Buddha In Clouds, 2008
Thailand, Lopburi P Province (Changwat)
Worldwide Photo Project - Thailand

The Worldwide Photo Project, an Explanation

The Worldwide Photo Project is my attempt to photograph every one of the 3978 provinces* (all the sub-national states of all the world's countries). The 3978 provinces are listed in SISO[*1] (i.e. , Shea-modified ISO 3166-2 list of Subnational territories) a list I created in 2003, based on the International Standards Organization's 3166-2 standard. Despite the fact that nowadays, there are cameras everywhere and more than enough photographs of everything, I argue that there is merit in having this work through the eyes of a single photographer. To date, I have visited over 2320 provinces and photographed more than 1000.

My outlandish plan has three parts. The first is to photograph every one of the world's 3978 provinces in my lifetime, which is conveniently situated at the beginning of the 3rd millennium. The second part is to invite a photographer a hundred years hence to repeat the project, photographing those areas that today's 3978 provinces currently occupy, followed by a comparative exhibit between how the world looked in my lifetime and a hundred years hence. The third part is for this same project to be repeated at the beginning of the fourth millennium, a thousand years hence, followed by another comparative exhibit. The contrast will no doubt be stunning. Perhaps poignant. Certainly educational.

United Kingdom, Tower Hamlets Province (County), London
Worldwide Photo Project - United Kingdom
London's population represents nearly every ethnicity in the world. I took this photograph with an f4 500 mm Canon lens from across the street.

Futher Explanation of SISO*[1], Shea-Modified ISO-3166 List of Sub-national Territories

SISO, based on the ISO 3166 standard, represents the "playing field" of the Worldwide Photo Project

In 2003, I devised SISO (the Shea-modified ISO 3166-2 list of subnational territories). Since countries like Singapore did not have any subnational territories at that time, they were not listed on the ISO's 3166-2 list. By adding them back and making a few logical adjustments, I arrived at a list representing the provinces of the world, 3978 in all. (That is, SISO is a list of the first level divisions of every nation in the world, for example, the states of the United States, prefectures of Japan, provinces of France, rayons of Azerbaijan, counties of the UK, divisions of Myanmar, and so on.), My Worldwide Photo project aims to photograph all of them. At the time of this writing, I have visited 2313 provinces and photographed over 1000. Other extreme travelers have argued that the ISO 3166-2 list is changing all the time. My rebuttal is that it is important to have an unchanging standard as a benchmark. Otherwise, there would be no basis for comparison over time. My answer is SISO. This will allow any traveler in any era for a sensible basis to compare where they have been and what they have done with respect to travelers in history, such as myself or Jorge Sanchez.

London alone holds 33 boroughs, which the United Kingdom classifies as "subnational territories" under the International Standards Organizations 3166-2 standard. These comprise over 1/10th of the subnational territories of the United Kingdom, which, in 2003, numbered 232.

*1 - SISO - In simple terms, SISO is a list of all the provinces of all the countries of the world. Using ISO 3166-2, I created SISO in 2003 in order to establish a permanent and unchanging list of all the territories of the world so that travelers, whether now or a hundred years from now, would have a benchmark upon which to measure their travels and also to compare where they had been in comparison to other travelers, whether in my lifetime or beyond it. Since there were many lists of countries and places, and since this kept changing and expanding every year, I wanted to establish a permanent list that was not arbitrary, but rather that was objective. I also wanted to establish a list with sufficient detail that it adequately addressed the myriad places, many of which are little-known, so that an extreme traveler would have a lifetime of places to visit and study.

The Methodology Used to Create SISO

Using the 2003 version of the International Standards Organization's 3166-2 list of all the provinces of the world (which they call 'sub-national territories'), which numbered 3931 in all, I created my list of 3978 provinces.* I achieved this by:

a) *deleting one each of two overlapping places:*

  i) *Taiwan as a province of China ("CN-71";"Taiwan) because it was represented on the same list as a country with constituent territories (e.g., "TW-CHA*";"Changhua" district)*

  ii) *US Minor Outlying Islands as a province of the United States because it was also represented on the same list by its constituent territories, such as Wake Island UM-79";"Wake Island".*

b) *Adding back 49 territories that were acknowledged on ISO's national list (3166-1) but not on their subnational list (3166-2) because these places did not have any provinces within them at the time: Andorra, Anguilla, Antarctica, Antigua and Barbuda, Aruba, Barbados, Bermuda, Bouvet island, British Indian Ocean Territory, Cayman Islands, Christmas Island, Cocos (Keeling) Islands, Cook Islands, Dominica, Falkland Islands (Malvinas), Faroe Islands, French Guiana, Gibraltar, Greenland, Grenada, Guadeloupe, Heard Island and McDonald Islands, Holy See (Vatican City State), Liechtenstein, Macedonia (The former Yugoslav Republic of), Malta, Martinique, Mayotte, Monaco, Montserrat, Nauru, Netherlands Antilles, Niue, Norfolk Island, Palau, Palestinian Territory (Occupied), Pitcairn, Réunion, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, San Marino, Seychelles, Singapore, South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands, Tokelau, Tonga, Turks and Caicos Islands, Tuvalu, Virgin Islands (British).*

c) *The math therefore is 3931 – 2 + 49 = 3978. This is the number of provinces in SISO's "Combined ISO 3166 list."*

As of the time of this writing, SISO – although it has been mentioned in the press - is mostly known only to a very small list of extreme travelers who take an interest in such detail. Even with its limited public exposure, it is part of an ongoing controversy amongst extreme travelers as to what constitutes an appropriate measurement of travel for those who have already been to every country in the world. There are many existing country lists (e.g., DX Ham Radio Operators, Globetrotters, Guinness, ISO 3166-2, Most Traveled People, Travelers Century Club, United Nations registry of countries).

The following factors make the SISO list important:

a) *SISO is the only permanent list. The problem that I have with all of the other lists is that they are change constantly. Unless there is a permanent list, there is no objective way to compare notes with other travelers today let alone compare notes between a traveler today and one 100 years from now. Even the ISO list changes. SISO will allow for travelers now and in the future to compare where they have been and to organize notes and photos in a uniform way.*

b) *SISO is a more detailed list than the others.*

c) *SISO is based on an internationally recognized standard that was compiled by constituent coun-*

tries. All of the other lists, with the exception of ISO and United Nations, are based on arbitrary standards.

    d)   *SISO takes ISO 3166-2 and makes is user-friendly. In addition to the permanent "Combined ISO 3166-2 list" SISO also contains an Official Unlisted Places list, which allows for recognition of other "Official" lists (e.g., Travelers Century Club) that are not represented under the "Combined ISO 3166-2 list."***

JeffShea.org will be coming out with a Club for others to join, with an interactive software for input of visits to each of the 3978 places. For more information about SISO, see JeffShea.org.

*In 2003, I discovered that the International Standards Organization, based in Geneva, Switzerland had a list of "subnational territories." It contained a list of all the territories of the world, as reported to it by each constituent country. This is known as ISO 3166-2. They also have a list of national territories, ISO 3166-1... I purchased the list from ISO in 2003. On studying the ISO 3166-2 list, I discovered that some adjustments needed to be made to the subnational list in order for it to include those countries on the national list that were not represented on the subnational list because they did not themselves have provinces. (The process I used is described above under "The Methodology Used to Create SISO.")

**SISO consists of the Combined ISO 3166-2 list (compiled from 3166-1 and 3166-2) and the "Official Unlisted Places" list. SISO is thus comprised of a list based on ISO, and an additional list based on territories recognized by other official organizations but not covered under the Combined ISO 3166-2 list. The Official Unlisted Places list is currently comprised of those places on the Guinness list and the Travelers Century Club list that are not mentioned in the Combined ISO list. This list is intended to be only for officially listed places that are not represented by the Combined ISO 3166-2 list. In the future, the Official Unlisted Places list may expand to include other officially listed places that are currently not included. An example of other official lists include the DX (Ham Radio Operator's) list. The Official Unlisted Places list will change but not the Combined ISO 3166-2 list.

A Journal Entry on Photography

I am just discovering that the thing I enjoy most about photography is sitting and watching and waiting for the light to reach its full potential over a beautiful scene. In this sense, photography is a practice of seeing with intensity rather than merely looking. It forces one to be patient and to look for form, beauty, light, movement - what a delight! It is tranquility and contentment in itself. It meets the two counter-parts of happiness, which I have deduced to be vitalness and contentment, for it forces one to concen-trate on nature's vitalness while enjoying the contentment of the beautiful scene. In this view, my photography becomes experiential, that is, the primary purpose or objective is to go through the experience. Although hopefully the photographs come out well, it wouldn't be a total loss if they didn't, because the memories of tranquility and peace will be unforgettable and add the real value to the experience, if not to the photographs as well.

I suspect this tranquility of the photographer may show up in the photograph. I find it interesting to ponder that with some photographs, it's such a hassle to get them, then, if the photographs were lost, it would be only a frustrating memory, whereas with these I am taking, it is so enjoyable to take the photos, it is a worthwhile thing in itself.

June 18, 1990 - Rumsiki, Cameroon