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**Crossing America's Borders:
Chinese Immigrants in the Southwesterns of the 1920s and 1930s**

Philippa Gates

Today, when we think of the film Western, we think of a genre dominated by Anglo-American heroes conquering the various struggles and obstacles that the nineteenth-century frontier presented to settlers and gunslingers alike—from the daunting terrain and inclement environment of deserts, mountains, and plains to the violent opposition posed by cattle ranchers and Native Americans. What we tend to forget, most likely because the most famous Westerns of the last seventy-five years also forgot, is that Chinese immigrants played an important role in that frontier history. As Edward Buscombe confirms, “[g]iven the importance of their contribution, particularly to the construction of the Central Pacific railroad, the Chinese are under-represented in the Western” (86). In agreement, Hsuan Hsu writes that Asian Americans have been “written out of dominant narratives” of the West, and when they are included, “it is often through stereotypes such as . . . the laundrymen, prostitutes, and cooks that infuse western settings with ‘local color’” (145). Surprisingly, Disney’s critically derided summer tentpole film The Lone Ranger (Gore Verbinski, 2013) recently reminded us of that contribution. As Glenn Whipp suggests, The Lone Ranger “looked at the mythology of America’s westward expansion with a progressive sensibility that you wouldn’t expect from either producer Jerry Bruckheimer or the Walt Disney Co.” (par. 9). More specifically, as French critic Jacky Goldberg noted in his review, the film suggests that “America was founded on the theft and unlawful killing of Indians, and the exploitation of Chinese immigrants” (par. 4).¹

The nineteenth century saw an influx of Chinese immigrants, originally because of the

gold rush in California and later to build North America's cross-continental railroads that would connect the untamed West with the settled East. Between 1848 and 1852, 25,000 Chinese immigrants came to California; by the 1870s, Chinese immigrants constituted 10 percent of the state's population; and by 1882, 110,000 Chinese immigrants lived in the United States, mainly in urban centers in California and other western states (Powell 41-60). The increasingly visible population incited social fears that Chinese immigrants would eventually outnumber Anglo-Americans and override "American" culture with their own. As Gary Okihiro argues, the "Yellow Peril" was a product of a rationalizing discourse linked to Western colonial expansion: "[t]he fear, whether real or imagined, arose from the fact of the rise of nonwhite peoples and their defiance of white supremacy" (138).

The result was the attempt to control Chinese immigration with the passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 and, later, prevent it altogether with the 1924 Immigration Act. The 1882 Exclusion Act excluded Chinese laborers but did permit a few select classes of Chinese merchants, students, teachers, travelers, and diplomats to apply for admission to the United States (however, it did exclude all Chinese immigrants from gaining American citizenship). The 1924 Immigration Act prevented further immigration by excluding all classes of Chinese immigrants and, as Mae M. Ngai confirms, was "the nation's first comprehensive restriction law" (3) that established "numerical limits on immigration and a global racial and national hierarchy that favored some immigrants over others" (27); in other words, Europeans/"whites" were welcomed, whereas non-Europeans/"colored races" were rejected. Even if only imagined, "Yellow Peril" fears were regarded as founded in reality, especially in the urban centers of the western states where the existing immigrant population was visible, and American film producers exploited this panic.

In the 1920s and '30s, many films focused on the smuggling of illegal Chinese immigrants—whether men for work or women for prostitution. Although a topic for a handful of social dramas such as The Miracle Makers (W. S. Van Dyke, 1923), Speed Wild (Harry Garson, 1925), Let Women Alone (Paul Powell, 1925), Masked Emotions (David Butler/Kenneth Hawks, 1929), and Lazy River (George B. Seitz, 1934), as well as newspaper-crime films such as I Cover the Waterfront (James Cruze, 1933), and Yellow Cargo (Crane Wilbur, 1936), the smuggling of Chinese people was also common in Westerns. According to the AFI Catalog, Chinese characters and actors appear in minor roles in at least seventy-eight silent and classical-era Westerns as cooks (e.g., Chester Gan in Drift Fence [Otho Lovering, 1936]), laundrymen (e.g., Sammee Tong in The Iron Sheriff [Sidney Salkow, 1957]), and restaurant owners (e.g., Lee Tung Foo in Strange Gamble [George Archainbaud, 1948]).² These seventy-eight Westerns ranged from A-Westerns set in the nineteenth-century frontier to B-Westerns set in the modern West. Of the latter group, several Westerns—more specifically, “Southwesterns”—offered plots that connected Chinese immigrants to crime through the smuggling of opium, laborers, and prostitutes into the United States from China via Mexico.

Southwesterns were lower-budget and were typically shot with cheap sets, grainy film stock, and few retakes (what we would call today B-Westerns), set in the contemporaneous Southwest (i.e., California, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas) near the border with Mexico: it was this borderland setting that invited stories of smuggling and border penetration.³ According to the AFI Catalog, of the 182 Westerns released between 1910 and 1960 that are set in the Mexican–American border region, 39 offer plots centered on smuggling various kinds of things, from opium (Hands across the Border [R-C Pictures Corp., 1926]) and liquor (The Rum Runners [Aywon Film, 1923]) to silver (Ride 'Em Cowgirl [Samuel Diege, 1939]), dynamite (Border

Devils [William Nigh, 1932]), and counterfeit money (Under Mexicali Stars [George Blair, 1950]), as well as guns (Lawless Border [J. P. McCarthy, 1935]).⁴ In trade paper reviews at the time of their release, these Westerns set along the borderlands were also dubbed “cactus dramas” or were said to have a “sagebrush script.”⁵ Southwesterns exploited the borderland setting to offer exciting smuggling plots that connected crime to Chinese immigrants—through opium in films such as Unknown Ranger (Aywon Film, 1920), The Loser’s End (William Steiner, 1924), Border Sheriff (Robert North Bradbury, 1926), Hands across the Border (R-C Pictures, 1926), and Skedaddle Gold (Richard Thorpe, 1927) and through immigrants in films such as Sky High (Lynn Reynolds, 1922), Twin Triggers (Richard Thorpe, 1926), Roarin’ Broncs (Richard Thorpe, 1927), On the Border (William C. McGann, 1930), Riding Speed (Jay Wilsey, 1934), Hair-Trigger Casey (Harry Fraser, 1936), and Border Phantom (S. Roy Luby, 1937). Although the opium-smuggling films connect crime to China, they rarely feature Chinese characters. In contrast, the immigrant-smuggling films present Chinese people as a physical and visible alien threat to America’s national borders, and it is these films that are the focus of this article.

The Southwestern sided with its Anglo-American hero, who tried to contain the threat posed to American national identity that Chinese people represented with their unsanctioned breaching of the Mexican border into the United States. Perhaps today it seems strange that, of all genres, it was the lighthearted, often comedic B-level Western that explored the serious issues of immigration and human smuggling most frequently; however, the concerns arising from illegal Chinese immigration stemmed from the same politics of national identity that underpinned the myths of Manifest Destiny and the Western hero in the historical Western. As Robert G. Lee confirms, the fear of the “Oriental” was the fear of “pollution”—the “inadvertent crossing of a boundary” (2-3). Therefore, while, as Cheli Reutter states, Westerns “literalize an

ideological preoccupation with American nation building” (188), Chinese immigrants are absent from that myth. Although the majority of A-Westerns omitted Chinese immigrants, as this article will explore, the B-Westerns of the 1920s and '30s went a step further, arguing that it was the prevention of Chinese immigration that was necessary to make America exceptional. As Roderick McGillis argues, “[t]he B Western is, by definition, a narrative of imperialism” in which the hero “confronts several types of Otherness,” only one example of which is the Chinese (130). Although scholars have detailed the historical realities of Chinese immigration across the Mexican–US border,⁶ they have all but ignored the reflection and distortion of those realities in American films, especially in the genre of the Western.⁷ As this article will demonstrate, there were many Westerns centered on smuggling plots related to Chinese immigration, and the borders that these films were concerned with were as much cultural and racial as territorial. In other words, the presence of illegal Chinese immigrants assisted the genre of the Western to confirm the borders of American national identity.

“B” Is for Borderlands

The fear of the “Oriental” manifested itself in American film through plots focused on smuggling and the penetration of the US border in the Southwest (California, Arizona, and New Mexico), the Northeast (New York and Maine), and the Northwest (Washington).⁸ As Dominique Brégent-Heald argues, in classical Hollywood film, both the Canadian and Mexican borders were regarded as “soft” borders through which American national security could be compromised (12). In terms of smuggling over the Canadian–US border, the majority of films about this are “Northwesterns” in which Canada is cast as a kind of northern Wild West, often with the American iconography of gunslingers and saloons but with the Canadian Mountie cast as the

hero who “always gets his man.”⁹ Many types of goods were smuggled across the northwestern border, including opium and Chinese immigrants in films such as Boundary Rider (Wharton, 1914), Yellow Traffic (Olaf Skavlan, 1914), The River’s End (Victor Heerman and Marshall Neilan, 1920), and The Cyclone (Clifford Smith, 1920). Although both America’s southern and northern borders were regarded as places of potential leakage into the States, as Brégent-Heald argues, the two borders were differentiated in that Canada’s tended to embody “orderliness” and the “sublime,” whereas Mexico’s was portrayed as “chaotic and dark” (2). American newspapers at the time noted this perceived difference as well. In a 1924 article in the Los Angeles Times, Frederic J. Haskin reported,

The Canadian border, while requiring vigilant watching, presents the fewest difficulties. This is partly because Canada has practically the same immigration restrictions. . . . [T]he Mexican border, with its long stretch of dense wilderness offering excellent cover for smuggling activities, is an extremely serious problem. Here the bootlegging of aliens has become an extensive industry. (12)

Indeed, although the Canadian border-set Northwestern abandoned the topics of smuggling Chinese immigrants and opium into the United States in the mid-1920s, these topics remained popular in the Mexico-borderlands Southwestern until the late 1930s.

The Southwesterns are not technically Westerns as we define the genre today, in terms of the former’s setting in the twentieth century. As Larry Langman argues, “[t]he [Western] genre generally applies to that post-Civil War period beginning with the great cattle drives and ending around 1890” (ix). The independent, Poverty Row, and studio B-Westerns that this article examines offer an image of the modern Southwest at the time of release: in other words, the action of the films’ narratives is set in the 1920s or ’30s—notably, not in the nineteenth century.

Langman uses the term “modern” to describe these “westerns which introduced cars, airplanes, radios, motorcycles and other contemporary items” (xvii). Although Peter Stanfield takes care to highlight the differences in terms of setting and themes of the B-Westerns, most scholars do not acknowledge the twentieth-century setting of the B-Western. Scott Simmon does recognize a difference in setting between the A- and B-Westerns but argues that B-Westerns “seem irresponsibly cavalier about the era in which they are set,” sliding between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and never confirming the period of their setting (151). In contrast, I argue that the modern-set B-Western highlights its twentieth-century setting with planes, Ford Model Ts on ranches, and women dressed like flappers and engages with modern-day issues, including the smuggling of Chinese immigrants over the Mexican border. As Stanfield suggests, the B-Westerns’ “principal concerns are situated not within the paradigm of the frontier myth but in the tensions created by modernisation” (Hollywood 8). He argues that the cowboys of silent film appealed to a working-class audience as “a character type able to mediate conflicts between capital and labor, modernity and tradition, industry and agriculture, urban and rural lifestyles,” and he regards the B-Western of the 1930s as an extension of these themes, representing “a modern rural identity [with] western settings and situations act[ing] as a mask for contemporary environments and concerns” (Stanfield, Horse 5-6). With the modern era came the need to defend the America that the Western heroes had fought hard to create.

The films that I discuss in this article offer this image of the West as civilized and modernizing and center on contemporary concerns impacting the isolated and underpopulated borderlands, such as illegal activities on the Mexican border. In other words, the traditional A-Western, from The Covered Wagon (James Cruze, 1923) to The Searchers (John Ford, 1956), focused on westward expansionism and conquering the frontier through settlement, military

action, the displacement of Native Americans, and the coming of the railroad. In contrast, the Southwestern explored the problems in defending, in the twentieth century, the borders of America that the nineteenth century established. In common, however, all of these Westerns are informed by race: whereas it is Native Americans in the historical Western who are regarded as a potential barrier to the settlement of the West, it is Chinese immigrants in the modern Southwestern who are regarded as a threat to the uniting of the United States.

Richard Jensen argues that it was silent star Tom Mix's films that set into play the emphasis on the contemporary in the genre of the Western until the 1950s:

The heavy use of modern cars and planes in Tom's films set a pattern which B westerns would follow for another 30 years. The blending of the new west and the old west made the stories seem immediate and freed Tom and other cowboy stars from having to set all of their films in the Old West (92).

As Jensen explains, Mix's "modernized westerns often mirrored life in the great southwestern deserts": for example, people still traveled by horse and buggy on dirt roads, and electricity was not common until the Depression, when President Roosevelt signed the Rural Electrification Act (92). After filming with Mix on location, actress Colleen Moore described Prescott, Arizona, as "still really the old West, not long removed from pioneer days" (qtd. in Jensen 83). Yet, importantly, these films are not nostalgic for the loss of the Old West and instead embrace the coming of modernity as a continuation of America's nation building into the twentieth century. In the Southwestern, modernity is represented by automobiles (Hair-Trigger Casey), airplanes (Sky High), and independent women (Riding Speed), all of which were regarded as progressive and positive, even if with them came modern problems, including the smuggling of Chinese immigrants across the border. Writing in 1936, Leong Gor Yun confirms, "It is an open secret

that the Chinese are smuggled in by way of Mexico. . . . Today the wonders of transportation, automobiles and airplanes, bring them speedily in—and just as speedily out” (103-31). This connection between human trafficking and modern traffic is unavoidable, as Kristen Whissel argues:

“Traffic” initially identified the circulation of goods between “distant or distinct communities” and thereby implied the development of new forms of spatial, temporal, economic, and social intercourses around emerging commercial practices. It came to include not only the commodities but also the vehicles, bodies, and disembodied communications that move, in one form or another, through the landscape, as well as the rate charged for such circulation and the profits derived therefrom. (4)

The Southwestern is differentiated from the traditional Western by its setting and focus on the modern and its modern traffic (cars, trucks, and planes) that moves illegal immigrants across the border.

“Yellow Peril” Fears

The passing of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 had seen the illegal smuggling of Chinese across the Mexican–American and Canadian–American borders, as well as between Florida and Cuba, become a thriving enterprise. Estimates suggest that at least 17,300 Chinese immigrants entered the United States illegally by way of Canada or Mexico between 1882 and 1920. As Erika Lee explains,

Deteriorating political and economic conditions in south China, the availability of jobs in the United States, the U.S. Bureau of Immigration’s harsh enforcement procedures at regular ports of entry such as San Francisco, and the Chinese belief that the exclusion

laws were unjust—all had the unintended consequence of turning illegal immigration via the borders into a profitable and thriving business. (54)

In response, in 1908, the US Immigration Service established the Mounted Guard to watch the Mexican–American border; in 1908, the “Chinese Division” was created as part of the Immigration Service to handle illegal Chinese immigration specifically; and in 1924, the US Border Patrol was launched, the first officers hired for which were transfers from the “Chinese Division.” As Ngai argues, the Immigration Act of 1924 “articulated a new sense of territoriality, which was marked by unprecedented awareness and state surveillance of the nation’s contiguous land borders” (3). Despite the fact that Southwesterns of the time offered smuggling plots around alcohol, silver, and narcotics, the main job of the Border Patrol was, as Kelly Lytle Hernández states, “to enforce U.S. immigration restrictions comprehensively by preventing unauthorized border crossings and policing borderland regions to detect and arrest persons defined as unauthorized immigrants” (2). As former Chinese inspector Clifford Alan Perkins explains, with Chinese inspectors, immigration inspectors, and customs line riders working together, it was difficult for undocumented immigrants to enter the United States through busy ports and towns, and smuggling shifted to “the sparsely inhabited sections of southern New Mexico, Arizona and California” (9). Indeed, as Patrick Ettinger confirms, “[b]y the end of the 1920s, highly visible immigration inspection and patrol forces had been put in place on the nation’s borders, and they enjoyed some considerable successes in enforcing immigration laws” (162).

The Chinese smuggling plot became a common one in Westerns set along the Mexican border because the Border Patrol provided ideal frontier heroes for moviegoing audiences—and the Chinese, ideal villains. American audiences would have been familiar with tales of Chinese border crossing and “Oriental” villains through sensationalist newspaper stories that circulated in

local and national papers. In general, the Chinese were characterized differently than other immigrant groups in the United States. For example, whereas Secretary of the Treasury William Windom described immigrants of European heritage as “naturalized citizens,” he described Chinese immigrants as trying “to force their way into the United States” and being “at liberty to invade our territory”; similarly, the Commissioner-General of Immigration blamed border issues on the “difficulties inherent in the character of the Mongolian race” (qtd. in E. Lee 70). And as Erika Lee explains, though Mexicans moving across the border outnumbered the Chinese by more than eighty times in a thirty-year period, they crossed the border largely without restriction.¹⁰ In other words, in the United States, there was systematic racialization and criminalization of specifically Chinese immigrants. Indeed, Chinese immigrants were the first group in the United States to be marked as “illegal aliens” (Romero 12). Thus, the visibility of Chinese immigrants in America’s cities, the well-established trope of the “Oriental” villain in other media, and the perceived connections between Chinese immigration, opium dens, and prostitution saw the recycling of “Yellow Peril” tropes in the Southwestern. As Richard Slotkin argues,

Like any new pioneer in a new territory, the movies began by adapting to the environment, which in the case of the Western was both a real place and a set of myths associated with that place. In the end they colonized this space and altered it to suit their needs and preferences. (234)

In other words, the Southwestern, like all Westerns, simplified the myth of the West into a handful of narrative and visual tropes. In the case of the Southwestern, that included Chinese immigrants being a threat to America’s way of life.

In the broader genre of the Western, it was not uncommon to see “Chinese” men appear

as villains, although typically in minor roles—for example, in Pals of the West (Film Art Productions, 1922), White Pebbles (Richard Thorpe, 1927), The Desert of the Lost (Richard Thorpe, 1927), and Big Boy Rides Again (Albert Herman, 1935).¹¹ In a few Southwesterns, the “Oriental” villain is elevated to the role of the main antagonist whom the Anglo-American hero must defeat. Despite being depicted as a significant threat, however, in the end, the Chinese villain is ultimately exposed as only a small-time racketeer. He is corrupt and cunning rather than a criminal mastermind and is revealed to be working for a white superior rather than being in charge of the smuggling racket himself. For example, in Border Devils the “Oriental” villain, known as “the General” (Tetsu Komai), wants to control border ranchlands in order to smuggle dynamite across the border. The General is presented as the ruthless leader of a gang of bandits and is shown at first only in silhouette to amplify his mysteriousness and Otherness. In the end, it is the Anglo-American pretending to be an inspector of the Border Patrol who is revealed to be the real leader of the gang, with the General serving only as a false front—and a weak one at that. It would appear, at the time, that Chinese immigrants were disliked enough to be regarded as devious and amoral but were not respected enough to be intelligent criminal masterminds. As Ruth Vasey argues, Hollywood was not necessarily concerned with realism in its depictions of foreigners and instead opted for “colourful stereotypes”:

This came about not through ignorance, carelessness, or prejudice on the part of particular production personnel, but through the deliberate packaging of saleable elements. The picturesque, the exotic, and the quaint were all staple ingredients of Hollywood production; like spectacle, romance, and heroism, they formed part of the admixture of motion picture ingredients that the industry delivered for the price of a cinema ticket. (227)

Ironically, in real life, the elaborate smuggling networks were run by Chinese people. As Robert Chao Romero details, “the Chinese Six Companies developed not only a flourishing immigrant smuggling business but also an impressive transnational smuggling network involving representatives in China, Mexico, Cuba, and various cities of the United States, including El Paso, Tucson, San Diego, New York, Boston, and New Orleans” (4). Similarly, Sheldon Zhang argues, “Although few historians have discussed these early-day illegal immigration activities as organized crime, the extent and scope of the paper son racket, the systematic manner in which immigration papers were bought and sold, and the elaborate arrangement of border crossings exhibited clear patterns of highly organized activities” (8).¹²

In contrast, Southwesterns did not present stories of complex smuggling networks, corrupt officials, and counterfeit documentation but instead focused on characters smuggling in ingenious ways—for example, dressed as women being transported in a car (Sky High) and hidden in the back of vegetable trucks (On the Border). The suggestion of highly organized criminal rackets was rejected in the films in favor of less threatening criminal immigrants who were devious rather than sophisticated. The message was clear: all the United States had to do to protect its people and culture was place American heroes along the borders. The film version of the Border Patrol merely had to be vigilant in detecting smuggling and preventing the unwanted Chinese from crossing the border (or deporting them back to China if they made it over the border).

The Southwesterns with which this article is concerned were intended to capitalize on “Yellow Peril” fears and then pacify concerned audience members that American law enforcement agencies had the problem well under control and were shoring up gaps in American national borders and protecting American national identity.¹³ The review in the Motion Picture

News Booking Guide of Twin Triggers notes that the film featured “[t]win brothers pitted against each other as one is engaged in smuggling Chinese and other is out to stop practice. The law and order chap accomplishes his task and also wins brother’s girl” (“Twin Triggers” 52). The 1927 film Roarin’ Broncs starred Buffalo Bill Jr. (pseudonym for Jay Wilsey) as a border patrolman who goes to work undercover at a ranch suspected to be the headquarters of a Chinese smuggling ring. The review of the film in Film Daily notes, “Plot that offers good variation from the routine western business. Smuggling Chinese over the border this time” (“Roarin’ Broncs” 7).

The earliest of the immigrant-smuggling Southwesterns was 1922’s Sky High, starring Tom Mix as an immigration officer who uncovers an American gang smuggling Chinese immigrants into the United States from Mexico into Arizona and then through the Grand Canyon to California. In the film, the Chinese laborers are contrasted to Mix’s hypermasculine action hero through their alignment with femininity: in the opening scene, they are smuggled into the United States disguised as Anglo-American women. The film begins with a title card declaring, “Along the Border of Southern Arizona . . . silent for years after early struggles . . . now alive once more with mystery and intrigue—and smugglers . . .” The first scene introduces the film’s hero—“Tom Newbury, Deputy Inspector of Immigration, played a lone hand in guarding Uncle Sam’s border line.”¹⁴ Tom, astride his horse, brings a car to a halt on a desert road and orders the driver at gunpoint, “Get ’em out! I want your passengers to enjoy one of America’s beauty spots!” The driver responds with feigned shock, “What’s the big idea—making ladies get out in this awful dust?” Two ladies reluctantly emerge from the back of the car, and unceremoniously, Tom pulls off their hats with voluminous veils to reveal their true identities as Chinese men. The camera then offers a close-up of one of the immigrants as he yells at the driver; however, there is

no sympathy for the Chinese men, and the title cards offer only Chinese characters with no translation of the immigrant's tirade. Tom is amused at the ingenuity of the smugglers and informs the driver, "You birds are getting so smart, I'll have to go to night school to keep up with you!" By this time, two more Chinese men disguised as women have emerged from the car, and Tom "unmasks" them as well, pulling off their hats and veils. Tom roughly forces the Chinese men back into the car, kicking one in the backside. The scene is intended to be comedic—the audience laughing with Tom at the expense of the Chinese men now destined to be deported. As the Western hero, Tom then drops his lasso over the driver's head to keep control of him as he drives the car full of immigrants "to El Paso for a stop-over!"

In El Paso, at the headquarters for the immigration inspectors, Tom's boss confirms the extent of the problem: "About two hundred pigtailed are to be sneaked across the border near Calexico. . . . I want the ring-leader of this smuggling gang! That's your job—now get him!" Tom secures a job with Jim Frazer (J. Farrell MacDonald), who it turns out holds, as another title informs, "a mysterious position as unknown chief of certain border activities." Tom is sent to the Grand Canyon to guard the Chinese laborers that Frazier is smuggling to California, but his plans are sidetracked when Frazier's ward, Estelle Holloway (Eva Novak), requires rescuing in the canyon. The film repeatedly draws parallels between Chinese men and Anglo-American women: first, in the opening sequence when the Chinese men masquerade as white women to evade the law; second, at the camp, where the only Chinese immigrant shown is the cook, a job associated with women's work; and third, when Estelle dons the clothes of one of the Chinese immigrants.¹⁵ In contrast, Tom is depicted repeatedly as a man of action. The most famous scene occurs when Tom commandeers a biplane: after an extended scene of flying over the canyon, Tom instructs the pilot, "Make a dive for the river—I'm getting out!"¹⁶ He climbs out of the passenger seat of

the plane and hangs onto a rope as the plane dips into the canyon; he then releases the rope and drops a considerable distance to land in the river (the editing of the shots making the distance of the fall appear much greater than it is). Tom then scurries up the valley wall, at one point leaping from one side of a small canyon to another, and arrives at the top to take on the head villain in a fistfight in order to rescue Estelle.

Although Mix's Border Patrol hero breaks up the smuggling gang, his goal is to save Estelle—not to help the Chinese immigrants. Instead, the Chinese immigrants are presented as villains working with the gang, and they must be expelled to make America pure once more. Once Tom has the gang leaders in custody, the posse head off to apprehend the Chinese workers, scattering the line of Chinese men on foot. When one tries to take off on horseback, the Chinese man is pulled roughly to the ground by a lawman's lasso. The film, like all of the Southwesterns discussed here, offers no sympathy for the Chinese immigrants, who will be deported back to China to punish them for their successful penetration of America's borders.

The 1930 film On the Border also centers on a Chinese smuggling plot, but the film brings in a third angle on race by contrasting its Anglo-American hero with a Mexican-American family. The film offers two heroes—Dave (John B. Litel), an undercover border patrolman, and a dog named Rinty (Rin Tin Tin)—both of whom quickly identify the villain, Farrell (Philo McCullough). In contrast, kindly and naïve ranch owner Don José (Bruce Covington) enters into a business arrangement with Farrell, and his daughter Pepita (Armida) is attracted to him. The film begins with the title card “In the far South-West, where the Border Patrol keeps its watchful eye on all who cross the frontier.” At Don José's sheep ranch, “near the border,” Farrell arrives with two large trucks, seeking water, supposedly for the trucks' load of vegetables. It is Pepita's dog Rinty who discovers that hidden behind the crates of vegetables in the trucks are a group of

illegal Chinese immigrants.¹⁷ Farrell asks whether Don José is interested in selling his ranch, hoping to gain the ideal borderland location for his smuggling racket. Dave and Rinty's suspicions are proven correct when a group of border patrolmen try to stop the trucks later at the border and end up in a shootout. During the shootout, one border patrolmen is killed, as is Farrell's brother, and Farrell vows to have his revenge.

The action then shifts, as a title informs, "[t]wenty miles further South, [to] the old town of Rincon." Having lost one of his drivers in a shootout with the Border Patrol, Farrell sends Don José to drive one of his trucks to the Mexican town for the pickup. Dave and Rinty notice some tree-shaped packages swaying in the back of a moving truck and give chase. After one of the packages falls off the truck, they discover a Chinese man inside. Dave pursues the truck and returns Rinty to Pepita with a note reading, "The truck your father is driving is loaded with smuggled Chinamen. I must follow to save him. Beware of Farrell." Back at Don José's ranch, cars arrive full of gang members, who remove the smuggled immigrants from the trucks. Dave tries to save Pepita and her father, but Dave is taken prisoner, and in an amazing action sequence, Rinty must save him from a truck about to roll off a cliff. Back at the ranch, dozens of patrolmen arrive and partake in a shootout with the gangsters, and Farrell gets away; however, Rinty leaps into the truck after him and forces Farrell to drive into a wall. Whereas the Chinese men in Sky High were free to move about and work with Frazier's gang to subdue the American hero, in On the Border the Chinese men are powerless, with their fate determined by Farrell. And like Hair-Trigger Casey, this Southwestern identifies Mexicans as part of the problem in terms of border penetration—either as conscious coconspirators like Farrell's contact in Rincon or as naïve facilitators like Pepita and Don José. In the end it is up to the Anglo-American (and, here, also a canine) hero to shore up the leaky Mexican border.

Of the big B-Western stars, Hoot Gibson and Tim McCoy were World War I veterans—as was Jack Perrin, the star of the 1936 film Hair-Trigger Casey. Although the involvement of many actors in World War I was highlighted by film producers, only a few Westerns included their hero's service as part of the storyline.¹⁸ In Hair-Trigger Casey, the battle over the border to prevent unsanctioned Chinese immigration is likened to the World War—a war that needs to be fought to defend America's interests, borders, and identity. Jim Casey (Jack Perrin), captain of a cavalry unit stationed about one hundred miles from the border, receives a telegram from the Border Patrol alerting him to trouble at his ranch, which is two hundred miles away and on the border. As his African American servant, Snowflake (played by Snowflake), muses, “It's always a war. He just gets back from one war and start training for 'nother. The captain says pack his .45—that means more war.” Dressed in his uniform, Casey heads into Chinatown, where he runs into his ranch foreman, Karney (Ed Cassidy), just after a Chinese man (Victor Wong) attempts to kill Karney with “the hatchet of the tong.”¹⁹ When Casey discovers that one of his ranchmen has been killed, he says to his most trusted ranch hands, “We haven't had occasion to wear our guns in a long time, but this is where we start using them.” He then assures Colton (Robert Walker) of the Border Patrol, “I'm gonna be Hair-Trigger Casey again! Start shooting and asking questions afterwards.”

Casey suspects Karney early on of being responsible for his man's death and for some kind of illegal activity, but the man he is led to suspect of smuggling Chinese laborers over the border and through his ranch is a Mexican man who left behind a silver concho from his clothes. The smuggling racket is run through the ranch, and Karney is not the only of Casey's men in on it. Abner, the cook (Phil Dunham), reminds Karney, “When we went into this deal, you agreed to take orders from me! . . . We've been paid for four loads and delivered two. We'll run the other

through tonight.” Karney, afraid to risk operating “right under Casey’s nose,” protests: “We can’t run another load through tonight. What are we going to do with the ones we already have hidden? The place isn’t big enough to hold anymore.” Karney travels to the cabin to move the three Chinese men locked in the cellar. He tells them that he has been paid \$150 for each of them, but he wants more money before he will free them; he then searches them for the money hidden in their clothes. Casey arrives with backup to confront the “queer-looking Mexican,” as he describes him: it is only when Casey pins him to the ground that he discovers that the “Mexican” is Karney in disguise.

This realization causes Casey to have an extended flashback (the sequence lasts over three minutes) to World War I, when he risked his own life to save Karney’s. The film then returns to the present, where Casey says accusingly, “So this, Karney, is what you call gratitude!” Hair-Trigger Casey explicitly aligns the modern Western hero with the World War I hero and forges a connection between America’s war of the past and its modern “war” against border invasion. It is through the conflation of Chinese, Mexicans, and Native Americans that the film reveals its bias against the racial Other. Through Karney’s successful masquerade as a Mexican in charge of the racket, Mexicans and Chinese are aligned as criminals polluting America’s borderlands through smuggling plots. The film suggests that racial identity is limited to a few visible tropes and can be donned like a mask: all Karney needs to pass as a Mexican is a sombrero, silver conchos, a mustache, and an accent. Notably, Casey does not recognize Karney in disguise despite their long history together, and Karney explains that he was able to disguise his face with “a little trick [he] learned from an old Indian.” As McGillis argues, in the B-Western, Others are villainized: “Chinese people turn up as bad guys” along with Mexicans, African Americans, and Native Americans (131).

Of these Southwesterns, only Border Devils, Border Phantom, and Hair-Trigger Casey present a significant “Chinese” character with an English-speaking role. In the case of Hair-Trigger Casey, this character is Lee Fix, the hatchet man from Chinatown (played by Chinese American actor Victor Wong).²⁰ The film ends with justice exacted by the Chinese who have been swindled by Karney: after Karney escapes from the border patrolmen, he is dispatched by the hatchet man from Chinatown. Despite dressing in traditional Chinese clothes, Lee Fix speaks English, unlike the minor Chinese characters in Sky High who spoke Cantonese when they spoke at all. Another Southwestern that also affords screen time to a significant Chinese villain (played by Japanese actor Miki Morita) is the 1937 film Border Phantom, a film notable also for being one of the few to present the smuggling of Chinese prostitutes instead of just male laborers.²¹ As the reviewer for Border Phantom in Variety suggests, “Western with a new quirk is ‘Border Phantom,’ this time a story dealing with the smuggling of Chinese picture brides across the Mexican line” (“Border Phantom,” Variety n.p.). In Border Phantom, Barbara (Harley Wood) and her uncle are staying at a seemingly abandoned hacienda near the Mexican border while they collect data for the uncle’s entomology research. Barbara’s uncle uncovers a mystery, but he is shot before he can get a message to the sheriff. Meanwhile, in the nearby town, traveling cowboy Larry O’Day (Bob Steele) arrives just in time to see Lucky Smith (Don Barclay) burst out of Chan Lee’s Restaurant with two weapon-toting Chinese men on his heels. While a crowd gathers to watch the chase with amusement, Larry takes action—stringing a rope across the street to trip the two Chinese men. As they lay in the street on their backs, Larry affirms both himself as a Christian and the Chinese men as Other when he informs them, “Today’s Friday—fish day, not hamburger.” Lucky then explains that he just went in to see if he could earn a meal by doing some dishes, and the audience is left to find amusement in the idea that Chinese men are very

territorial over their domestic duties. It is Chan Lee (Morita), the owner of the Chinese restaurant, however, who is the important character in the smuggling plot.

On their way to find work at a borderland ranch, Larry and Lucky end up at the hacienda, as do German entomologist Dr. Von Kurtz (John Peters) and Chan Lee. Dressed in a Western suit and speaking in accented English, Chan Lee says that he was looking for the hog farm of Obed Young (Karl Hackett). Young, he explains, raises pork the same way it is raised in China, the implication being that he wants Young's pork for his restaurant. When Young appears, he says that he is on his way to the border to pick up a load of soybeans to feed his hogs—the third load this week. All of these coincidences strike Larry as suspicious, and he goes to Young's farm to examine his soybean barrels: it turns out that they are hollow. Later, back at the hacienda, Young unloads Chinese women from the hollow soybean barrels, but luckily, Lucky is witness to the goings-on. Eventually, Larry exposes the smuggling racket and brings in the sheriff to arrest the villains. For the majority of the film, the key villain is Chan Lee, who murdered Barbara's uncle and who is presented, as the reviewer for Film Daily describes, as “a suave, philosophical oriental” (“Border Phantom,” Film Daily 9). By the end of the film, however, the true head of the smuggling racket is revealed to be an Anglo-American, Kurtz the German, and just as in Border Devils, the Chinese villain is presented as only second-in-command.

As noted, Border Phantom is different from other Southwesterns in that the immigrants being smuggled are Chinese “picture brides.” In one scene, Chan Lee explains to one of the female immigrants, “The worst of your journey is over. You will soon be at the home of your honorable bridegroom, a wealthy merchant, who awaits eagerly his bride.” Later, Chan Lee says to Barbara, “Many of my countrymen desire wives from China, but your rules here say ‘no.’ So I smuggle them in.” The film's insistence that the women will be wives is, however, likely the

influence of Hollywood's Production Code because in reality Chinese women were smuggled into California for the sex trade. In his 1936 book on San Francisco's Chinatown, Leong says that, compared to 2,600 reported in the 1880s (out of a population of 30,000), there were probably no more than one hundred Chinese prostitutes in San Francisco at the time that Leong was writing, but that wealthy Chinese men would pay \$1,000 to \$10,000 (with costs dependent on the difficulty of delivery) to have women smuggled for exploitation as private sex slaves. Leong argues, "Before the immigration laws, the girls often came voluntarily as immigrants, but now are brought in as 'daughters' or 'wives' of Chinese merchants. Some prostitutes are American-born" (222-23).

Interestingly, Border Phantom also offers reverse human trafficking: although the Anglo-American villain Barton (Perry Murdock) helps smuggle Chinese women into the United States from Mexico, he wants to smuggle Anglo-American Barbara over the border into Mexico so that he can force her to be his wife. Though forced marriage is understood as horrific in regard to the Anglo-American woman who must be saved from such a fate, similar consideration is not demonstrated for the Chinese women in the film. Border Phantom ends with the smuggling ring exposed and the Chinese women saved from Chan Lee and Kurtz—but only to be deported. There is no sympathy for the Chinese women who are marched anonymously and silently past the heroes in the final scene. Nor, does it seem, was there any sympathy expressed by reviewers. Reflecting the indifferent attitude of the time toward Chinese immigrants, the reviewer for Variety offers only one comment about the Chinese women in the film: "A very nice collection of beauty, physical and costume, is arrayed in the half dozen picture brides from China" ("Border Phantom," Variety n.p.).

The majority of these Southwesterns focused on the smuggling of male laborers into the

country rather than that of women for prostitution, most likely because of the act passed in June 1930 that allowed the immigration of the Chinese wife of an American citizen if the couple was married prior to the approval of the Immigration Act of 1924. The act improved the Chinese male–female population ratio from 7:1 in 1920 to 3:1 by 1940, and in 1943, the Immigration Act of 1924 was repealed, increasing the quota of immigrants from 0 to 105 per year and allowing American-born Chinese to be naturalized (Loo 46-48). It is probably a reflection of these laws and their implications in terms of real-life changes that Chinese immigrant-smuggling plots disappeared from American films by the 1940s.

Conclusion: Manifested Destiny

The Western solidified the conception of the American hero that still dominates mainstream film today: he is of Christian European ancestry, but importantly, his background does not determine his future because he is a self-made man, the original rugged individual. Despite this message that anyone who works hard can achieve social mobility, the American dream was not available to the racial Other: whether Native American or Chinese, the Other was not seen as part of America's nation building in the West. As Ngai suggests, “[t]he telos of immigrant settlement, assimilation, and citizenship has been the enduring narrative of American history,” and though the “myth of ‘immigrant America’” plays an important role in supporting the theory of “American exceptionalism” (5), Chinese immigrants are excepted from that myth. Or, as Erika Lee explains, “[a]t its very foundation, Chinese exclusion had always been justified and articulated through the language of American national sovereignty and self-preservation, American nation building and empire building. U.S. immigration law explicitly equated threats posed by Chinese immigration with threats to national sovereignty” (73). Similarly, Robert G.

Lee argues that the representation of the Asian as “pollutant” stems from the mid-nineteenth century, when the Chinese settlers “disrupted the mythic narrative of westward expansion” (9). It is likely for this reason that the famous A-level historical Westerns that define the genre omit Chinese immigrants from their depiction of the Old West. And this is why the analysis of the B-level modern Southwestern is an important intervention in the critical discussion of the genre.

Notably, the Westerns I have discussed in this article are not set in the Old West in the era of the nineteenth-century frontier but are set instead in the twentieth century, at the time of their production, and they negotiate social anxieties of their time. As Stanfield explains, “1930s Westerns can be read as complex allegorical narratives, which articulate issues of national cohesion, American identity and experiences of modernity” (Hollywood 12). Whereas the historical Western struggled with questions of cohesion and identity in the nineteenth century as its heroes attempted to settle the frontier while facing Native Americans, the modern Southwestern struggled with the traffic of unwanted immigrants to America as a threat to the confirmation of American national identity during a time when America was attempting to define itself in the new international sphere of the interwar years. Though America enjoyed the economic and social opportunities provided by modern international traffic, it wanted to control the flow of traffic to enjoy the benefits but not the costs—especially the “rate charged for such a circulation” and the “bodies” that Whissel explains came along with it.

The presence of Chinese characters in so many Westerns of the 1920s and '30s was not intended to suggest that they had a place in American society, but rather was used to exploit modern issues and allow the Western's Anglo-American hero another kind of opportunity to police and protect America's borders. Importantly, the racist attitudes held by the films' white characters and the lack of sympathy demonstrated by screenwriters and producers for the

Chinese immigrants through the films they made are attitudes not of America's frontier past, but of the first half of the twentieth century. The modern Southwestern offered a space to explore the definition of American national identity in an international world following World War I—embracing the modern but rejecting the foreign as represented by Chinese immigrants who were visibly Other in comparison to the Western hero.

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Notes

1. Also translated in Whipp.
2. AFI Catalog, <http://afi.chadwyck.com.libproxy.wlu.ca/film/search>. Search parameters: “Chinese” as key word, “Western” as genre, and 1910 to 1960 as release years. I would note, however, that I find that these numbers tend to be on the low side because many subjects go uncatalogued or appear only in the plot summaries and therefore do not come up in searches. Chinese American actor Willie Fung featured in eighteen Westerns, Chester Gan in fourteen, Lee Tung Foo in eight, and Eddie Lee in six.
3. Although B-films did not technically exist until the introduction of the double bill during the Great Depression, the term today can also refer to films produced quickly and with lower budgets. In this article, I use the term to evoke the latter in contrast to the higher-budget epic Westerns of the 1920s and the A-Westerns of the 1930s.
4. AFI Catalog, <http://afi.chadwyck.com.libproxy.wlu.ca/film/search>. Search parameters: “smuggling” as key word, “Mexican-American border region” as subject, “Western” as genre, and 1910 to 1960 as release years.
5. Both terms were used in the Film Daily review of Secrets of the Wastelands (Derwin Abrahams, 1941).
6. For example, the scholars cited in this article, including Patrick Ettinger, Kelly Lytle Hernández, Erika Lee, Mae M. Ngai, Robert Chao Romero, and Sheldon X. Zhang.
7. McGillis is the only scholar to mention Chinese characters in the B-Western, but he only discusses three films briefly in a larger discussion of the racial Other in the Western.
8. My use of the term “Oriental” is intended to invoke Edward Said’s critical idea of “Orientalism.” I argue that these Westerns offer a representation of Chinese immigrants that is

the product of the mythical, patronizing, and imperialist conception that the West has of Eastern cultures and people.

9. American films that were set in Canada have been referred to as “Northerns” or “Northwesterns,” stemming from a genre established in adventure literature by authors including Jack London and James Oliver Curwood.
10. Erika Lee compares 17,000 Chinese who entered the United States illegally from 1882 to 1920 to 1.4 million Mexicans who were able to migrate largely without restriction from 1900 to 1930.
11. I place “Chinese” in quotation marks because often the characters were played by white actors in “yellowface” or by Asian American actors whose ancestry was not Chinese. The exception in this list of films is White Pebbles, which featured Japanese American actor K. Nambu as the villain Ah Wung.
12. “Paper sons” were those immigrants who posed as the sons of US citizens but were born in China. The practice became easier after the San Francisco earthquake in 1906 that destroyed many government buildings and their records.
13. Of the immigrant-smuggling films I discuss, Sky High, Riding Speed, Border Phantom, and Hair-Trigger Casey are available on DVD. I was able to view the silent version of On the Border at the Library of Congress (the sound version was produced as sound-on-disc). I have yet to locate copies of Twin Triggers and Roarin’ Broncs. I do not discuss Riding Speed in great detail since it does not have the same level of narrative complexity, performance, or action.
14. Some copies of the film identify Mix’s hero as “Grant Newbury”; however, the title in the 1929 reissue version identifies him as “Tom Newbury.” The copy of the film available on

DVD is the 1929 reissue.

15. The Chinese clothing is not everyday attire but a costume for Chinese operas, as suggested by the traditional style of the clothes, the rich fabrics, and the elaborate headdress.
16. A title at the beginning of the film states that these are the “[f]irst and only aerial motion pictures taken of the Canyon.”
17. There are also a couple of men in turbans, suggesting they are South Asian.
18. The [AFI Catalog](#) lists about a dozen Westerns released between 1918 and 1936 that link their heroes to World War I.
19. “Hatchet men” (also known as “highbinders”) were the enforcers for the tongs and were portrayed in Hollywood films as assassins whose weapon of choice was a hatchet. A tong was one kind of community organization that Chinese immigrants established upon arrival in the States, basically a secret society that, in many cases, was linked to criminal rackets. Today’s equivalent are what we call today the Triads.
20. The film also differs from the other Southwesterns discussed in this article for featuring an African American character with significant lines and screen time (played by Snowflake).
21. Similarly, the melodrama [Speed Wild](#) also focuses on a plot to smuggle Chinese women into the United States but is not a Southwestern. I have been unable to locate a copy of the film.

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