Stalking Cajuns — Japanese style

Hiroji Kubota's imagination dwells in the place where people and their land come together. This week, the people and the land are Cajun.

Kubota, a photographer who devoted six years to his landmark "China" collection, has turned his lens back to America in honor of the upcoming 500th anniversary of Columbus' voyage.

Kubota has already traveled 90,000 miles to complete 60 percent of his photography for his "America" project for publishers W.W. Norton Co. in New York. He spent Monday in a Lafayette motel room, waiting for the right combination of fog and early morning light to capture the Atchafalaya swamp on film.

"When I started, I was told, 'Oh, you must look for Cajuns,'" said Kubota. "But they didn't know anything about Cajuns. They didn't know where to find Cajuns, and of course I didn't either.'

So, two years ago, Kubota found the name of Daily Advertiser photographer P.C. Piazza in a directory of journalists. Now Kubota knows where to find Cajuns. He'll shoot the swamp when he can, but the people photographs must wait.

"For that, I would like to photograph the Cajun people at a kind of festival — a crawfish festival, a frog festival," Kubota said. "Maybe next year.

He can wait. Kubota is nothing if not patient.

Born in Japan in 1939, Kubota studied political science in his native country before coming to New York in 1962 to study photography. He spent six years there and in Chicago. He returned to Tokyo in 1965.

Since then, his work has been published in Time, LIFE, Newsweek and National Geographic. He covered the fall of Saigon and Phnom Penh for Newsweek in 1975.

Four years later, as a member of the prestigious Magnum Photos agency, Kubota embarked on an epic six-year journey to China, negotiating with communist authorities for permission to travel all over that nation. In his book, "China," he admits to only two disappointments: He was denied permission to photograph the terra cotta warriors from the tomb of First Emperor and the waterfall of Huko on the Yellow River.

A theme runs through the "China" collection: Big, colorful, panoramic landscapes serving as backdrops before which ordinary people perform everyday tasks. The faces of the people often seem expressionless, but they meld with the landscapes and cityscapes to create expressions of their own.

"Landscapes influence people, their way of life, their sense of beauty, their culture," Kubota said.

In one photograph from Xinjiang in northern China, Mongols in bright holiday garb walk across a snowy plain to visit relatives as they celebrate the Mongol new year. In another, fishermen set out in boats at dusk, with the mountains of Guilin silhouetted against the sky to serve as a background.

Kubota's deadline is January 1992. The "America" project will be published later that year. In the meantime, he'll keep looking for the images that live on film the way they do in his photographer's eye. He'll look for new perspectives on standard subjects like the Grand Canyon. And he'll look for scenes that, like the Cajun festivals, show the interplay between people and their environment.

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Staff Writer

Japanese

I refuse to photograph any leaders, any political leaders," Kubota says. "I refuse even to photograph the president of your country. That's not my job. Everybody knows what he looks like.

Instead, he tries to capture the everyday lives of real people.

"My fundamental mission that I'm trying to cover is diversity," Kubota said. "The people, the culture, the diversity, the landscapes. And when it comes to diversity, there's no place like America.'

In his travels, Kubota said he saw a pluralistic culture not reflected in images seen overseas.

He also noted how, as diverse as the nation is, there are still vast areas like Montana or Alaska that are, except for native Americans, all white.

And he was fascinated by the number of churches. "This is a deeply Christian country," Kubota said.

Another image stands out: "Shopping malls," he said. "Shopping malls look identical everywhere.'

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