

Transnational Cultural Migration. Mexico-U.S. Border Experiences: A Case Study**Migración cultural transnacional. Experiencias de la frontera México-Estados Unidos: un estudio de caso**

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the transnational cultural experiences of a Cantonese migrant while border crossing the United States and Mexico. Specifically, we explore his experiences while residing in transnational spaces (Mexico, the United States, and Canton (Guangzhou)). Fieldwork including participant observation and qualitative data were collected through ethnographic interviews carried out during the period 2014-2016, at a Chinese food restaurant in Puebla, Mexico. Our goal is to understand the border crossing experience as a confluence of activities, which contribute to the construction of epistemologies from below and the understanding of transnationalism from a cultural approach.

Keywords: 1. Chinese border crossing, 2. cultural transnationalism, 3. Chinese immigrants in Mexico, 4. U.S.-Mexico Border, 5. China.

RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza las experiencias culturales transnacionales de un migrante cantonés al cruzar la frontera entre México y los Estados Unidos. Aquí exploramos sus experiencias mientras vive en espacios transnacionales (México, los Estados Unidos y Cantón (Guangzhou)). El trabajo de campo incluyó observación participante y los datos cualitativos fueron obtenidos de manera complementaria a través de entrevistas etnográficas durante el periodo de 2014-2016, en un restaurante de comida china en la ciudad de Puebla, México. Nuestra meta es entender la experiencia del cruce fronterizo como una confluencia de actividades que contribuyen a la construcción de epistemologías desde abajo, a fin de entender al transnacionalismo desde una perspectiva cultural.

Palabras clave: 1. cruce fronterizo de chinos, 2. transnacionalismo cultural, 3. inmigrantes chinos en México. 4. frontera México-Estados Unidos 5. China.

Date received: March 18, 2021

Date accepted: May 11, 2021

Published online: March 15, 2022

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INTRODUCTION

Transnationalism from Below

The migration of Chinese, and specifically Cantonese, around the world has been explored by different scholars (Amyot, 1973; Chan, 2006; Goldberg, 1985; López, 2013; Ong & Nonini, 1997; Schiavone Camacho, 2012; Velázquez Morales, 2008). Cantonese migrants dwelling in the United States and Mexico specifically experienced a great number of aggressions, indifference, and marginalization of their cultural, economic, and political realms (e.g., their second-class status).

During the last decade of the 20th century, scholars studied immigrants through the lens of transnationalism by looking at their socio-cultural, economic, and political relations between their country of origin and the host country (Basch, Glick, & Cristina, 1994; Bauböck, 1994; Faist, 2000; Kearney, 1995; Kivisto, 2001; Ong, 1999). Scholars incorporated transnational perspectives including, but not limited to, international migration, immigrant settlements, and ethnicity (Faist, 2000). Research proliferated in the United States and Canada despite the vagueness of defining transnationalism. Some scholars highlighted the epistemological inconsistencies of the concept while designing studies from below (grassroots constructions) and not from above models. For example, Faist (2000) elaborated a systematic and rigorous definition of transnational social spaces of immigrant communities.

These social spaces included kinship groups, transnational circuits and communities (Kivisto, 2001). To a greater extent, these studies contributed to studying transnational communities by looking at the complexity and dynamics of those who do not necessarily fall within the category of immigrant or seasonal worker and yet were able to create their communities. Similarly, Portes (1999) looked at how transnationalism aids in understanding the assimilation processes of “first-generation immigrants and their offspring” (1999, p. 188) from individuals and families theoretically linked from above and from below and their impact on “the development of sending countries” (Portes, 1999, p. 190).

According to Ong and Nonini (1997), Chinese transnationalism represents “an interplay between strategies of accumulation and the experiences of dislocation, [...] and the different constructions of modernity by capitalist interest and by nation-states” (1997, p. 16), and we concur with their proposition. Therefore, we aim to explore the transnational cultural experiences of a Chinese man across borderlands (Mexico and the United States). Moreover, Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt (1999, p. 217) looked at the transnational experience of immigrants from “below,” in other words, from their own experiences and perspectives, including the practice of their economic, political, and socio-cultural activities in sustained and habitual manner between their host country and the country of origin. However, their proposition constrains the study of immigrants who do not necessarily follow a pattern of immigration from South to North (e.g., from Latin American, Mexico, or the Caribbean to the United States). On the contrary, a pattern is absent, and the social, economic, and political relations are neither habitual nor sustained.

In contrast, Grimson, Ng, and Denardi (2016) spoke of emerging transnationalism in South America, specifically during the 1980s in Argentina. Under their lens, transnationalism is present through the connections made with officials and businessmen while preserving the organizational structure. In addition to their results, their research demonstrates that Chinese towns do not depend on remittances from immigrants living in Argentina (see also Pappier, 2011). The objective of Chinese immigrants is “aimed at incorporating the members of the receiving society and not so much to develop the[ir] place of origin” (Grimson, Ng, & Denardi, 2016, p. 28).

Thus, under Pappier’s lens (2011), the socio-cultural practices, celebrations, and religion of Chinese in Latin America are constructed in the present, depending on the place where they have migrated, but above all, they retain a strong link with their ancestral culture. However, one of the major challenges for Chinese immigrants in Latin American countries such as Argentina and Mexico is the acquisition of the Spanish language. Nevertheless, Chinese immigrants sought business entrepreneurship in the market and restaurant sectors since their dexterity of the Spanish language was not a requirement and represented an activity that could be shared with their families (Pappier, 2011).

Following Portes and Armony (2016), it is relevant to note the organizations and networks built by Chinese populations in Mexico. For instance, they emphasized the long-lasting ties with their country of origin (mostly related to family and economic realms), including the cultural and social integration of Chinese immigrants in Mexico. It is interesting to analyze their current network of traditional organizations “based on a common surname or [from] the same region of origin” (Portes & Armony, 2016, p. 5). We concur with these authors, while looking at transnational flows between China and Mexico as outnumbered. Likewise, “these migrants created closed communities, in part to protect themselves from strong external discrimination” (Portes & Armony, 2016, p. 5).

However, over time they were neither assimilated nor integrated into mainstream society. Rather, as research demonstrates, Chinese migrants experienced identity and cultural revival within and beyond their host country, including the practice of their ancestral cultural beliefs such as the Dragon and the Lion Dance⁴ (Chang, 2003; Chan, 2006; Chao Romero, 2011; Manzano-Munguía, Gómez Izquierdo, & Gómez Parra, 2020). We propose that the practice of transnationalism among Chinese immigrants in Mexico is fragmented and irregular, rather than habitual and sustained (Portes, Guarnizo, & Landolt, 1999, p. 217). Here we explore Chinese cultural transnationalism through the lens of our interviewee, Jimmy. His ethnographic account of being transnational is illustrated in terms of his socio-cultural, economic, and political activities between Mexico, the United States, and his hometown Canton (Guangzhou).

We concur with Guarnizo’s (1997, pp. 281-322) study of network relations across borderlands where economic, political, and socio-cultural domains are present at the local and global levels. At

⁴ See, for instance, this short documentary that illustrates the Chinese Dragon and Lion Dance in the region of the Soconusco, Chiapas: <https://vimeo.com/388589239>

the same time, immigrants adapt and adopt different survival strategies while living in transnational spaces (Levitt, 2001). Our interest is to look at the practice of cultural activities and economic fragmentation as survival strategies. Thus, this study contributes to the literature on epistemological inconsistencies and porosity while defining transnationalism from below. But before we launch into further details, a historical overview of Chinese in Mexico and the United States must be addressed to understand their current *modus vivendi* in Mexico.

Chinese Population in the United States and Mexico

During the second half of the 19th century, an important migration of gold seekers to California's shores drove Chinese immigrants who followed the quest for gold fever. They were also leaving behind poverty, unemployment, and diseases. By 1862, President Lincoln signed the Bill of the Pacific Train to the Central Pacific Company (McGinnis, 1994, pp. 32-34). Under the direction of Charles Crocker, the Central Pacific Railroad Company (CPRR) requested the U.S. government to employ Chinese immigrants for railroad construction. Despite the doubts faced by the hiring committee for contracting Chinese labour force, the CPRR agreed to employ them after Crocker recommended their industrious abilities, referring to the construction of the Great Wall (Ambrose, 2000; Bergquist, 2008; Haward Bain, 1999).

In the United States, the Chinese labour force was exploited and underpaid. As stated by Daggett (1922), "they quickly proved their usefulness, and also proved to be cheaper to hire than the previous white labourers—They were paid a dollar a day, out of which they supplied their own food and lodging" (1922, p. 70). Their working conditions in the railroad construction were also dangerous. The use of dynamite and other volatile substances caused the death of thousands of workers:

[...] Central Pacific brought in nitroglycerin. Only the Chinese —people experienced with fireworks— were willing to handle this unpredictable explosive, pouring it into the tunnel through holes drilled in the granite. Countless workers perished in accidental blasts, but the Central Pacific did not keep track of the numbers (Bergquist, 2008, p. 61).

Thus, the railroad construction meant a dangerous zone for Chinese men who faced health hazards and death. Despite this appalling scenario, they represented the cheap labour force *par excellence* sought by capital: multitask, auto exploited, and underpaid (Chang, 2003). Also, their consumption habits were strict and mostly related to survival. For instance, most of the time, their savings meant opening a new business such as restaurants, laundromats, and food stores, among others (Botton Beja, 2008, pp. 477-486). The economic growth of the Chinese fuelled the anti-Chinese movements across the United States and Mexico:

[...] as a class, [C]hinese were harmless, peaceful, and exceedingly industrious; but, as they were remarkably economical and spent little or none of their earnings except for the necessities of life and merchants of their own nationality, they soon

began to provoke the prejudice and ill-will of those who could not see any value in their labor to the country (Hittell, 1989, p. 99).

The increasing number of Chinese migrants coming to the United States, the completion of the Central Pacific railway line, and the emergence of Chinese industries paved the way for enacting the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, signed by President Chester A. Arthur in 1883. The act prohibited the legal immigration of Chinese workers to the United States and stated the punishments to captains who ventured to bring Chinese workers to the country:

The Chinese Exclusion Act, approved in 1882 in Congress lasted for 60 years, it was the first and the only federal law in U.S. history that excluded a single group of people from immigration on no basis other than their race. It explicitly banned Chinese workers from immigration and existing residents from naturalization and voting (Xinhua, 2012, para. 6).

The enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act prompted the exodus of Chinese families from the United States to their country of origin (China) or, as Velázquez Morales (2002) accurately noted, to Mexico. For geographical reasons, Mexico was one of the best options for starting a new life:

[I]n the United States the Chinese were incriminated of stealing jobs from white people, for being “unassimilated,” for “holding onto their customs and habits,” for being “dangerous,” “servile,” “dirty and for having filthy habits” [...] in general “inferior from their mental and moral point of view.” Moreover, their physical appearance was considered unpleasant, their slanted eyes and their tongue a complete cacophony. These concepts about the Chinese were inherited by the Mexicans and persisted long after the United States ended the persecution over this minority group⁵ (Botton Beja, 2008, p. 479)

In Mexico, the history of Chinese immigrants is similar to what they experienced in the United States in terms of working conditions, economic growth, and racism (Velázquez Morales, 2001; Gómez Izquierdo, 1991). Moreover, the Opium War (1839-1842) was one of the factors that prompted them to leave their country of origin due to the after-war effect of poverty and diseases experienced in their villages and farmlands (Botton Beja, 2008). Most of these Chinese immigrants later worked in the mining industry, railroad construction, and cotton fields. Once they experienced social exclusion in the United States, they faced a new migration conundrum: to move back to their country of origin where poverty, hunger, and lack of opportunities were ever-present or try the opportunities offered in Mexico. Many embraced the second option, which represented to be the most affordable and an intermittent trampoline to access the United States.

Baja California was an important place of residence for Chinese workers due to its geographic location, where opportunities to start Chinese businesses proliferated, and job access. Consequently, this meant the beginning of a brief period of peace, mobility, and economic growth,

⁵ Translations from Spanish to English made by Juan Periañez de la Rosa.

along with social and cultural relations within the Mexican territory. Over time, an emerging bourgeoisie, based on austere habits and hardworking skills, persisted with the “capitalist development process” (Harvey, 1990, p. 132) in expansion, specifically related to the growth of U.S. capitalism. By the early 20th century, auto exploitation persisted with subcontracts for them. Their precarious labour condition included low wages, weak or absent job security, and family subcontracts. At the same time, it also meant the practice of transnational illicit networks:

Chinese entry was an excellent business, whether to stay in the country or for passing by, while managing to enter in the United States. There were widespread networks engaged in organizing the relocation, beyond the legal channels, hundreds of workers and everyone involved obtained huge profit: recruiters, carriers, immigration officers, public officials and, above all, companies who hired them in exchange of the lower wages paid in the region (Velázquez Morales, 2008, pp. 7-8).

Chao Romero’s (2010) seminal work on Chinese immigrants during the late 19th and early 20th century depict precisely experiences of precarious employment in Mexico and their journey of illegal entries to the United States and beyond. He also emphasized the Chinese transnational commerce networks that included, but were not limited to, labourers, merchandise, smuggling, and small-scale trade between China, Mexico, the United States, Latin American countries, Canada, and the Caribbean (Chao Romero, 2011).

During the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) and through the *Porfiriato* term (1875(76)- 1910),⁶ an increasing interest from the State forged a strong sense of popular nationalism where nested feelings of patriotism and resentment against some foreign communities and settlers in Mexico flourished. There was certain favouritism enjoyed by some foreigners, especially Europeans (González Navarro, 1969, p. 579). Quite the opposite experienced Chinese immigrants with the generalized feeling and policies that promoted a complete rejection of their personality, status, and culture, which lasted beyond the Revolutionary period (González Navarro, 1969, p. 590). For instance, the “massacre of Chinese in Mexico” (Nájar, 2015, p. 2) took place during the Mexican Revolution (1910-1921) in Torreón, a city in Northern Mexico.

As demonstrated by Nájar (2015), Chinese merchants, peasants, and laundromat owners settled in Mexico, especially in the city of Torreón, Coahuila. They opened different businesses as increasing starvation and poverty conditions persisted in Guangzhou, China. The cruel and violent massacre against the Chinese community was the aftermath of the anti-Chinese policy and movement in Mexico (Botton Beja, 2008), including the xenophobia and racism sentiments expressed against Asian and Arab immigrants. As Nájar (2015) argued, the prohibition of marriage

⁶ The *Porfiriato* is a period under review by historians such as Tenorio Trillo & Gómez Galvarriato (2006), who stated that it meant the confluence of multiple stories under critical revision where Mexico faced oppression but also economic modernity, the articulation and participation in international markets, and the accumulation of capital. The *Porfiriato* also included the rise and consolidation of multiple haciendas across Mexico. Finally, this period represented the peace and order established after the Independence period.

between Chinese and Mexican women in the state of Sonora was one of the most racist and cruel episodes of the anti-Chinese policy in Mexico.

Moreover, by 1924 President Álvaro Obregón signed repatriation orders for Chinese settled in Mexico based on Article 33 of the Mexican Constitution, which considered “inconvenient the permanence of these individuals in the country” (Archivo General de la Nación, 1924). Scholars studied the documented and undocumented waves of Chinese immigration, including their living conditions and racism experiences during Mexico’s postrevolutionary period (see Botton Beja, 2008; Gachúz Maya, 2014; Dussel, 2013; Ham Chande, 1997; Monteón González & Trueba Lara, 1988; Rabadán Figueroa, 2009). For instance, Velázquez Morales (2001) and Ham Chande (1997) studied the Chinese community living in northern Mexico, where similar anti-Chinese movements across Mexico and the United States were documented (Cardiel Marín, 1997).

Moreover, Velázquez Morales (2001) identified three major Chinese migration flows between 1899 and 1945. Each one had different implications in terms of the socio-political, economic, and historical realms. Here we focus on the experiences of a Chinese immigrant, Jimmy, who experienced being Cantonese across borderlands (Mexico and the United States) during the late 20th and early 21st century. But before we launch into further details an overview at our methodology needs to be addressed.

METHODOLOGY

As an undergraduate student of the program in Communication Sciences at the Benemérita Universidad Autónoma de Puebla, Juan Periañez de la Rosa was the research assistant of Dr. Manzano-Munguía from 2014 through 2017. He conducted ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with Jimmy⁷ at different locations in Puebla, such as his Chinese food restaurant, coffee shops, parks, and groceries stores like the *Central de Abasto* (wholesale market).

Some of the challenges faced over the three-year period of fieldwork included, but were not limited to, the absence of a fine line dividing the close relationship established between the researcher and the researched. The dialogical relationship established with Jimmy triggered the ethical dimension, which underlined the construction of scientific knowledge and rapport with our participant (Oehmichen Bazán, 2014). In addition, Periañez de la Rosa conducted participant-observation at Jimmy’s restaurant while deep hanging out with him (Rosaldo, 1989). For instance, he helped in the kitchen while cooking, cleaned the restaurant, served food, washed dishes, purchased groceries, and performed other duties related to the restaurant industry.

In our research design we included the case study as an important component of our methodology despite the ongoing dilemma on the reliability issue of results (see Giménez Montiel

⁷ A fictitious name was used to protect the interviewee’s anonymity.

& Heau Lambert, 2014, for details). This paradox deepens if we consider that much of what we know about the empirical world has been generated by case studies and, even today, most of the research projects are as well case studies. The main question made to this type of research design is how trustful can be since the analysis of one specific case cannot determine the entire understanding of a phenomenon (Giménez Montiel & Heau Lamber, 2014). Nonetheless, we concur with the idea of enriching the results of knowledge creation, and it will always be a particular view from a general situation or experience. Consequently, some studies could be used to compare cases, determine similarities, and create contradictions.

This paper precisely explores the contributions of a case study to illuminate our understanding of transnational cultural migration through the lens of Jimmy's experiences across borderlands. Therefore, this case study examines his migration experiences from Canton (Guangzhou) to the United States, and after facing several cultural, economic, and social barriers, his arrival to Mexico. Regarding the interview process, most of his answers were recorded in English. However, our informal conversations were mostly conducted in Spanish. Now we turn to analyze Jimmy's experiences of being Cantonese in Mexico and the United States.

BEING CANTONESE IN MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES

Here we explore the experiences of being transnational through the ethnographic account of Jimmy, while he forged and sustained a network of multiple social, economic, political, and cultural relations between Mexico, the United States, and his hometown of Canton (Guangzhou). Our emphasis is on the cultural activities and the strategies of economic fragmentation while living in Tijuana, Mexico, and San Ysidro, California before he settled in the capital of Puebla in 2011. Although he still travels intermittently to the United States and sporadically to Guangzhou (see Map 1).

Map 1. Guangzhou's Province



Source: Juan Periañez de la Rosa's elaboration based on Wikipedia (2020).

When speaking about his family, Jimmy mentioned about his father, Xan, who was a popular dog butcher in his hometown. He remembers very well when the Chinese political party elected him for a government position:

My father was one of the best dog killers in my town, just two hits with a little hammer in the dog's head and *pum!* [...] it's dead. That's why he was chosen as a government bureaucrat. We [referring to China] are not a democracy, we are communists, but we have a congress where the senators just raise their hands and say: "yes" and clap their hands: "bravo, bravo" (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

His mother, Peng, took care of him and his brother. She knew about her husband's daughter (from an extramarital relationship) and prohibited her sons from contacting her at all (Jimmy, personal communication, January 7, 2015). Jimmy studied primary school in Guangzhou, China, until he was 14 years old. While being at school, he learned about his region and country, as well

as Cantonese (although his mother tongue is Mandarin, China's official language), history, natural sciences, and math. His academic performance was good. He had the best notes from first to fourth grade. From fifth grade to the moment he left school, he was among the top five students in class.

Indeed, one of the most important events in Jimmy's life was his childhood and attending primary school in Canton (Guangzhou). He continued secondary school, and one year after, he switched to a trade school where he learned his cooking skills:

It's useless [...] the school [...] because it doesn't give money, there's a lot of competition in China, if you are good enough in something there are two Chinese better than you, when you are a Chef in another country you can make a lot of money and you may be the only one" (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

In the following interview excerpt, Jimmy remembers when his father announced his decision to leave China to make more money in another country called America, referring to the United States:

When I was a child, I really liked the school [...] Everyday after school, I went back to my house and did my homework. It happened once when I was not in bed, by midnight because I was doing my homework, and my father got upset and told me: "You do not need to make your homework, you are going to work in the United States anyway, you don't need to do this" [...] It is something that I will never forget, never (Jimmy, personal communication, January 7, 2015).

Jimmy's aunt on his father's side was a permanent U.S. resident, and she helped his parents get a temporary residence documentation and a tourist visa for their children. As he remembers:

My father always told me that I must leave the country and make more money. I obeyed them [his parents], what else was left to do? I went to a chef school [in China] because I wanted money, there's no Chinese food in Mexico [referring to the lack of Chinese restaurants in Mexico], when I'm a Chef I can make a lot of money in any country of the world (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

In 2001, the entire family went to the United States for a holiday for about six months. His father was a state agent, and to a greater extent, he was able to secure their travel documents and expenses. As stated by Jimmy, he remembers some big buildings and many white skins [referring to Caucasian people]:

I was so afraid [he was 13 years of age] because in primary school the teachers told us: be careful with the Americans, they eat children if you misbehave [...] [B]ut when I grew up, I realized this was not true (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

Jimmy's first experience as an immigrant was in his childhood, it was not clear for him because he was on holiday with a tourist visa, and he did not stay for a long period. Being an immigrant was the first step of a complicated web for being transnational. His parents visited the United States to arrange their living conditions and working opportunities.

Conversely, Jimmy thought he was going to live in China for the rest of his life and complete his studies. He wanted to start his own business as a restaurant owner. However, his father did not envision the latter scenario. By 2005, Jimmy was 17 years of age, and his father decided to leave their country of origin and move to the United States. Unsure of his father's reasons for choosing the United States, he believed the decision was job-related due to his government contract: "I believe we moved out because we were communists, you cannot grow [financially] but you can do so in democratic countries. In Mexico, the government also promoted entrepreneurship, very different from China. It was a friendly process" (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

Research demonstrates some of the key factors for the increasing numbers of Chinese migration to Mexico are related, but not limited, to seeking better working and living conditions, escaping from the communist *modus vivendi*, government prosecution, and freedom (see Manzano-Munguía, Chilián, & Chilián, 2013). For instance, Cantonese living in Mexico, the United States, and Latin American countries invested their savings in different business entrepreneurship such as restaurants, dry-cleaning stores, variety stores, and workshops, regardless of their professional training. As Jimmy stated:

To a greater extent, Chinese are more eager to open businesses: once they arrived at a new community, they quickly identify the main or more profit activity and they start working on it. If the context is rural then they are more prompt to farm production such as food and animal production. In urban centres we are known for laundry mats, restaurants, delivery services, retail stores, and smuggling (Jimmy, personal communication, October 13, 2015).

For Jimmy's father, moving to Miami represented the opportunity to start a family business managed by both. However, he was unable to receive his permanent resident card, and his parents left him behind. Nevertheless, his father contacted a *Mestizo-Chino* (Mexican Chinese) association in Tijuana, and Jimmy lived there for a few years.

In the state of Baja California, he found support through the services provided by several Chinese Mexican associations. For instance, the Mexicali Chinese Association (*Asociación China de Mexicali*), Zhong Shan Association (*Asociación Zhong Shan*), Lung Kung Association (*Asociación Lung Kung*), and the Chinese Language School Tianji (*Escuela de Idioma Chino Tianji*). The latter published books related to Mandarin and a catalogue of Chinese restaurants in Tijuana. These associations sought to promote Chinese culture to Mexican mainstream society, including those of Chinese descent living in Mexico and the United States. On the one hand, these legal associations promoted Chinese cultural revival. While on the other, they represented an ongoing bridge of communication for Chinese people living abroad while creating a sense of belonging to their country of origin that continued through generations.

As Jimmy's family settled in Miami, his aunt helped with the new network needed for establishing their business and starting a new life. Jimmy's parents immediately began working in

the United States, “my dad worked in a Chinese restaurant as a Chef and my mother washed the dishes in the same restaurant” (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014). To return to Jimmy’s account, he then traveled from Miami to Tijuana by bus where:

A Chinese was waiting for me at the bus station, I don’t know how he recognized me because he did not speak Cantonese, only Spanish [...] but I saw him as a “*Chinito*” (Little Chinese). So, I followed him, and he left me at a restaurant where I worked. He introduced me with a *mestizo* [of mixed race] who was my boss (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

This was the first transnational experience for Jimmy in Mexico: the network of social relations from his aunt and dad helped him endure the ordeal of moving without family members to a new country with a different language and cultural codes (see Map 2).

Map 2. Jimmy’s Route from Miami, Florida to Tijuana, Baja California



Source: Juan Periañez de la Rosa’s elaboration based on Wikipedia (n.d.).

To a greater extent, this transnational experience also included the illegality immersed within the context of identity paperwork. The same *Mestizo-Chino* who landed him in a job purchased an underground Mexican migration form to stay in the country. This blurred scenario illustrates the porous transit of an individual and their families as well from an illegal to legal status using a state document. In other words, the purchase of an underground “legal” document legitimated his immigrant status across Mexico, and it also represented Chinese porous transit across borderlands. As Jimmy stated:

When I came here [Tijuana], I started to work in a restaurant, I was young [17 years of age] and inexperienced so I was a “chalán” [helper] and I saw “Chinitos” coming every day, whole families, at least one family per day. The thing is: you change the nationality of your parents, they [the Mexican Consulate] asked for my documents and you give them [immigration authorities] money, they [immigration authorities] change your parent’s name. When a Chinese arrives, he or she goes to the Migration department and declares to be a son of a naturalized Mestizo or Mexican Chinese for false documentation to be issued. You then receive the name of a Chinese with Mexican nationality either born or naturalized. They send the documents to China and China gives them back to them (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

Obtaining legal documents for undocumented immigrants is perceived as a community practice, where families, and not individuals, gain their legal status for staying and working in Mexico. Once in Tijuana, a public officer sold migration forms (*Forma Migratoria FMI*) to Chinese illegals in Mexico. As Jimmy mentioned: “I know a Chinese and that Chinese knows someone in the department of migration. Who? I don’t know, maybe a *diputado*, but he does “*la tranza*” [the deal]. I paid about 2,000 dollars” (Jimmy, personal communication, October 13, 2015). Documented by scholars such as Carey and Marak (2011), this porous terrain can also be depicted through the export of goods and services, specifically alcohol, drugs, food, merchandise, goods, ideas, and resources. What call our attention are the performative grassroots constructions (Latour, 2005) of being transnational across and beyond the U.S.-Mexico border. To a greater extent, our example depicts the networks available for false documentation.

Another example of porous borderlands is the *coyotaje*, where people pay a certain amount of money to travel “safely” from Mexico to the United States and not necessarily as a group member of illegal migrants. For instance, Jimmy’s older brother paid 30,000 dollars to enter the United States from Canton (Guangzhou) via Mexico and Puerto Rico. His brother was the first member of his family to travel undocumented to the United States in 2003, as Jimmy remembers:

Chi-Lou [his brother] paid about 30,000 dollars to enter the United States from Canton [Guangzhou], China. First, they [his brother and a group of Chinese immigrants] went to Europe, afterwards they travel to Haiti, Mexico, and finally to Puerto Rico. It took a while, but they used a false resident identity to enter New York City. Paying is very easy, my brother is a professional Chef, he spent a year and a half saving [working in a Chinese restaurant as a chef] and paid everything [...] he earned like 2,000 dollars in a week, that’s why it was easy to pay the *coyote* [a smuggler] (Jimmy, personal communication, October 13, 2015).

This example illustrates another grassroots construction of the fine line in border crossings. Here we illustrate and call attention to the ongoing underground activities sought to obtain false immigration documents for family members or anyone interested in pursuing the American dream. For instance, in the 19th century, Chinese mobility networks regulated the ways of human mobility from China to Mexico and the United States. This is a reminder of the networks recalled by

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Velázquez (2001). For Jimmy, accessing legal documents and eventually purchasing them was possible through his social networks and connection with State agents. It is out of necessity that individuals practice moments of legality, or illegality, as a mechanism for negotiating contested spaces and identities. As a Chinese Mexican, this is an imposition from above and not from below. His identity is being used as a survival strategy. He stated more than once about his Cantonese identity. Thus, his Chinese heritage: “Never a Mexican [...] always *Chinito*” (Jimmy, personal communication, January 7, 2015) persisted across time and location.

Another example that illustrates the process of negotiation while dealing with fraudulent governmental documentation and corruption is the process to apply for a drivers’ license:

I have had my license for 10 years and I bought it, it’s easier because with my FM [migration form] it’s legal to have a license. The thing is that I bought it, even if it is available at the office of transportation (Jimmy, personal communication, October 13, 2015).

Jimmy is familiar with the corruption permeating governmental officers and services, as he puts it:

[I] put 2,000 pesos in my hand and [...] greeted to the police officer and said: “*Buenas noches oficial*” [Good night officer] and he responded: “*Wow, Chinito sí sabes*” [Wow, you Little Chinese you know] and that’s it. I was able to move away without any infraction or document checkup [referring to his license] [...] Once I was driving through Tijuana and I forgot my migration form. I thought it was not an important document and left it at home. Then a cop stopped me and asked, “license and migration form please.” I showed my license, but I didn’t have my migration form. The cop told me: “*me vas a tener que acompañar*” [You will have to come with me] and I was scared because I thought, “this fu... is going to deport me” so I asked him for a way to solve the issue, and he asked me 10,000 pesos to let me go. I gave him 5,000 pesos [...] and he left me [...] I was again driving (Jimmy, personal communication, January 4, 2016).

The examples aforementioned indicate the agency enacted or performed by Jimmy while dealing with corruption (e.g., state officials and/or false documentation). In addition, these examples illustrate how corruption and illegality are socially driven (accepted and enacted by multiple social actors); and economically construed (permeated by informal economy and low-income State officials) to create a pattern of resistance for immigrants.

Subsequently, Jimmy moved to Tijuana to enjoy the best of both countries (Mexico and the United States). He learned about Mexican customs and practices, food, and language in one year. He also experienced the multiple meanings of border crossing between Mexico and the United States and the acquisition of goods and services on either side (see, for instance, Manzano-Munguía (2014) for details about border crossing). For example, Jimmy crossed several times at San Ysidro to purchase goods, clothes, shoes, Chinese food and species, and other items that were neither available nor affordable in Mexico. He found good deals in the United States, which made a difference while living in an expensive city like Tijuana. Moreover, he learned Spanish as his third language since he already spoke Cantonese and English:

I went to a Spanish school and studied eight hours at night, repeating and repeating my Spanish. I'm Jimmy because in the school there is a teacher that teaches all the "*Chinitos*" [little Chinese] but she cannot address us by name, so she invented different names in Spanish for us [her students]: Juanito, María, Pedro, Salvador, and my name was Jaime (Jimmy). I learned bad words in the restaurants where I worked, there were many Mexican waiters, helpers, and some were Chinese Mexicans, mostly born in Mexico. Sometimes I went for a drink in bars with my friends and all of them spoke bad words (Jimmy, communication personal, January 4, 2016).

While studying Spanish, Jimmy realized that a high percentage of Chinese lived in Tijuana, and many were businesses owners (e.g., restaurants, variety stores, laundromats, retail stores, among others). Therefore, by 2008 he decided to move to another state to make more money. Through a website called QQ, Jimmy found work in a Chinese restaurant in Durango and stayed there for a year and a half while saving money. His life project was to start his own restaurant business, as he stated:

At the beginning it was like this, I needed money to start my own business, but I also needed to find a place without competition like Tijuana where many Chinese businesses are common. They are "*riquísimos*" (very, very, rich) [...] they have everything, and I cannot compete against them. At that time, I did not have much money, so I went to Durango looking for a better job (Jimmy, personal communication, January 4, 2016).

The social networking website QQ is an example of how technology helps Chinese people to connect among them despite not knowing the place they reside very well. While living in Durango, Jimmy was reserved. He worked every day, and a couple of times per month, he hung out with his friends and visited bars or restaurants. In terms of romantic relationships, his first girlfriend was Mexican, but he always expressed his preference for having a girlfriend from the United States or Europe. It was a sign of high status. This period was quiet because he was a hard worker. As a restaurant owner told him: "Chinese business owners prefer Chinese more than Mexicans, because we are hardworking people" (Jimmy, personal communication, January 4, 2016). Similarly, this resonates among Latino auto parts workers in Canada. They state, "Chinese are the worst!" (Manzano-Munguía, 2002, p. 67) because they fail to take their breaks, they skip their lunch and toileting. Finally, if asked, they consent to work overtime without objection, even if offered at the last minute.

When Jimmy saved enough money, he thought of starting his own business while visiting in the city of Puebla. As he puts it:

I saw big buildings, shopping malls, and big streets. Another important reason to choose Puebla was that I saw a very limited number of Chinese restaurants, and this was a sign for me to open one of my own. I had to adapt and learn Mexican lifestyle to survive. I had to relate myself with people from the cities, and more

important, **I became the owner of my own business** [emphasis added] (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

Despite cultural and language barriers, Jimmy was able to socialize and create a new sense of belonging in Mexico. Due to his marital status and family ties, he experienced transnationalism differently. The multistranded relationships he had with his country of origin (China), the other countries, which represented his family ties (United States), and his imagined homeland (Mexico) were contributing factors (see Image 1).

Image 1. Jimmy at his Restaurant in the capital of Puebla, Mexico



Source: Photo taken by Juan Periañez de la Rosa (2016).

Additionally, Jimmy's Chinese food restaurant created a suppliers' network where Chinese species, rice, meat, vegetables, oil, sauces (black bean and soy), fortune cookies, and drinks arrived from China and were shipped to Mexico and the United States (see Images 2, 3 and 4).

Image 2, 3, and 4. Chinese Imports for the Food Industry





Source: Photo taken by Juan Periañez de la Rosa (2016).

Also, Jimmy remained in contact with his social (family and friends) and economic relations back in Canton (Guangzhou) via social media platforms such as Skype and Facebook, or through e-mail, cell phone calls, among others. For instance, he contacted his food supplier, mostly for condiments, in Cantonese and received imported products directly from China through a delivery company to his restaurant. He also received gifts from his Chinese food suppliers. We witnessed a meaningful present from a food supplier. It was a Mooncake, a signature cake made for the Mid-Autumn Festival in China. As an important Chinese and Asian tradition to Jimmy, it meant to be at home, still in touch with family, friends, and traditions. Just as he stated: “Learning two languages is important to succeed, but the most important language you need to learn is to speak your cultural language [...] our food language [...] my beloved Mooncake” (Jimmy, personal communication, October 13, 2015).

Additionally, Jimmy still relates with his family and close friends dwelling in Canton (Guangzhou). He reads Cantonese local news online and remains in touch with the increasing number of Chinese businesses across the world. As he puts it:

I have family in Canton [Guangzhou], aunts, uncles, and some cousins, most of them went to other countries [one of his cousins lives in Italy]. But we are not like you [referring to Mexican families and their sense of belonging], for me my family includes my parents and brothers, and the rest of my extended family are family, but not as much as my parents (Jimmy, personal communication, November 16, 2014).

His family ties with his cousins are not as strong as the ones he keeps with his parents. Besides, the older members of his extended family face a technology dilemma given their lack of

communication skills through the cyberspace. Nevertheless, he stays in touch with his immediate family members (parents) in the United States through technology. To a greater extent, his network of Chinese relations nests transpacific connections with the Americas.

CONCLUSION

Ong and Nonini's (1997) seminal work on modern Chinese transnationalism noted the relevance of studying "human agency in border-crossing capitalism" (1997, p. 43), and this paper contributes to our understanding of human agency across borderlands. Historically, one of the pushing factors for Chinese migration was the search for economic growth while serving capital needs. For several immigrants moving to the United States, this meant the fulfillment of the American Dream (financial wealth and prosperity). However, as research demonstrates, this is not the case for many immigrants who face flexible, precarious, and exploitative working conditions (D'Aubeterre Buznego & Rivermar Pérez, 2014). For Chinese immigrants, Mexico and the United States represent entrepreneurship, despite its levels of success or the lack of it (Gachúz Maya, 2014).

During the 19th and 20th centuries, the border played a fundamental role in the politics against Chinese people in Mexico and the United States. An example of these dynamics is better illustrated through the exclusion act and the anti-Chinese movement. Moreover, the process of migrating to a new country is also plagued with moments of legality and illegality where transnational networks helped Chinese immigrants secure a job in the market, gain economic independence, and achieve family support. These represented the mechanisms for negotiating contested spaces and identities across borderlands. For example, the conundrum depicted is precisely Jimmy's entrepreneur's goals which served the needs of capital. In other words, he was subject to the system but still exercising agency.

Jimmy's transnational experience illustrates the fragmented and irregular practices across borderlands, such as learning another language, negotiating with the State through documentation or business permits, and learning social, economic, and cultural strategies. It is relevant to note that his transnational experience is tied closely to his cultural construction of being Chinese at a distance and from below. Jimmy's experience demonstrates some relevant aspects of being transnational: his multi-situated relations with family members, purchases, and social interactions, including gifts among and between Chinese businesses, and commercial partners and community representatives within and beyond Mexico, the United States, and China.

Further research is needed to understand the complexities of cultural transnationalism across borderlands, not only within the context of Mexico and the United States but also Canada and other countries. Some constraints may include but are not limited to other Chinese experiences in other parts of the world. Moreover, female Chinese experiences of cultural transnationalism across borderlands need further exploration.

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