Impact of the Juan Mora Porras Road on the Costa Rican-Nicaraguan Border Region

This research project will analyze the impact of the recently constructed “Juan Mora Porras” (JMP) road on the trans-border region of Costa Rica and Nicaragua. The study will use qualitative data gathered in field work as well as quantitative data to assess the road’s impact on economic development and immigration at a regional level. Dr. Elizabeth Chacko, Chair of the Geography Department, will assist me in this research.

Costa Rica and Nicaragua have a complex political and economic relationship. Although the two countries share a history of Spanish colonialism and its legacies, their more recent history shows diverging development trajectories. Migration from less-developed Nicaragua has resulted in Costa Rica employing thousands of unskilled Nicaraguan laborers who remit substantial sums of money home. However, proximity has also led to tensions, particularly along the San Juan River which follows the international boundary between the countries.

Although the San Juan River belongs to Nicaragua, Costa Ricans can lawfully use it for navigation purposes, and many poor Costa Rican communities rely on the river for mobility. In 2011 this changed: The Costa Rican government, with the financial assistance of the Inter-American Development Bank, finished the JMP road, which runs parallel to the border between the two countries, from coast to coast, and is the only road connecting communities along the border.

The JMP road has triggered more development on the Costa Rican side by improving people’s access to basic goods and services, but its impact on the broader border region of both countries is still not clear. This paper will analyze the impact of the JMP road on Nicaraguans and Costa Ricans living in the trans-border region with respect to flows of people and goods, as well as economic development in the region. I hypothesize that the JMP road, although considered a symbolic barrier by the Costa Rican authorities, may instead have triggered greater integration in the Costa Rica-Nicaraguan border region. The research will investigate 1) how it has affected Nicaraguan immigration to Costa Rica and the porousness of the border 2) whether the road has triggered more development in the border region and if so, what forms this development has taken 3) how it has affected transnational relations among individuals of the trans-border region.

To answer these questions this study will rely on qualitative and quantitative data. I will conduct field work in the border region in both Costa Rica and Nicaragua to collect qualitative data. I will visit the region in August 2012 to make initial observations, conduct preliminary interviews, build rapport and identify key informants, such as governmental officials, NGO representatives, and experts on the topic. During the Fall 2012 semester I will collect quantitative data related to immigration, tourism, and living standards in the border region. I will use qualitative and quantitative data in tandem to answer my research questions. I plan to go back to the region in December 2012 to
gather more information but now with a more solid theoretical framework. I will use the stipend to support my two visits to the area.

My plan is to present this paper in both Nicaragua and Costa Rica as well as at the Annual Conference of the Mid-Atlantic Division of the Association of American Geographers. I also hope to publish this paper in a student journal. It is my belief that this study will shed light on the impact of such a project at multiple levels varying from the individual to the entire trans-border region, and will be of assistance to development agencies and local governments in both the short and long terms.

As a native and long-term resident of Costa Rica, I am well acquainted with the culture, the region, and the language, as well as the local aspects of Nicaraguan immigration to the country. I have taken Geography courses that increased my knowledge about theories and models of immigration and development projects. I interned at Unimer International, a Costa Rican company that conducts research on markets and public opinion. This internship taught me how to formulate questionnaires, conduct interviews, focus groups, surveys, and field work. My faculty advisor, Dr. Elizabeth Chacko, has a background in Geography, Immigration, and Development, which are key components of my research paper. The papers I have written about Costa Rican-Nicaraguan relations include those on stereotyping of Nicaraguans in the Costa Rica media, the 2011 Costa Rica-Nicaragua border controversy, and individual Nicaraguan immigrants’ specific migratory stories as they relate to theory. I was a finalist for the Eckles Prize for Freshman Research Excellence for a paper about discourse on Latin American immigration to the United States. Through researching and writing this paper and course work related to my international development and international economics major concentrations, I learned much about theories and practices related to migration, development, and policy issues. I believe the proposed study and the paper emanating from it will add to discourse on development in a trans-border context.

Research under the aegis of Elliott School Undergraduate Scholars Program will help me develop a finer and more nuanced understanding of how local communities are impacted by national and regional policies. As a future professional researcher and policy maker, I firmly believe that this kind of research experience paves the way for more inclusive development policies that transcend national borders and tensions and emphasize international cooperation over sectarian gains.
The Economic Impact of Women’s Rights in China

China’s rapid economic development has generated a long-running debate among experts about the effect of economic reform on the status of Chinese women. Some say that the current work atmosphere is exploitative of women, while others argue that it presents more opportunities than were available before. My research will reconcile this debate among China scholars by focusing on the role of women in China’s workforce and how that role has changed as a result of economic reform. My faculty mentor is China expert, Professor Bruce J. Dickson, with whom I have taken two courses: *Intro to Comparative Politics* and *China’s Domestic and Foreign Policies*.

The overarching question my research will address is, “Have Chinese women gained or lost as a result of post-Mao economic reform?” Under Mao Zedong’s regime, the Chinese economy experienced a recurring rollercoaster of growth followed by stagnation, and the country was rocked by widespread famine as a result of policies advocating rapid industrialization and collectivization. The post-Mao period, however, took a sharp turn with Deng Xiaoping’s economic policies, which included de-collectivization of agriculture, opening to foreign investment, and large-scale privatization.

Since the Chinese female population is too complex to be generalized about, I will break it down in several ways. I will focus on the effects of economic reform on young Han women between the age of 18 and 30 (the Han nationality makes up over 90 percent of the Chinese population). I will divide that larger population into two groups: those who migrated from rural areas into China’s cities those who were born and raised in the cities. I will not only track changes affecting each of the two categories separately over time, but also I will evaluate the two groups against each other with regard to their differing origins. In other words, I will compare and contrast the opportunities available to young urban and rural women and how those opportunities changed over time.

The research will be accomplished in four phases. In the first phase (already begun), I will thoroughly review scholarly books, journals, and studies on the 1949-1976 period (the Maoist era in China) and the period from 1976 until today (the reform era). The primary journals I have been working with and will continue to focus on include *China Quarterly* and *China Journal*, the top journals on contemporary China. I will track the evolution of economic reforms in China and the varying impacts on women in the different time periods. The variables I will use in my assessment will include gender-wage disparity, upward mobility, Chinese Communist Party (CCP) attitudes toward women, and public opinion of women in the workplace.

I intend to employ a few methods of collecting and analyzing relevant data. I will rely on a variety of official sources, such as media reports and statistical yearbooks to examine gender-wage disparity. I will investigate access to higher education in order to determine levels of upward mobility. I will also look at
revisions to the state constitution as well as track the change in number of women in the Politburo, Central Committee, State Council, etc. in order to measure CCP attitudes toward women. In addition to those sources, I intend to use survey data collected by Professor Dickson regarding attitudes toward women in the workplace. This will aid in determining to what degree women in the workforce have become a social norm in China.

In the second phase, I will construct timelines for comparison. The base timeline will lay out the basic economic reforms and key turning points in Chinese history. The second timeline will be built from the research in phase one. I will note the dates of key articles and studies that reveal things like why women decided to migrate and what kinds of jobs they were pursuing in different years. In the third phase, I will develop specific hypotheses on the relationship between economic reform and changes in female work outside the home. In order to formulate such a hypothesis, I ask how do these aforementioned variables influence the degree of mobility that women in China have today? In the fourth and final phase, I will draw conclusions about the effect that China’s economic reforms have had on women in the workforce.

I carefully selected my faculty mentor based on both his qualifications as well as my experience working with him. Professor Dickson’s *China’s Domestic and Foreign Policies* course provided a solid and extensive foundation of the history of Chinese social and economic policy. This course, coupled with my previous *Scopes and Methods of Political Science* course with Professor Douglas Steinel, provided the background knowledge and personal capability of constructing an effective research design to achieve my goals for this research in the coming year. Beyond being a Chinese politics expert, Professor Dickson has a specific interest in the consequences of economic reform in China. His extensive personal research on the topic of economic reform has been extremely helpful as I put together my initial reading list and will be even more helpful as I research the topic in more detail throughout the year. I know that we will work well together, because we have already had experience doing so in his own course when he helped me to develop another research project on China.

I have a desire to research and delve deeply into a topic to the depth that would justify its publication. This opportunity would combine my goal to achieve such publication with my passion for studying Chinese politics and the advancement of women’s rights on a global scale. The funding from the Elliott School would be fundamental to my success in the realization of my personal academic goal. I would use the stipend to help defray the costs associated with research such as photocopying costs and transportation to the Library of Congress. This project is also valuable to me because it would serve as the foundation for my Fulbright application next year. I intend to use my findings to fuel new, deeper questions that will necessitate my travel to China in order to conduct research.