Neo-Victorian Asia: An Inter-imperial Approach

Elizabeth Ho
(University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong)

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Several neo-Victorian moments stand out in Hong Kong's recent history. In the days leading up to Hong Kong's 'handover' to China, colonial iconography was gradually erased from the cityscape. Those that remained, such as the Queen Victoria statue in Victoria Park, took on renewed significance and became points of protest. In 1997, Chinese artist, Pun Sing-lui, attacked the Victoria statue with a hammer and covered it in red paint as part of his protest against the sterility of Hong Kong's colonial culture and local indifference towards the continued effects of colonial politics.[1] In 2017, during the twentieth anniversary of Hong Kong's 'reunification' with the mainland, the Queen Victoria statue gained notoriety again, this time in an act of erasure rather than visible vandalism. In advance of Chinese President Xi's visit to Hong Kong, permission was granted to a pro-Beijing group to host a science expo at Victoria Park, a traditional venue for the start of anti-government protest marches. In addition to displacing an annual protest event, the group erected boards and a banner in such a way that the statue of Victoria was obscured from sight.[2] Local officials and residents were quick to argue that these actions were "petty" and that pro-Beijing groups and visiting Chinese officials could not "face the city's colonial past" (Mok and Cheung 2017: n.p.). Local newspapers drew attention to the statue's history: installed in the late-nineteenth century in Statue Square, Victoria was commandeered by the Japanese during WWII to be melted for weaponry before being rediscovered in a scrap yard and rehomed in the newly-built park in the 1950s. Thus, Queen Victoria anchors multiple, interlinked histories in the making of Hong Kong: British colonialism, Japanese imperialism, and the so-called 'rise' of China.

At its simplest, neo-Victorian studies explores the proliferation of contemporary texts that immerse us fully in nineteenth-century settings and milieux, and those that telescope between the nineteenth century and various presents. Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn assert that neo-Victorian texts must be "*self-consciously engaged with the act of (re)interpretation,*

Neo-Victorian Studies
11:2 (2019)
pp. 1-17

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2628375

(re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (Heilmann and Llewellyn 2010: 4, original emphasis). To their general definition, I would add that the return to the Victorian in contemporary global texts, ranging from literature to fashion, has become one of the primary memorial practices associated with the sense of crisis stemming from the processes of decolonisation, the perceived collapse of the British empire (Ho 2012: 16) and the erosion of Western global dominance more generally. Postcolonial neo-Victorian production, in particular, has been dominated by a need to work through the historical relationships with the former coloniser, usually Britain, in order to pose deimperialised futures. For Hong Kong and other ex-colonial Asian sites, neo-Victorianism offers a highly visible, highly aestheticised code for confronting again the histories of empire and neo-imperialist presents.

These two examples in Hong Kong, where the Victorian reappears to do contemporary political work, bookend shifts in neo-Victorian studies that have occurred over the last decade, especially in the field's reflections on the geographical constraints of the "V-word" (Ho 2012: 10) and its own colonising tendencies. The anti-colonial sentiment unleashed by Pun on the statue of Victoria reflects how postcolonial approaches to the phenomenon of neo-Victorianism, despite the latter's emphasis on critique and the recovery of lost voices and experiences, often remain tied to the nineteenth-century British empire as its subject. By 2017, the erasure of Victoria to ostensibly protect Chinese sensibilities from other imperial histories, including its own, suggests that neo-Victorian studies must expand beyond the British empire to include other imperial relationships. In many ways, this special issue extends and refines Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger's project to "go beyond the current postcolonial frontier in the study of neo-Victorianism and test the reach and relevance of neo-Victorianism beyond the borders of the British Empire and the English language" (Primorac and Pietzrak-Franger 2015: 1). With the proliferation of cultural texts set in nineteenth-century Asia, it feels timely to amend the insight that the Victorian creates a shorthand for the memory of the British empire that obstructs the achievement of postimperial futures and instead assert that the nineteenth century can stage many memories of many empires. Far from "petty" (Mok and Cheung 2017: n.p.), the return to the Victorian in Hong Kong and other places across Asia can be considered an art of what Laura Doyle has termed "inter-imperiality" (Doyle 2014: 159).

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For a more thorough study or historicisation of colonialism beyond area studies and a pervasive, even debilitating, Anglo-Franco focus, Doyle proposes the methodology of inter-imperiality, a study of the "full 360-degree global horizon of political manoeuvres among contemporaneous empires and all kinds of other states", preferably "over a very longue durée" (Doyle 2014: 160). Empires, Doyle reminds us, operated simultaneously, imitating and borrowing freely from each other; to study their interconnectedness sharpens our insight into the economic formations, anti-colonial resistances, shared strategies of expansionism, and intra-imperial projects and subjectivities. Comparing what Jane Burbank and Frederick Cooper have called "imperial repertoires" across time and space and other forms of "imperial intersections" (Burbank and Cooper 2010: 14) strengthens our understanding of relationships and movements *between* empires rather than limiting critical attention to what occurs *within* empires. Aside from connecting decolonising movements, the development of modernities and expanded circuits of labor over time, Doyle writes, "we can glimpse the ways that literary and artistic forms have long mediated these struggles within a larger circuit of several empires, sounding intertextual notes to which we have become deaf" (Doyle 2014: 163).

Tracing the growth of what I am deliberately and problematically terming 'Asian neo-Victorianism' as part of the development of neo-Victorianism as a postcolonial approach make audible some of these intertextual experiences for the present and transforms the global memory of the nineteenth century past into an inter-imperial zone. Reading neo-Victorianism as an art of inter-imperiality turns the canon of neo-Victorianism away from popular writers such as A. S. Byatt and Sarah Waters, for example, to global actors such as Jackie Chan, artists such as multi-media artist Yinka Shonibare, who crafts often neo-Victorian inter-imperial histories using Dutch and African textiles, and writers such as Amitav Ghosh. Ghosh's *Ibis* trilogy (2008-2015) is an exemplar of the kind of inter-imperial work that Asian neo-Victorianism can produce as opium becomes the vector used to chart a connected world of free and indentured labor, drug trafficking, shipping and trade, in which violence and cosmopolitan communities weave together via the Indian Ocean.

In keeping with the memory of the Victorian as empire, the contributors to this special issue define Asian neo-Victorianism as the attempt to recapture and critique the 'urge to empire' within Asia in the

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2628375

nineteenth century and to recall how Asian cultures, their self-understandings, cultural forms and knowledge were formed by contact with Euro-American empires. Asian neo-Victorianism serves as a reminder that the nineteenth century brought a surge of Euro-American colonial expansion across South East Asia in particular. In addition to much of South Asia and what is geographically referred to as Oceania, British imperial acquisitions included Burma (now Myanmar), Malaya, Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), and Borneo as well as the major trading cities of Penang, Singapore, and Hong Kong. Jockeying for access to China, other imperial nations such as the French in Indochina and the Dutch in the Indonesian archipelago acquired territory and established colonies for trade, resources, and for blocking a British monopoly of influence across the continent (see Kratoska 2001). Whether or not the term Asian neo-Victorianism can account for these simultaneous empires and these and other territories' subsequent postcolonialisms is a question raised by some of the contributors to this special issue. Asian neo-Victorianism also acknowledges the colonies of older (or continuing rather than emergent), nineteenth-century imperial powers, such as Portugal and Spain, for example, who like the Dutch, had been established in parts of Asia since the sixteenth century. Macau, a former Portuguese colony also returned to China in 1996, features prominently in Timothy Mo's *An Insular Possession* (1986), one of the earliest examples of Asian neo-Victorian fiction that offers an inter-imperial approach to the opium trade. At the close of the nineteenth century, the United States' annexation of the Philippines as a result of the Spanish-American war added another player to a primarily European imperial field. As the essays in this special issue demonstrate, Asian neo-Victorianism captures the range of histories and responses related to the scale of this inter-imperial entanglement.

Asian neo-Victorianism addresses overlapping periodicities of imperial expansion without claiming that all of Europe's or Asia's empires were imperial with equal intensity at the same time. Thus, it can explore the experiences of nations not colonised outright but nonetheless heavily influenced by Western forces: Thailand and Japan can proudly say they were never colonised but "hungrily soaked up" everything Western (Buruma and Margalit qtd. in Harrison 2010: 16), from literary realism to natural science to expansionist ideologies. Both locations form robust centers of neo-Victorian production: the oft-repeated adaptation of Anna

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Leonowens's (1831-1915) memoir of her time as tutor in King Mongkut's court as a respectful but barely disguised romance is often read as a dramatisation of Thailand's attraction to Westernisation.[3] Within Thailand, the popularity of *Four Reigns* (1953) by Kukrit Pramoj, which chronicles the nation's modernising process through the eyes of a young palace girl, has been translated into English, adapted into four television serials, and most recently staged as a musical, shows how the memory of the nineteenth century and nationalist projects continue to go hand in hand. In addition, Japanese neo-Victorian production pivots around the British nineteenth century to address Japan's aspiration to be another 'Island Empire' by adapting British ideologies of nationalism, modernisation and masculinity. Like Yui Nakatsuma in this issue, I have argued previously that the return to the Meiji era in the late-nineteenth century interrogates, however obliquely, Japan's own subjugation of Asian nations, which took its inspiration from British imperial expansion and posits this period as a rupture or trauma in inter-Asian power dynamics (Ho 2012: 162). In this way, Asian neo-Victorianism describes complexities and geographical dynamics that move beyond coloniser/colonised binaries and center/periphery spatialities.

Reading a range of contemporary Japanese authors such as Soji Shimada, Ryu Togo, and Futoro Yamada, Nakatsuma's essay, 'The Japanese Neo-Victorian Novel: Looking Back to the Age of Victoria from Japan', traces a moment of intense contact between Japan and the British empire in the nineteenth century. Her essay begins by situating Japanese neo-Victorianism within the Meiji Restoration: taking 1868 as a pivotal year, Nakatsuma outlines the deliberate emulation of British technology, ideologies and values as the foundation of Japan's modernisation and policies of expansion that ultimately led to a Japanese empire. Nakatsuma's examples of Japanese neo-Victorian ghost stories, such as Naohika Kitahara's "The Hanging Girl" (2010), reveal an ambivalent stance towards the influence of Victorian culture on Japanese identity that mixes admiration with horror tropes. Nakatsuma argues persuasively that such stories construct the Victorian as a connector between Japan's present and its nineteenth-century past, which obscures the trauma that Japanese imperialism inflicted across Asia and the subsequent bombing of Nagasaki and Hiroshima. Choosing contemporary Japanese fiction that 'writes back' against Arthur Conan Doyles's Sherlock Holmes short stories as her primary archive, Nakatsuma demonstrates how, by inserting fictionalised

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figures prominent in opening Japan to the West into Holmes's cases, neo-Victorianism developed into a critique of Western modernisation and scientific knowledge, racism, and English masculinity that influenced Japanese imperialism. By revealing the often unconscious strategies of memory and forgetting deployed in Japanese rewritings of late-Victorian detective fiction, Nakatsuma illustrates how 'writing back' includes a problematic turning away from Japanese imperialism, itself entangled with Britain and other countries in Asia, while acknowledging the global variants of Japanese masculine identity.

Waiyee Loh's essay, 'Japanese Dandies in Victorian Britain: Rewriting Masculinity in Japanese Girls' Comics', offers a different approach to neo-Victorian production in Japan. Using the *shojo* manga, *Kuroshitsuji* (*Black Butler*) (2007–present) as her case study, Loh explores how the Victorian is deployed in popular culture to negotiate ideals of creative masculinity. Tracing the contestations in the Meiji era over the appropriate model of masculinity for Japan's modern and increasingly imperial outlook, Loh argues that the militaristic and self-effacing ideology of *bushido* and the nativist, supposedly 'authentic' values of *bankara* subculture were consolidated in opposition to the Westernised, consumerist culture of the dandy, a figure made popular by translated Victorian etiquette books imported from England. Adopting sartorial advice and embracing consumerism as a vehicle for fashioning the self, the *haikara* and *shinshi* 'gentlemen' of Meiji Japan emerged as alternatives. Loh deftly maps this crisis onto the re-appearance of the dandy figure in contemporary manga such as *Kuroshitsuju*: characters such as Sebastian, the titular butler, possess a radical combination of male beauty, supernatural powers, fluid sexuality, and an obsession with creative dressing and fashion, which mark them as exemplars of neo-Victorian dandyism. The neo-Victorian dandy and his creative consumption of style and fashion, Loh claims, offers a powerful alternative to the ubiquitous post-war figure of the salaryman, whose strict adherence to a Japanese work ethic can be traced back to the honour code and military discipline of the samurai. Loh attributes these shifts in masculinity to the social and economic pressures faced by salarymen working under new constraints in the post-eighties economic bubble Japan. *Kuroshitsuji*, in particular, re-codes what were once seen as the importation of Western cultural codes against nativist constructions of Meiji masculinity into a specifically Japanese form of cultural production that has led to the

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global export of Gothic and neo-Edwardian styles via the new etiquette books available in the form of fashion magazines and Japanese street-style websites.

To expand Asian neo-Victorianism's archive beyond the canon of self-reflexivity implied by Heilmann and Llewellyn's definition, it would be useful to explore versions of Asian neo-Victorianism perceived to be less 'critical' because reliant on the neo-Victorianisation of Asia. By this I mean the mapping of neo-Victorian tropes and themes onto Asian settings and characters, so that one can deliberately craft a version of the nineteenth century to fit the needs of contemporary memory work. A recurring theme in the neo-Victorianisation of Asia is the depiction of the nineteenth century as exclusively aligned with female oppression: examples include the attention to footbinding in Lisa See's *Snow Flower and the Secret Fan* (2005); novels that take place in the sacrosanct spaces of geisha houses or else concubine's quarters, as in the case of Amanda Roberts's *Threads of Silk* (2016), set in the Forbidden City's harem. Prostitution as a means to explore sexual and colonial oppression is another common plotline in novels such as Alexandra Curry's *The Courtesan* (2015), based on the celebrated nineteenth-century prostitute Sai Jinhua, who was sold into sexual slavery as a child and experienced freedom and hardship in her travels to the West as a concubine of China's envoy to Europe. While these novels can be said to capitalise on the neo-Victorian by flattening rather than demarcating the differences in the Asian landscape they describe, read in concentration, they can move us beyond the mere exotic setting of Asia and the rescuing of female voices doubly lost from Asian and Western history. At stake in these novels is a larger argument of whether or not feminism, a Western import, is an appropriate oppositional force in Asian contexts.

These elements come together particularly strongly in 'Last Empress' fiction, a growing body of biofiction on the Chinese empress, Cixi. Like Queen Victoria, Cixi becomes a powerful and malleable figure around which coalesce issues such as national traumas, Westernisation, imperialism, and post-feminist debates such as ageing and time, sexuality and motherhood. In my own contribution, 'Last Empress Fiction and Asian Neo-Victorianism', I apply neo-Victorianism's critical apparatus to a body of fiction that does not explicitly represent the Victorian in order to define the entanglement of empires and the role that mis-rememberings of nineteenth-century China continue to play in the Asian-American immigrant

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experience. Treating the problematic rejuvenation of Cixi's contentious reputation and her aging body as an extended metaphor in novels such as Anchee Min's *Empress Orchid* (2004) and its sequel, *The Last Empress* (2007), Da Chen's *My Last Empress* (2012), and Linda Javin's *The Empress Lover* (2014), I demonstrate how representations of Cixi's body reflect and critique Western reactions to the economic rise of China and how the neo-Victorianisation of Asia might cause readers to overlook Orientalism in contemporary East/West relations or, even more importantly, authoritarianism's challenges to human rights. I end my article with a discussion of the Singaporean musical, *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress* (2002), whose hybrid aesthetics of Western musical forms and Asian imagery draw out what a neo-Victorian project in Asia can accomplish. Transforming Cixi's history into a romance of motherhood, *Forbidden City* makes palatable a version of Chinese heritage that can unite ethnic diversities across the city state yet also reveals the state's mechanisms of ethnic imperialisms that privileges a Chinese economic and cultural elite.

Barbara Franchi's essay, 'The Neo-Victorian Chinese Diaspora: Crossing Genders and Postcolonial Subversion in Pacific Gold Rush Novels', also examines the memory work that neo-Victorian fiction can perform for the Chinese diaspora in the present. If opium bonds together a history of international contracted labour originating in India, China, and Africa, then gold similarly links together nineteenth-century migration to destinations beyond 'properly' colonial spaces conventionally prized by neo-Victorian studies. Taking gold rush fiction set in nineteenth-century settler colonies of Australia and New Zealand, such as Isabella Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* (1998) and Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003), Franchi reads the gold fields as anchors in a zone of economic production that stretched across the globe. Focusing on the Chinese communities in these novels, Franchi argues that Allende and Tremain recover a lost history of Chinese migration and racism that challenges the hegemonic representations and imperial structures of nineteenth-century settler societies as dominated by Britain. Douglas Fetherling highlights how the study of gold rushes in New Zealand, Australia, California, Canada, and South Africa tend to be perceived as discrete, national events rather than a "cumulative worldwide development" that can reveal in "British imperial heritage a rival form of individual expression that is separate from

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Americanism and untainted by it" (Fetherling 1997: 8) and furthermore, reveal similarities within the residual legacies of nineteenth-century racist legislation across the Western world in contemporary policies of multiculturalism. Franchi's attention to the romance plots of neo-Victorian gold rush novels see gender fluidity and inter-racial relations flourish amongst Chinese sojourners and Western women. However problematic, the biracial offspring that emerge from such unions recast the gold fields as originary moments in the multicultural futures of these settler nations.

Following the gold has been part of Asian American studies' agenda of recuperating lost Chinese voices in immigration to America, in particular the gold fields of the West Coast, the labour practices of working the Union Pacific Railroad, and subsequent racist legislation such as the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882. Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), a collection of vignettes chronicling sojourners and early nineteenth-century male immigrants to America, can arguably be said to have paved the way for an Asian neo-Victorian approach aimed at establishing a network of Chinese migration as an inter-imperial project, which frames the current phenomenon of global Chinese capitalism that has catapulted cities such San Francisco, Toronto, Vancouver, and Sydney into areas of high-density ethnic ownership, labour and citizenship. To Kingston's work, we may also add Asian American literature focusing on Chinese labour used to build the transpacific railway, such as *Donald Duk* (1991) by Frank Chin; Jackie Chan's blockbuster, *Shanghai Noon* (2000); Karen Shepard's 2013 novel, *The Celestials* (covering Calvin Sampson's 'Chinese experiment' to import 75 Chinese laborers from San Francisco to North Adams, Massachusetts to break a shoemakers' union strike); or, more recently, Peter Ho Davies's *The Fortunes* (2016), which, beginning in the 1860s, spans the Asian experience in the US over 150 years and recovers a history of Chinese labour in America's imperial expansion westward that opens neo-Victorianism up beyond its usual boundaries. The success of Eleanor Catton's *The Luminaries* (2016), the immense astrological form of which trains the readers' focus on a mining town in New Zealand as the gathering point for Europeans, Chinese and Australian prospectors, turns opium as well as gold into the new currency for neo-Victorianism's narrative advancement towards viewing the nineteenth century as an age of immigration and intercultural and counter-hegemonic encounters. It may be tempting to launch the accusation that this is yet again, neo-Victorianists encroaching on

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or colonising other fields and nationalistic literary divides, in this case, transpacific or Asian-American studies. However, thinking about gold can serve multiple purposes in Asian neo-Victorianism: in addition to seeing the gold rush as a "voluntary mass migration around the world that became the example and prototype for all later episodes of fortune-seeking" (Minnick 2002: 142), the metaphor of mining has also been used by Marie-Luise Kohlke, for example, to discuss the deeper archival work that neo-Victorianists can perform (see Kohlke 2014: 21-37). Gold-mining thus offers a critique of neo-Victorian studies' perhaps too greedy turn towards other fields.

What emerges in this special issue is how China has come to dominate the inter-imperial connections in the nineteenth century traced by contributors across Asian neo-Victorian texts. Or put differently, several essays explore how 'China' became a quasi period in the history of what is popularly remembered as the apex of the British empire. On the one hand, this emphasis reflects the dominance of ethnic Chinese groups across Asia in the postcolonial period, which has significantly affected policy in city-states like Singapore or the role that Chinese ethnicity has played in structuring racial, cultural and economic identities and 'problems' in postcolonial nation states such as Malaysia, the Philippines, and Indonesia. On the other hand, the attention given to China in Asian neo-Victorianism functions as a cautionary tale. In 2005, Linda Colley was writing in response to the publication of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's *Empire* (2000) and at the height of the US invasion of Afghanistan, but she also issued a warning about the amnesia regarding empire in a non-Western context: "like many Americans now, and many Britons during their imperial era", she asserts, "vast numbers of Chinese remain in denial about their empire" (Colley 2005: 413). Consistent flexing of the PRC's 'sharp' power in policies, which pursue global economic and informational expansion, has made it increasingly important to be attuned to potential neo-imperial/colonial tactics in the present. Asian neo-Victorianism underscores how European imperialism colours perceptions of China's actions and remains the means by which we identify investments, partnerships, and global presences as colonial.

Neo-Victorian scholars studying Asia gain the opportunity to take on one of the many challenges offered by Doyle, that only through "careful attention to the long-accruing interaction of empires" can such phenomenon

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as the "rise or return of 'Chinese empire'" be contextualised and understood (Doyle 2014: 161). The problem of language, however, troubles access to a comprehensive understanding of inter-imperiality that Doyle champions; as Antonija Primorac has observed, there remains a "tacit assumption, shared with the contemporary art world, that the relevant production and cross-cultural dissemination of neo-Victorianism is conducted mostly or exclusively in the English language" (Primorac 2015: 49). Many of the contributors to this special issue are acutely aware of the linguistic limitations of their archives and the conditions under which these are brought to academic and popular attention. The availability of translated texts, such as Nobel Prize winner Mo Yan's *Sandalwood Death* (2013), set during the Boxer Rebellion (1899 – 1901), underscores how much the neo-Victorian archive depends on the primacy of English in the international prize industry. The visibility that translation into English brings neo-Victorian texts in Asia might not, however, extend to F. Sionil Jose's *Dusk* (1998): although written in English, the book is prized in a different way, as 'merely' nationally renowned, and Jose's Rosales Saga has not gained global attention in spite of providing a powerful fictional account of American colonialism in the Philippines. The uneven access to versions of the Victorian in the present is best captured in Daniel Mason's *The Piano Tuner* (2002), when the protagonist Edgar Drake becomes unwittingly entangled in the Great Game between Russia, Britain and Indo-China, unable to interpret the deadly skeins of inter-imperiality because he cannot understand the Shan dialect, writing, and music of the Tai state in Burma. Many of the contributors to this issue reflect on the issues of language and translation – in their article on *Agassi/The Handmaiden*, Park Heebon, Julie Sanders and Chung Moonyoung draw attention to the importance of cinematic subtitling for younger Koreans, who do not have the same colonial exposure to Japanese as their predecessors, while Nakatsuma and Diana M. Pho's articles help expand inter-imperial concerns by bringing bilingualism into their scholarship. The resulting awareness of linguistic gaps and lack can re-sharpen neo-Victorianism's critical edge and ethical agenda.

These linguistic and ethical issues are addressed in two contributions to *Neo-Victorian Asia* that explore the sub-genre and subcultural movement of steampunk. In their seminal introduction to steampunk, Rachel A. Bowser and Brian Croxall define the nebulous phenomenon as united by its

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"invocation of Victorianism" (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 1), proceeding to explain that

> In literary culture, this can be a narrative set in Victorian London; one set in a futuristic world that retains or reverts to the aesthetic hallmarks of the Victorian period; a piece of speculative fiction that deploys Victorian subjects; or a text that incorporates anachronistic versions of nineteenth-century technologies. (Bowser and Croxall 2010: 1)

These characteristics of Victoriana extend to steampunk's material and performance culture, in which 'tinkering' and a DIY-aesthetic capture both the counter-cultural ideologies of 'punk' and the Victorian scientific culture. Recent studies of steampunk have critiqued the generalities of Bowser and Croxall's initial assessment of steampunk's alternate temporalities, drawing attention to the alternate geographies and racial identities that necessarily arise too (see Ho 2012; Ferguson 2011). Harnessing neo-Victorianism's postcolonial agenda to steampunk troubles the cartography of empire by revealing other technological centers as zones of power (and anxiety) to Britain. Practitioners and writers have also interrogated the whiteness of steampunk's performance culture that can arise when its ahistoricism is embraced or enhanced without criticism.[4]

Diana M. Pho, for example, has been instrumental in dismantling the mono-racial dynamics of steampunk cosplay in her award-winning blog, *Beyond Victoriana*. In the 'Author's note' to her creative piece included in this special issue, a one-person play entitled *Analog Incarnations*, Pho responds to this amnesia by situating steampunk performance as a working through of postcolonial trauma. Inhabiting her steampunk persona, 'Ay-leen the Peacemaker', Pho takes advantage of steampunk's anachronistic temporal codes to stage a crucial moment in the French colonisation of Indochina and the Vietnamese resistance movement: two female time travellers, Ayleen and an anonymous Vietnamese-American, share their stories on the eve of Ayleen's execution for the assassination of the Indochinese Governor-General in 1896. The play offers a race conscious opportunity to participate in steampunk performance and critiques, through Ayleen's warrior lineage, the stereotypes of Vietnamese-American femininity that persist to this day.

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Like Pho, Kurian Therakath Peter examines steampunk's engagement with colonial history in his essay, 'A Therapeutic Mangle of History: Towards a Politics of Reconciliation in Arjun Raj Gaind's *Empire of Blood*'. India has not often been included in the archive of neo-Victorian fiction, perhaps, as I have surmised elsewhere, because its national narrative of independence does not 'fit' neo-Victorianism's ability to give voice to the hauntology of empire in the supposedly postcolonial present (Ho 2012: 11). In India, the trauma of Partition rivals British colonialism in post-independence political, religious and racial divisions. In addition to the popularity of novels such as J.G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) or blockbuster films such as *Lagaan: Once Upon a Time in India* (2001) and *Mangal Pandey: The Uprising* (2005), both starring Aamir Khan, steampunk has proven a rich resource for nineteenth-century Indian settings and a neo-Victorian postcolonial agenda. After surveying a range of literary steampunk examples authored by the West from S. M. Stirling's The *Peshawar Lancers* (2002) to Gail Carriger's *Prudence* (2015), Peter reveals how, despite the best intentions of the novels' progressive politics, they leave unchallenged and unimagined the possibility of Indian agency or resistance. Peter then turns to the graphic novel *Empire of Blood* (2015), written by the Indian author Arjun Raj Gaind and illustrated by the Argentinian artist, Enrique Alcatena. Published primarily for Indian audiences, *Empire of Blood* depicts an alternate history of the Raj where British power depends on the consumption of *aqua vitae*, revealed to be blood taxed from Indian colonials. Tom, a young Englishman, sacrifices himself for Indian independence by killing the monstrous Queen Elizabeth, a vampiric Victoria-avatar who has cruelly ruled this version of the British empire for two thousand years using alchemy. At first glance, *Empire of Blood* seems to offer a similar kind of historical exculpation of British colonialism as the steampunk novels with which Peter opens his critique. However, upon careful reading of graphic novel's text and images, Peter argues that *Empire of Blood* troubles the dynamics of colonial trauma, inviting sympathy from readers directed at the plight of both Indian and British characters. Because Gaind graphically depicts the atrocities of British colonialism but does not assign blame for the injustices of empire, Peter argues the text implies a degree of postcolonial healthiness in the Indian imagination of the nineteenth century, which can redirect neo-

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Victorian studies' agenda of recovering (from) historical trauma to, instead, remain open to possibility.

The final essay of this special issue and a collaborative analysis between South Korean and British scholars, 'Secondary Pleasures, Spatial Occupations and Postcolonial Departures: Park Chan-Wook's *Agassi/The Handmaiden* and Sarah Waters's *Fingersmith*', challenges both the insularity of neo-Victorian studies, as dominated by "linguistically, geographically, and ideologically delimited by the maps of the British Empire" (Primorac 2015:48), and the pleasures of recognition that adaptation brings the viewer/reader. Keeping the complicated plotline of *Fingersmith* (2002) largely intact, Park shifts the novel's Victorian setting to a specific historical moment in Asia: the Japanese occupation of the Korea peninsula in the 1930s. Sook-Hee enters into service to a wealthy Korean household of Mr. Kouzuki, whose fortune and library of pornography has been acquired through collaboration with the Japanese occupying forces. His niece by marriage, the Japanese Lady Hideko, becomes the object of Sook-Hee's own collaboration with the self-styles 'Count Fujiwara' to steal her mistress's inheritance through marriage to the conman and subsequent imprisonment in a lunatic asylum, only to have her actions thwarted by Hideko's own counter-plot to substitute Sook-Hee for herself. Inventing neo-Asian and neo-Victorian strategies of engaging with the past, *Agassi* performs alternative historical work for a contemporary Asian audience, so that the British nineteenth century becomes repurposed as a launching ground to examine a moment of colonial occupation in Korean history. For the authors, forced occupation, dislocation and relocation become central to the film's imagery and structure, anchoring the film's exploration of the imperial complexities of the Korea-Japan-China triad that dominates geopolitical and cultural dynamics past and present. *Agassi*, the authors conclude, takes its place as a pre-eminent example of what the neo-Victorian can imaginatively and politically perform for the postcolonial in Asia.

At the same time that this special issue expands the purview of neo-Victorian studies, it also engages with the critical obstacles surrounding the application of the term 'neo-Victorian' to different non-British contexts. At a MLA roundtable on the Long Nineteenth Century, Waiyee Loh and I discussed how "appropriate" the term neo-Victorian is for historical fiction set outside of Britain; whether or not scholars are imposing the Victorian as

DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2628375

a "privileged periodising category on narratives that involve other ways of dividing historical time" and, further, why we should use a periodising category at all when Victorian studies itself "is shifting away from a narrowly British-based framework towards a global history of the long nineteenth century" (Loh 2018: n.p.)? Finally, Loh asked, why not simply use the term "historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" (Loh 2018: n.p.), or what Elodie Rousselot has called the "neo-historical novel" (Rousselot 2014:2), in place of 'neo-Victorian'? Loh's interrogation of how to group texts under the umbrella of Asian neo-Victorianism critiques the colonising impulses of neo-Victorian studies and whether or not the term can and should expand to include inter-imperial content. Her questions imply that the site specificity of 'neo-Meiji' or 'neo-Qing' fiction might be more accurate in describing the directionalities of colonialism or the power dynamics of other forms of imperial relations in the nineteenth century. Her comments reflect the discomfort that critics outside (and within) neo-Victorian studies experience when a category such as Asian neo-Victorianism overlaps with concerns in area studies, an overlap I perceive as a productive co-mingling rather than a territorial obstacle. At stake in this special issue may be the very heart of neo-Victorian studies itself: is neo-Victorianism just an Anglophone/Western literary and cultural "system of appraisal" (Primorac and Pietzrak-Franger 2015: 8), or can it self-consciously project 'Asia' as a theatre of past and present inter-imperial exchanges?

Notes

1. I began my 2012 monograph, *Neo-Victorianism and the Memory of Empire* with a discussion of this image of the vandalism of Queen Victoria's statue as an example of neo-Victorianism as a global Anglophone project and its ability to address what I called "improper postcolonialism" (Ho 2012: 10). The span of the five years since has seen a shift in neo-Victorian studies to attend to the possibilities of a truly global approach to the neo-nineteenth century.
2. Marches and expos also displace the large but less visible populations of Indonesian women, many hired as domestic helpers, who gather in the

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shadow of Victoria on weekends and underscore the entanglement of postcolonial identities in the city.

3. The most well-known example of neo-Victorianism is probably the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, *The King and I* (1956), followed by the updated movie version of *Anna and the King* (1999), directed by Andy Tennant and starring Jodie Foster and Chow Yun-Fat. Both versions could be re-considered as forms of Asian neo-Victorianism and represent inter-imperial dynamics in their content and production. Notable too is the circulation of the 'Siamese' twins, Chang and Eng Bunker, not only in various sideshow stages around the world as Asian curiosities in the nineteenth century, but also amongst present-day Asian American studies, neo-Victorian studies, disability studies and beyond.
4. See, for example, Christine Ferguson's article, 'Surface Tensions: Steampunk, Subculture and the Ideology of Style', in which she argues that steampunk play and performance can be self-consciously creative but not necessarily welcomed by steampunk practitioners: "[S]ome consider the privileging of overtly referential and ostentatiously ideological forms of steampunk to be a skewered imposition, or worse, a beggaring of the scene's aesthetic potential" (Ferguson 2011: 76). The danger, however, is an ahistoricism that 'forgets' colonial exploitation and empire.

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.2628375