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"A little trip with unmentionable cargo": Border Crossing in the Age of Chinese Exclusion on the U.S.-Mexico Borderlands

In a letter to his friend and roommate Haden Clarke, William "Bill" Lancaster, a famed British aviator, expressed his desire to "take a chance and make a little trip with unmentionable cargo" to secure funds to support his wife Jessie M. Keith-Miller. This voyage, in fact, would involve a plan among several co-conspirators to smuggle Chinese crossers, opium, and gold from Mexico to the United States. Mexico, especially Sonora, was in the midst of anti-Chinese fervor. The aviator and his co-conspirators hoped to capitalize on this fervor by charging Chinese fleeing the state up to $1,000 to fly from Sonora to the United States. Their 1929 scheme to smuggle people, drugs, and precious metals to the United States would come to light three years later in a Miami courtroom after a suspicious suicide led law enforcement to a series documents related to their smuggling scheme. Investigators unearthed letters, receipts, and pictures that revealed the illicit complexity of their smuggling operations.[1]

Following in the footsteps of scholars like Grace Pena Delgado, Kelly Lytle Hernandez, Erika Lee, and Julian Lim, my research examines those other "unlawful" means of immigration, specifically focusing on Chinese and Syrian immigration into the United States through the Mexican and Gulf Coast border from 1882 to 1930. It also examines the social, legal, ethnic, and transnational interconnectivities between Americans, Chinese, Mexicans, and in at least one case, Syrians. The intermingling of cultures and ethnic profiles in a borderland setting raises questions of agency, policy, and manipulation. Fear and racism generated the "illegal" immigrant, which in turn conjured images of those who defied United States law.

Current existing scholarship on Chinese border crossers has focused on Pacific coast and western borderlands activity, especially in California, Arizona, and Oregon. The cases used in my research decentralize that network, moving the occurrence of the activity east towards New Mexico, Texas, and the Gulf of Mexico. The western-eastern dissection in U.S. borderlands history, specifically between Texas/New Mexico and California, is one that my research connects by examining these trafficking routes and "hot-spots". Likewise, including the Gulf of Mexico as its own border carries the borderlands geographic narrative further east. With this, the implication should be clear that Chinese immigration and border crossing into the United States was not solely a western phenomenon, but rather a southern borderlands occurrence. Mapping and visualizing the Chinese and contraband smuggling routes between Mexico, Florida, Texas, New Mexico, and Arizona allows us to visualize the human-forged networks and activity between cities, states, and nations while also complicating our definitions of borderlands.

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[11] Letter from William Lancaster to Haden Clarke, Report of Investigation of Status in the Case of Mark G. Tancrel, May 23, 1932, File 55776/982, Subject and Policy Files 1893-1957, Immigration and Naturalization Records, Record Group 85, National Archives Building, Washington, D.C.