

Author, Journalist Andres Oppenheimer speaks to Costa Rican audience

By Kenneth D. MacHarg

Costa Rica could become an international health-care center, serving the medical needs of the exploding retiree population in the United States.

That prediction came from renowned journalist and author Andrés Oppenheimer who spoke at the Libreria Internacional bookstore in Escazú on April 18.

Pointing to the country's excellent quality of medical care, the low costs in comparison to medical costs in the U.S. and the agreeable climate here, Oppenheimer said that with the retirement of baby boomers just getting underway, there is an unlimited opportunity for Costa Rican medical facilities and doctors to begin offering and marketing their services to foreign consumers.

"Baby boomers are not always able to pay the high costs of medical care in the United States," Oppenheimer told an audience of over 100. "For that reason, they will begin to look elsewhere for medical services."

The *Miami Herald's* Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist and television host was in San José to attend a book signing for his newest bestseller *Cuentos Chinos; el engaño de Washington, la mentira populista y la esperanza de América Latina*.

The book, which challenges Latin American countries to look at the economic success of countries such as China, Ireland, the Czech Republic, India and others, has been listed on best-seller lists in many countries, including Costa Rica where Libreria Internacional places it in fourth place among non-fiction books. Oppenheimer says that over 70,000 copies were sold in the first three months after publication.

Oppenheimer, who is Argentinean, reiterated the various themes of his book when he told the audience that Latin American countries must get rid of the old polemical theories that are limiting economic and political development. "The rest of the world is moving ahead," he said referring to China, a nation with a communist government but an open economic plan and free trade agreements that encourage investment and development.

Charging that many Latin American nations find themselves hampered by a theoretical discussion of whether their political and economic models are faithful to the principles of Simon Bolivar or protect the sovereignty of the country, he said that governments must focus on moving ahead instead of looking back.

Oppenheimer said that the questions asked by Chinese leaders when they make a political or business decision are not whether it reflects communist philosophy but whether the policy will develop the country economically and help to reduce poverty.

While traveling to China to research the book, Oppenheimer said that he read an article in the Asia edition of the *Wall Street Journal* reporting that Venezuela's Hugo Chavez had

closed all of the McDonald's restaurants in Venezuela for three days because of a political dispute with the United States.

Upon arriving in Beijing, he learned that an official of the McDonald's chain was in China to negotiate the opening of 600 additional restaurants. Oppenheimer contrasted those two positions as one that looks back to 19th century political philosophies and another that is looking forward to the 22nd Century.

The journalist challenged Latin American countries to move beyond exporting primarily raw materials or products such as Costa Rica's bananas and coffee or other nation's minerals or lumber.

Pointing to Finland, he demonstrated how that country has used its timber resources to first produce furniture and later to develop furniture design and related products and services for export. "Unfortunately, Latin American countries simply export wood," he said.

Using the Seattle-based Starbucks Coffee Company as an example, Oppenheimer said that a cup of certain Starbucks Coffee products retail for \$2.80 in the United States. Of that, only one percent returns to coffee growers in Costa Rica. The other 99 percent goes to the Starbucks company and middle-men for packaging, publicity, marketing and sales. He challenged Costa Rican coffee concerns to develop some of those services here so that they can retain a part of the 99 percent that is earned outside of the country.

Oppenheimer said that countries such as Costa Rica that do not become involved in free trade agreements will find themselves on the losing end of investment and commerce. He said that with CAFTA, which Costa Rica's congress has not yet passed, the country has the opportunity to attract investments and expand trade.

The author challenged Costa Ricans to look at the example of Ireland that was one of Europe's poorest countries 11 years ago and today ranks as the second most prosperous nation in its region. He said that the country advanced economically by forging an agreement between business owners and trade unions, opening its markets to free trade agreements and attracting investors. Whereas Ireland was losing workers to other countries because of unemployment just over a decade ago, today it is receiving immigrants to fill available job opportunities.

In a conversation after the presentation, Oppenheimer said that it is too early to know what impact the book is having among Latin America's movers and shakers. However, he said that he is aware that the book has been read by most of the region's presidents.

The author told the daily newspaper *La Nación* that the book has sold well because it appeared at a time when Latin American nations are asking what kind of political model they want to follow, i.e., capitalism or socialism and whether or not they want to participate in the process of globalization.

At the book signing, he encouraged Latin American political leaders to look at Brazil's socialist president Luiz Ignacio "Lula" da Silva and the recent socialist governments of Chile as models for their own development. Terming the leaders of those two countries as "responsible socialists," he indicated that other countries could follow suit in forging their own political future.

Cuentos Chinos is available only in Spanish and can be purchased at many San José area bookstores including Libreria Internacional or on line at sites such as www.amazon.com.

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