabs in addition to Caucasians.

The focus of this research is on the audiovisual component of Argentine popular culture because of its role in Argentine society as one of the ways the nation culturally identifies itself. The audiovisual component specifically relates to any forms of media that combine both aural and ocular qualities. I am interested in the films, television programs, and YouTube videos that are broadcasted to Argentines on a daily basis because motion images have inundated the Argentine population. With the broad definition of popular culture and research of the many theories, I define popular culture as "any form of media or activity that impacts society." My definition focuses on the daily influence that bombards individuals when they watch television, peruse the Internet, or read magazines or newspapers. The audio and visual components are qualities that can be reproduced for different audiences. The particular examples selected for each ethnic group reflect the programs that are broadcasted around Argentina through the Internet, film, and television.

Results:

The Japanese in Argentine Audiovisual Popular Culture

The Argentine cable television channel *elgourmet* is synonymous with that of the Food Network in the United States. Within the channel's repertoire, there are over a dozen chefs that have their own shows demonstrating various food preparation techniques. In particular, *elgourmet* features a Japanese chef by the name of Takehiro Ohno. Chef Ohno's cuisine fuses Japanese ingredients and Latin American flavors together in a way that harmoniously brings together the two different worlds. An example of Chef Ohno's Japanese-Argentine fusion is seen in an episode of *Ohno* where the Japanese chef creates a meal of *guiso de berenjena* (eggplant stew) and *hamburguesa japonesa con champiñones en salsa de soja* (Japanese hamburger with mushrooms in soy sauce) as seen in figure 1 (elgourmetcomLatam, "Ohno – Guiso de berenjena y hamburguesa japonesa"). This complementary pairing mixes rich, yet distinctive flavors that are pleasing to the palate. Ohno goes one step further in pursuing this Asian-Latin flavor using ingredients from his Japanese mother's dessert recipes.



Figure 1. Takehiro Ohno, Japanese-Argentine chef. Chef Ohno cooking during his program, *O3. Oriente, Occidente, Ohno* (top left), his dishes of guiso de berenjena y hamburguesa japonesa (top right and bottom left), and his TEDx talk in Córdoba (bottom right). Sources: elgourmetcomLatam, "Ohno – Guiso de berenjena y hamburguesa japonesa"; Ohno

In an episode of *Okashi.Dulces.Ohno*, Ohno makes a *torta marmolada de cacao y la de té verde con batatas fritas caramelizadas* (cocoa and green tea marble cake with fried caramelized yams). Cocoa beans are native to Latin America, specifically Central America and the Amazon basin (Zipperer 4). Ohno's blending creates a rich dessert filled with bits from the East and Latin America (elgourmetcomLatam, "Okashi. Dulces. Ohno."). At the conclusion of each of his cooking demonstrations, Ohno completes the Asian-Latin American fusion by sharing facts and tidbits of his homeland. He sits in a replica of a *zashiki*, a traditional dining area complete with a low standing table and cushions, and displays an object pertaining to Japanese culture or shares memories from his childhood in Japan. For some Argentines, Ohno's cooking show is their first glimpse into the Asian continent and the Japanese culture. The gastronomic tour invites viewers to connect on a comfortable, yet informative one-on-one basis through food.

The Koreans in Argentine Audiovisual Popular Culture

Korean immigrants and their descendants can be seen in television programs and independent Argentine movies. For example, Chang Kim Sung plays "Walter Mao" on the *Telefe* comedy *Graduados* (The Graduates) as seen in figure 2. Sung was born in South Korea and traveled to Buenos Aires with his family when he was a young child. In *Graduados*, Mao is the right-hand man to his boss and close friend, Clemente Falsini. In contrast to the typical, secondary roles that Asians usually hold, Walter Mao is a prominent character who is essential to the plot of the series. He is comfortable speaking Spanish and even knows *lunfardo* or local porteño slang. Sung's character is so prominent that in an episode he has his own dance sequence. Mao charms one of his colleagues by switching out his eyeglasses for a pair of black sunglasses and turns the office floor into a dance floor for the infamous song, "Gangnam Style" by Psy.

For Sung, playing the role of "Walter Mao" is not just an honor; it is an accomplishment to have an Asian in a leading role (Puraquimica2012). Ever since Sung moved to Argentina more than 30 years ago, he feels that he is "more Argentine than *dulce de leche* and *churrasco*" (*dulce de leche* is a sweet confection made of milk and *churrasco* is thinly sliced beef that gauchos used as part of their *asados* or barbecues) (Kim Sung, "Por Fin No Hago De Oriental"). Early in his acting career, Sung played over 15 roles as a "chino" working in a supermarket or a "chino" in an organized mafia (Kim Sung, "Con Su Papel en Graduados"). Sung's portrayal of "Walter Mao" launched him into the national spotlight

and earned him a nomination for a prestigious Martín Fierro Award as "Newcomer of the Year" (a Martín Fierro Award is presented by the Asociación de Periodistas de la Televisión y Radiofonía Argentina Association of Journalists of Argentine Television and Radio) and is similar to that of an Emmy Award) ("Se conocieron los nominados a Los Martín Fierro 2013").



Figure 2. Argentine-Korean Actor, Chang Kim Sung as "Walter Mao" on the television program, *Graduados*. Source: http://a.espn.com/media/motion/2012/1029/Hu_121029_Deportes_PQ_ChangKimSung/Hu_121029_Deportes_PQ_ChangKimSung.jpg

The Chinese in Argentine Audiovisual Popular Culture

The film *Un cuento chino* (*Chinese Take-Away*) has been one of the most popular films in Argentina grossing over \$10 million in the first three months of 2011 alone (Smith). The comedy follows the life of Roberto, a grumpy hardware store owner who is disenchanted and apathetic with the world (*Un cuento chino*). His mundane life changes when he helps a foreigner named Jun (played by Taiwan-born actor Ignacio Huang) find his last living relative. During the course of the film, audiences witness Roberto's transformation from a man with a cold heart and stern face to a man who feels and expresses emotion. The added language barrier between Jun and Roberto gives a humorous aspect to the film as seen in figure 3. Since neither character speaks the same language as the other, both men must rely on facial expressions and hand gestures to communicate. By the end, Jun finally finds his relative and moves out of Roberto's house. However, the impact the two men made on each is priceless and leaves the audience empathizing with the characters.



Figure 3. Still shots from *Un cuento chino*. Ricardo Darín as “Roberto” and Ignacio Huang as “Jun”. Source: *Un cuento chino* (Chinese Take-Out)

The success of *Un cuento chino* launched Ignacio Huang into popularity all over the country. Ignacio has done television interviews with programs such as TV Pública’s *Vivo en Argentina* where he reminisced about his early days in Argentina as an 11 year-old boy from Taipei, Taiwan (TV Pública, “Vivo en Argentina: Un lugar en el mundo: Ignacio Huang – 17-08-11”). When the film won the Premio Goya (the Spanish equivalent of an

Academy Award) for Best Film, Huang did interviews for major new channels such as C5N and Canal 26 further publicizing his fame as seen in figure 4 (ArgDVD; C5N). For a better part of the 2011 and 2012 season, *Un cuento chino* was the biggest non-American film to be widely shown in Argentine cinemas. The film’s great success catapulted the recurrent struggle Chinese immigrants endure to the forefront of Argentine viewers. Instead of describing what battles take place, a vivid image was painted into Argentines’ minds. In a way, the movie served as a public service announcement to educate the population of being Chinese in Argentina.

Methods:

It is important to note that this research was conducted by an American in the United States with no previous knowledge of Argentine popular culture. This challenge was overcome thanks to the use of the Internet and Argentine web-based systems. Through these sources, I researched the most viewed television channels in the country, and film and television associations akin to the Academy Awards. Then, I looked at the ethnic composition of the cast and chose particular programs or films if principle protagonists were of Chinese, Japanese, or Korean descent. To further filter results, I perused Argentine search engines and databases to select highly viewed programs and films. Furthermore, all of the films and television programs analyzed are spoken in Argentine Spanish. This dialect utilizes phrases, verb tenses, and pronunciations not found in Spanish dialects in North America. The steps of interpreting and translating materials required me to exercise my knowledge of the Spanish language along with the expertise of my mentor, whose research includes Argentine topics.

Discussion:

In Argentina, the media has increased the awareness of cultural globalization within the country. Argentines are composed of people from diverse ethnic groups that have lived together and shared common



Figure 4. Ignacio Huang’s interviews with the Argentine media. Ignacio Huang is interviewed during a news program on Canal 26 (left) and TV Pública’s *Vivo en Argentina* daytime show (right). Sources: ArgDVD; TV Pública, “Vivo en Argentina: Un lugar en el mundo: Ignacio Huang – 17-08-11”

stories of immigration and integration. In each of the three examples analyzed, there is an exchange of thoughts and ideas that begin to facilitate an educational public dialogue. Ohno incorporates Japanese traditions and customs through his cooking lessons, Sung exuberates his Korean heritage through his primary role in a popular Argentine television program, and the film *Un cuento chino* serves as a visual aid to highlight the plight of Chinese immigrants. These aforementioned individuals are just some of the ethnic actors that are highlighted in Argentine audiovisual popular culture. Their addition has increased the presence and awareness of these ethnic groups in the media.

The presence of journal articles and YouTube clips that are a part of this research have highlighted the importance of popular culture in society. According to David William Foster, a Latin American culture scholar, his definition of popular culture encompasses anything that impacts the daily lives of people such as newspapers, magazines, movies, or television programs (Foster 2). On the contrary, Latin American scholars Eva Paulino Bueno's and Terry Caesar's definition incorporates "a sort of middle stratum between national identity and a lived complexity of social reality" (15). The combination of these two definitions brings awareness to how the nation identifies itself through audiovisual media.

The appearance of Chinese-Argentines, Japanese-Argentines, and Korean-Argentines in audiovisual media enriches the awareness of these ethnicities in the country. This research has allowed me to gain insight into "study abroad" experiences that last longer than just one semester. Personally, the examples emphasized in this research share a remarkable resemblance to my parents' upbringing as first-generation children growing up in America.

Furthermore, this research shows how minorities are incorporated into popular culture and to an extent, society. The United States of America is not the only country to have experienced huge waves of immigration and the subsequent period of how immigrants find their place in their new home. Though the two countries are nearly 7,000 miles apart, both share similar accounts of immigrants creating their lives in their new homes.

Acknowledgements: *I would like to thank my mom, dad, and little brothers for their encouraging words of support through this entire process. Many thanks to the University Studies Abroad Consortium (USAC) for providing an amazing program in Santiago de Chile. If it was not for the study abroad program, I would have not*

thought of going to South America let alone Buenos Aires where I was inspired to write about this thesis topic. Furthermore, I would like to thank Dr. Darrell B. Lockhart for coming aboard with me on this project. His time, efforts, and advice are much appreciated. GO WOLF PACK!

References:

- "About Argentina." *La formación histórica del estado argentino*. 2011. La Presidencia de la Nación: el Gobierno de la República Argentina. 5 Dec. 2013 <<http://www.argentina.gob.ar/advf/documentos/4e5ced44183aa.pdf>>.
- ArgDVD. "Premio Goya Ignacio Huang un actor taiwanés 'Un Cuento Chino' Iberoamericana Argentina 20Feb2012." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2014
- Bueno, Eva Paulino, and Terry Caesar. *Imagination beyond Nation: Latin American Popular Culture*. Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh, 1998. Print.
- C5N. "C5N - Espectaculos: Un Cuento Chino, Premio Goya [Ignacio Huang]" Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 20 Feb. 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2014
- Central Intelligence Agency. "Argentina." *cia.gov*. Central Intelligence Agency, n.d. Web. 17 Jan. 2014.
- Eckstein, Susan. "Immigrants from Developing Countries: An Overview of Their Homeland Impacts." *How Immigrants Impact Their Homelands*. ed. Susan Eckstein and Adil Najam. Durham: Duke UP, 2013. 1-29. PDF.
- elgourmetcomLatam. "Ohno – Guiso de berenjena y hamburguesa japonesa." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 9 Jun. 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.
- elgourmetcomLatam. "Okashi. Dulces. Ohno. - Torta marmolada de cacao y la de té verde; Batatas fritas caramelizadas." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 8 Apr. 2013. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.
- Foster, David William. *From Mafalda to Los Supermachos: Latin American Graphic Humor as Popular Culture*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 1989. Print.
- Graduados2012. "Gangnam Style – Graduados HD." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 22 Oct. 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.

- Kim Sung, Chang. "Con su papel en Graduados, Chan Kim Sung disfruta del éxito." Interview by Sergio Zuliani. Cadena3.com. Cadena3.com, 24 Aug. 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
<<http://www.cadena3.com/contenido/2012/08/23/102076.asp#comentar>>.
- Kim Sung, Chang. "'Por Fin No Hago De Oriental'." Interview. Television.com.ar. Television.com.ar, 18 May 2012. Web. 7 Apr. 2014.
<<http://television.com.ar/diario-online/opinion/167495/por-fin-no-hago-de-oriental/#.U0Ncj1eBpcJ>>.
- Ohno, Takehiro. "Samurai en la cocina y en la vida." TEDTalks, Oct. 2013. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.
- Puraquimica2012. "Chan kim Sung en Pura Quimica (26-10-2012)." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 31 Oct. 2012. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.
- Rowe, William, and Vivian Schelling. *Memory and Modernity: Popular Culture in Latin America*. London: Verso, 1991. Print.
- Rubin, Rachel, and Jeffrey Paul Melnick. *Immigration and American Popular Culture: An Introduction*. New York: New York UP, 2007. Print.

- "Se conocieron los nominados a Los Martín Fierro 2013." Espectaculos. Clarin.com, 24 June 2013. Web. 08 Apr. 2014.
<http://www.clarin.com/espectaculos/tv-y-radio/conocieron-nominados-Martin-Fierro_0_943705846.html>.
- Smith, Ian Haydn. International Film 2012: The Definitive Annual Review of World Cinema. Brighton: International Film Guide, 2012. PDF.
- "Takehiro Ohno." *Takehiro Ohno*. Elgourmet, 2011. Web. 22 Mar. 2014.
<<http://elgourmet.com/chef/takehiro-ohno>>.
- TV Pública - Argentina. "Vivo en Argentina: Un lugar en el mundo: Ignacio Huang – 17-08-11." Online video clip. *YouTube*. YouTube, 17 Aug. 2011. Web. 21 Mar. 2014.
- Un cuento chino (Chinese Take-Out)*. Dir. Sebastian Borensztein. Perf. Ricardo Darin, Muriel Santa Ana, and Huang Sheng Huang. DVD. Royal Cinema Group, 2011.
- Wood, G. A. R., and R. A. Lass. *Cocoa*. Oxford: Blackwell Science, 2001. PDF.
- Zipperer, Paul. *The Manufacture of Chocolate and Other Cacao Preparations*. Berlin: M. Krayn, 1902. PDF.