# The Neo-Victorian Chinese Diaspora: Crossing Genders and Postcolonial Subversion in Pacific Gold Rush Novels

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**Abstract:**
In neo-Victorian gold-rush novels, the Pacific coasts of California and New Zealand are liminal spaces where clashes and encounters between Asian, Australasian and American cultures occur. In particular, frontier town communities in Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003) and Isabel Allende's *Daughter of Fortune* (1999) portray the problematic hierarchy established by the white, predominantly male ruling class over Chinese migrants. Pao Yi (in Tremain) and Tao Chi'en (in Allende), victims of the traumatic experience of the Opium Wars and the loss of their families, are reduced to a marginal role in the settlement enterprise, and subjected to violent discrimination from the white prospectors. They will find unexpected allies in another silenced minority in the frontier town, namely women of English heritage. This article argues that the friendships and romantic relations, which eventually develop between these two groups of excluded people, challenge imperial hegemony from within. Such Anglo-Chinese crossings disrupt the Victorian system of social and racial hierarchies, and represent a new postcolonial and neo-Victorian community based on cross-cultural integration and equality.

**Keywords**: Isabel Allende, Californian gold rush, Chinese diaspora, feminism, frontier, neo-Victorian, New Zealand, postcolonialism, romance plot, Rose Tremain.

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According to the Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh, the First Opium War (1839-1842) symbolised the "emergence of a new ideology, namely the free market, or capitalism based on drug trade and human trafficking" (Ghosh qtd. in Zullo 2009: 181).[1] This historical turning point also marked the triumph of Britain's expansionist ambitions over China's policy of isolationism. One of the most profound consequences of British imperial rule was the opening of new opportunities for Chinese individuals, especially through emigration from the homeland.

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The Chinese diaspora, or the movement of migrants who left home in search of fortune in the goldfields across the British colonies and beyond, is testimony to the profound social, economic and cultural turmoil that China and its inhabitants were undergoing in the period in question. This article examines how nineteenth-century gold rushes, when replayed in twenty-first century literature, shape Western and Chinese identities as the intersection between global movement and the history of imperialism. Novels such as Rose Tremain's *The Colour* (2003), Isabel Allende's *La Hija de la fortuna* (1999), translated into English as *Daughter of Fortune* (1999),[2] and Eleanor Catton's monumental Booker-Prize winning *The Luminaries* (2013) evoke the stories of migration, loss, and trauma of two marginalised categories of individuals: the male Chinese settlers and gold prospectors, and their white, *mestiza*, Anglophone and Hispanophone female counterparts. In these works of fiction, I argue, the gold-rush frontier participates in the act of "comparing and contesting local tendencies and global impulses" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 13), which the neo-Victorian project is increasingly invested in. By so doing, the novelists centre the diegesis on the process of character and societal development as movement: individual mobility and shape-shifting occur within the broader context of the geographical travel networks highlighted in the texts.

Set during the nineteenth-century gold-rushes in the Anglophone world, neo-Victorian gold-rush fiction focuses on how identities form for Chinese men and white and *mestiza* women who travel to frontier towns. A sub-category of fiction in neo-Victorian studies, neo-Victorian gold-rush fiction shapes diasporic identities as a "contact zone" (Pratt 1992: 4), which the gold field represents. Indeed, the neo-Victorian enterprise "re-visions the nineteenth century and its latter-day aesthetic and ideological legacies in the light of historical hindsight and critique" (Kohlke 2014: 21). By revisiting the gold field as the crucial place that commemorates the traumas of the Chinese diaspora in white settler colonies, authors of neo-Victorian gold-rush fiction identify a key strategy of survival for Chinese miners in shaping their new home through their relationships with women as fellow marginalised individuals.

Julia Bradshaw underlines how, historically, Chinese outward mobility after the First Opium War was not equally widespread across the country's ethnicities and classes. Rather, it involved mostly male farmers and craftsmen from the Guangdong area, where the ports of Canton, Macau


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and Hong Kong had acted as gateways for the initially forbidden opium trade, and subsequently as flashpoints in the violent conflict:

> From the time of the First Opium War (1839-1842) southern China was in a state of economic upheaval. A family decision might be made that a son or nephew should attempt to increase the family's fortune by working in another country where earnings were higher […]. A stream of intrepid men made their way to the goldfields of California (from 1850), Australia (from 1854) and Canada (from 1860). In December 1865 Cantonese men came to the goldfields of Otago [New Zealand] and within 18 months they were mining on the West Coast. (Bradshaw 2009: 12)

When there was gold to be had, everyone had a right to try their fortune, and Chinese prospectors were as attracted as anyone else by the chance of wealth, luck and profit that the mines promised. Just like their British, American and continental European counterparts, the Chinese gold prospectors who moved to Australasia and California (and elsewhere) were driven by a desire for financial gain, or by the need to support their families at home. Typically, Chinese miners would settle in a village or town, work hard in the mines or in other connected sectors, and contribute to the community's economy, just like miners of any other origin. The Chinese communities that formed during the gold rushes of the mid-to-late-nineteenth century were therefore instrumental for the economic development of the areas in question. They filled key gaps in the local economy, to the point where "perhaps the nineteenth-century Australasian colonies would have starved to death without the Chinese market gardeners" (Ferrall 2005: 18-19).

Moreover, Chinese immigrants also actively contributed to the creation of the ethnically-mixed societies that are still prevalent in many of these former settler colonies, now nation-states, such as Australia and New Zealand, or part of a larger postcolonial federal superpower, as in the case of California in the United States. By playing such an active role in the foundational moments in the cultural memory of a place, diasporic Chinese communities challenged the dominant Victorian imperialist discourse, which structured white settlers in opposition to non-white *local*


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communities (Aborigines in Australia, Maori in New Zealand, Native Americans and Mexicans in California). However, the social and racial hierarchy imposed by white hegemonic rule systematically discriminated against Chinese sojourners. If, as maintained by Judy Yung, the nineteenth-century Chinese diaspora saw up to 2.5 million individuals leave home to go overseas (Yung 1995: 16), more often than not Chinese miners and labourers in gold-rush frontier towns were the victims of systematic racism (see Bradshaw 2009: 20; Belich 2009: 308), and of discriminatory laws that denied them basic human rights (Yung 1995: 21-22).[3]

As a result of growing Sinophobia in the nineteenth-century gold rushes, Chinese miners were the victims of active discrimination in the form of poll taxes aimed at them, as non-white, non-European miners.[4] Discrimination against the Chinese presence in these settler colonies culminated with eventual efforts to prevent Chinese migration at large: such exclusionary legislation was initiated by the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act in the United States, which restricted the arrival of Chinese men and, specifically, Chinese women. Sinophobia on the goldfields produced not only tangible racial and ethnic segregation, but also a form of cultural anxiety around the 'Yellow Peril'. In the perception of the white majority, Chinese men were further demonised as abject polluted bodies with the potential to contaminate white women (Ferrall 2005: 9). In this respect, the element of gender has to be considered alongside race and culture: in fact, the initial Chinese communities were constituted only by men, as their wives and female relatives were often legally unable to join their husbands or fathers before the men made enough money to pay for their passage. Although relationships between Chinese men and white women were actively discouraged by Antipodean and Californian governments, the mere possibility of such an encounter occurring raised anxiety in the dominant white culture and resulted in the Othering process of Chinese men, because "their unclassifiable strangeness affected all categories of being" (Ferrall 2005: 9).[5]

As aliens and alienated, the Chinese were therefore also long ignored by public and cultural discourses on the gold rushes, as well as by historiography. Contemporary social history and ethnic history have refreshingly played their part in restoring the Chinese presence to its rightful place in the cultural memory of mid- to late nineteenth-century gold rushes worldwide. Scholarship ranging from Bradshaw's and Yung's monographs


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to the 2005 collection of essays, *East by South*, edited by Charles Ferrall, Paul Millar and Keren Smith, exemplifies this shift. Neo-Victorian gold rush novels equally play their role in recuperating the memory of the discriminations and exclusions faced by Chinese miners in Californian and Antipodean gold rushes. Through the subversive rewriting of the Chinese labourers into spaces that were predominantly places of white settlement, these neo-Victorian texts "highlight the suppressed histories of gender and sexuality, race and empire" (Kaplan 2007: 3). Such novels become places of postcolonial encounters, where multiculturalism overtly calls into question imperial hierarchies between ethnicities, races and genders. Indeed, establishing contacts between Chinese men and white women, two "subaltern group[s], whose identity is [their] difference" (Spivak 1988: 285), forms the prevalent modality adopted across neo-Victorian gold-rush novels to challenge the imperial and racial hierarchies of the nineteenth century.

Catton, Tremain and Allende rewrite the history of frontier towns, traditionally viewed under a white, Western gaze, by placing the diasporic Asian presence centre-stage. These novels question nineteenth-century Sinophobic attitudes by making the Anglo-Chinese and *mestiza*-Chinese encounters themselves the foundational moment for the cross-cultural, melting-pot societies that contemporary New Zealand and California represent. Restoring the voices of the Chinese diaspora becomes the most evident political stance of neo-Victorian gold-rush fiction: the protagonists' reimagined painful experiences of migration from China redefine white hegemony. At the same time, by challenging nineteenth-century Sinophobia in white settler colonies, these novels broaden the scope of the neo-Victorian project as a whole. They open a necessary conversation around the historical exclusions and discriminations against the Chinese presence in the particular historical context (and in subsequent cultural memory of the period), and depict human mobility within the broader picture of trade and global capitalism across a number of nineteenth-century imperial powers, such as Britain and China.

In the first section of this article, I consider how China is perceived as a place of memory and trauma in *The Colour*. The engagement with material objects, haunting memories and the adoption of fluctuating identities proves a successful survival strategy for the Chinese hero Pao Yi and the English heroine Harriet Blackstone, who acquire a free, nomadic


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status over national and racial allegiances. Subsequently, I focus on how, in Allende's novel, encounters between Chinese men and white women reshape the hierarchies of the frontier town, celebrating Chinese identities as the successful counter-hegemonic model with which to contrast the racial distinctions at play. Ultimately, while reclaiming the just and long-overdue presence of the Chinese miners in the gold rushes, neo-Victorian representations of Asia in the diaspora also propose alternative histories to the white male history of settlement and colonisation of the Antipodes, and of the United States' takeover of California.

While central to the diegeses of Catton's, Tremain's and Allende's novels, the Anglo-Chinese encounter has different structural roles across this corpus of fiction: while mostly functional to the sensational plot and interrupted halfway through the text in *The Luminaries*, the relationships between Chinese men and white women in *The Colour* and *Daughter of Fortune* represent, instead, a defining moment for their characters' processes of formation. For this reason, Catton's novel will remain in the background of this article, while Tremain's and Allende's texts are placed centre-stage. Indeed, where Catton has her Chinese prospectors die before the white male hero's safe return to his lover Anna, Tremain writes a love affair ending in a pregnancy between Pao Yi and Harriet Blackstone. Similarly, Allende has her protagonist Eliza Sommers fall in love with a Chilean gold-seeker before gradually transferring her affections to the Chinese doctor, Tao Chi'en, who has always been beside her.

In Tremain's and Allende's novels, the characters' trajectories find the equilibrium they have long sought for in the Anglo-Chinese encounter, setting an important precedent in the stories of cross-cultural and imperial tension that this particular category of neo-Victorian writing represents. Conversely, the events in Catton's text appear to be much more driven by external factors, not least the star charts punctuating the chapters of the 800-page novel. Within this pattern, the characters' destinies are not the outcome of the individual agency of subjects in formation, but rather attributable to a teleological system that rewards the white settler majority, relegating the Chinese (and Maori) characters to the borders. From this perspective, in *The Luminaries*, the Anglo-Chinese friendship between Anna and the Chinese prospectors, especially her drug-dealer Ah Sook, appears to have a different aim from those in *The Colour* and *Daughter of Fortune*, where the positive potential of the Chinese diaspora in neo-Victorian fiction is commemorated.


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Instead, *The Luminaries* instrumentalises these relationships as a necessary and preparatory phase, preluding the white, heteronormative and bourgeois conclusion that prevails in Catton's sensational masterpiece.

## 1. Portable Objects and Nomadic Identities in *The Colour*

If cross-cultural exchanges have the power to disrupt imperial dynamics from within, then in the neo-Victorian Chinese diaspora such interactions start with negotiating how traumatic memories from the past haunt characters in the diegetic present. Key emblems of that legacy are the portable objects that come to represent a new home in the settler colony: such tangible signifiers of domesticity evoke distant memories of one's home country and indicate how diasporic movement crosses and redefines the lines of gender and race. Small, surrogate versions of China become traces from the past for Chinese male migrants; by engaging with material objects, these men reassess their gender and sexual identity, and establish cross-cultural connections with the white female protagonist.

*The Colour* features an unhappily married English couple, Harriet and Joseph Blackstone, who move to the Southern Island of New Zealand to start a life in farming. The couple's initial efforts prove unsuccessful: their cow dies in the cold, their seeds are blown away in the wind, and they grow increasingly indifferent to one another. For Harriet, comfort comes unexpectedly from a cheap wooden tea box, featuring "a drawing of two herons, with their necks entwined amid some Chinese writing, and Harriet thought it beautiful and strange" (Tremain 2004: 10). A symbol of domesticity and homeliness in the inhospitable New Zealand frontier, the box is also an emblem of the "embodied memory that returns us to the past" (Mitchell 2010: 176) – akin to the neo-Victorian novel that contains the image. The box is a personal item with a history, one that engages in revisiting the collective dimension of memory as well.

Harriet's dealings with the box involve the senses of touch and sight: she finds it aesthetically pleasing, but she does not understand its writings, or the full significance of the herons. In a figurative way, however, and precisely because of her lack of full engagement with the box, Harriet can use it to travel with her mind to the Chinese landscape it evokes, and away from her solitude and her husband's harsh and unloving temper:


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> Harriet prised the lid open with a knife, the nails lifting easily and cleanly. She stared at the empty box, which must have crossed the Pacific on some interminable sea-voyage from Canton. Tea and silk. Opium and ebony. Chinese settlers hoping for money and gold … All these, like her with her dreams of land and children, had made their way to Aotearoa, to the Land of the Long White Cloud, to a new world. And there was only this now, this new world. She had to make of it what she could. So there and then, as the dark of the afternoon gathered at the windows, Harriet imagined that she was consigning to the box all the weight of her dislike for Joseph, and that this box – this object of no account – would enable her to go on with her life. (Tremain 2004: 60, original ellipsis)

The real and imaginary memories that this box evokes become Harriet's epiphany about her marital frustrations, and a symbol of the painful caesura that imperial travel involves for the humans who, increasingly, move around the globe in search of fortune. In this respect, through the box Harriet's story of migration, loss and existential doubt becomes part of a common destiny, involving the tea, the silk, the opium and ebony that have (been) moved to New Zealand to be traded and consumed, and to generate valuable income. While, to a white English woman, a metonymical representation of China shows a desire for a fascinating and mysterious country full of rich resources, the box operates also as a neo-Victorian object. It emblematises primarily the connection in time between the Victorian time of the diegesis and the twenty-first century time of the reader, but it also, importantly, stands for the commercial networks of global imperialism in which Chinese goods and bodies are involved. The box ultimately symbolises the profit-driven, commercial aspect that has led to imperial trade and movement in the first place, a drive to which Harriet herself, as a woman seeking to become a pioneer farmer (and later gold prospector), has fallen victim to.

In the historical context of the novel, the box is more than a symbol of China, its goods and its inhabitants: it allows the novel to retell the New Zealand gold rush as the history of the Chinese diaspora and China's arrival in white women's homes. The box then is also a metonymy for the neo-Victorian strategies of the novel: the Victorian fascination for Chinoiseries


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becomes a neo-Victorian celebration of the cultural values of Chinese landscapes and their (human and animal) inhabitants. This anti-hegemonic account of the Chinese diaspora therefore reassesses imperialist discourse on migration from the Guangdong province, by highlighting the suffering and displacement involved in finding oneself away from home. Much as Harriet struggles to find her feet in an inhospitable and foreign place, the box too is 'out-of-place' and thus uncannily familiar, even homely to her. The box becomes a means of unexpected comfort, championing as it does the beauty of connections and of the everyday, embodied in the natural image of two interlinked herons.

The box connects Harriet to the global networks of imperial trade, commerce and migration that she is a part of, as a migrant woman, settler and consumer. At the same time, the object also serves as a means of evasion and imaginary escape from her dreary situation. It is therefore telling that the escapist dimension attached to the box, indicated by the two flying birds it portrays, anticipates the material link with China that Harriet will find in the relationship with Pao Yi, a gardener selling vegetables to the white prospectors on the West-Coast goldfields. As Pao Yi enters the narrative, he is described as a quasi-spectral apparition:

> The figure had come out of the bush. He wore a fur hat and carried on his shoulders a bamboo pole and at each end of the pole was strung a wicker basket and from the way the man walked, Joseph could tell that the baskets were heavy. […] Then the Chinaman stood perfectly still, waiting, with the sun of mid-day shining on him and on the river as it flowed past him, clear and bright. And after a while, when no one came out of the tent, he shouldered his pole and the heavy baskets and walked away. (Tremain 2004: 188-189)

Referred to as a "figure", not a man, Pao Yi silently appears before the European gold diggers almost like a conjured presence. He is perceived only as a body burdened by heavy baggage, but his 'real' corporality is denied, hidden as his form is by his hat and bent over by his baskets. Importantly, his facial features are blanked out, almost as if his alterity excludes him from the status of human. Kate Mitchell argues that in neo-Victorian fiction, "[g]hostliness becomes a metaphor for a past both lost and, paradoxically,


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perpetuated, endlessly returned or repeated in the present. The mediums for this haunting are […] bodies and, importantly, novels and stories" (Mitchell 2010: 144). In this passage, Pao Yi's ghostliness marks him as an ostracised migrant: he is deprived of the ability to craft his own story, and of the agency to become anything but an unwelcome phantom presence, whose existence occurs on a different level to that of the white prospectors.

Voiceless, Pao Yi is spoken for, and spoken of, by the mainly white community of the goldfield: "The diggers never called him by his real name; they called him 'Jen' […] or 'Jenny' or sometimes 'Scurvy Jenny'" (Tremain 2004: 189). Given a female name with which he does not identify, Pao Yi is feminised and objectified by the white, male diggers who, paradoxically, do not recognise the queer innuendoes and anxieties implied in their process of discrimination against Chinese subjects. Reduced to his function as a food provider, Pao Yi is further domesticated and denied the same economic opportunities as the white men, whose survival nonetheless depends on him.

If he cannot search for gold in the same ways as the white settlers, Pao Yi's relationship to food also symbolises the global nature of the gold-rush economy, and, parallel to Harriet's box, his specific presence in it. Pao Yi's almost bodiless features are ghostly precisely because they embody the haunting dimension of empire and global trade in the gold fields that the white prospectors perceive as unsettling, and therefore choose to ignore. The white men, assured by their alleged racial and cultural superiority, shift the weight that imperial trade can have on communities and individuals to Pao Yi, who is left to carry the burden of the material impact of the imperial enterprise in the Antipodes. Where they actively exploit the land, driven solely by their desire for immediate profit, he cultivates vegetables to make sure there is food to eat; while the white men claim sovereignty and ownership over the land, he chooses to live more harmoniously within the environment that he finds himself part of, and that provides him with his sources of nourishment, monetary income and comfort.

Pao Yi's traumatic memories shape his unique status as an outsider in this system. Originally from a poor fishing family living on the shores of Heron Lake, in Panyu County, Pao Yi is a loving husband and father who lost his own parents in a tragic boat accident. Out of grief, he leaves home for New Zealand in order to procure his family a better future and there creates a vegetable garden. Although able to support himself and live in his


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basic little hut and garden, Pao Yi cannot yet call his family to join him, nor can he return to China. Instead, his memories and nostalgic dreams about his homeland and his wife Paak Mei are the only sources of comfort in his painful solitude:

> No word could come from Paak Mei because she couldn't write, nor barely form the characters of her own name, 'White Plum Blossom', and it felt to Pao Yi after he'd been in New Zealand for a while, as if the voice of Paak Mei was becoming fainter, as though his wife had caught a chill and had trouble speaking above a whisper. Only in his dreams did he hear her clearly, hear her high laughter and remember the sound of her walk, which was a little ghostly shuffling on the heels and knuckles of her bound feet in cloth shoes. (Tremain 2004: 190)

The voices and faces of his distant family are layers of the "uncanny […] revenant or ghostly visitor from the past" (Arias and Pulham 2009: xv), which have trapped Pao Yi in a condition of passage between two countries and two communities; gradually losing touch with his origins, he is not able to fully assimilate into his new context. Othered by the individuals he depends on for his income and far from his native lake, he cannot but seek to embrace the shifting space between memories, dreams of home, and the contingent reality of New Zealand as his only possible home. He therefore adopts a "nomadic consciousness", consisting of "not taking any kind of identity as permanent […]; he makes those necessarily situated connections that can help him to survive, but he never takes on fully the limits of one national, fixed identity" (Braidotti 2011: 64). Pao Yi may be affected by a traumatic past, and he may be living in a far from ideal present, but he is eventually able to find freedom and consolation in his relationship with Harriet, an unlikely ally and a fellow-nomad living on the edge between past, present, and desires for the future.

The texts establishes several connections between Pao Yi and Harriet. Well before they meet, they have a shared passion for the natural world: like Pao Yi's vegetable garden, in fact, Harriet runs a flourishing garden and, even when she does find a golden nugget in it, she treats it with "ease" (Tremain 2004: 278), in that she is not obsessed with the need to own


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as much 'colour' as possible. The New Zealand landscape acts as a powerful source of life and sustenance for both characters, more than just a resource to be used and consumed. Once Harriet has joined her husband in the goldfields, she finds Pao Yi when she is captivated by his "extraordinary garden" (Tremain 2004: 271). This more positive and peaceful relationship with the land stands for an anti-colonial, anti-hegemonic strategy. The paradigm of the alliance between the Chinese male and the white female presences can produce less disruptive, more fruitful interactions between humans, and between humans and the natural resources they live off than the gold-fields themselves.

Almost as a material response to the painful ghostliness and the lack of agency in Pao Yi's nomadic instability, the trope of the heron provides a further connection between the two characters, and embodies the process through which the Chinese protagonist finally finds his peace. Pao Yi in fact comes from Heron Lake in China, a place re-evoked by Harriet's box depicting two birds of the same species on its sides. The image of this animal becomes then, like the garden, a shared territory between the Chinese man and the English woman, and establishes a material trace that anticipates the ultimate symbol of fruitful connection between the two, namely the pregnancy that will follow. At the same time, the fact that Pao Yi's memories of Lake Heron are paralleled by an object which shares his origins (China) and his destination (Harriet) reinforces the role that material traces can have in creating a positively cross-cultural dimension in the gold-rush frontier, an alternative to the white male paradigm of power over lands, goods, and people.

If neo-Victorian objects circulate in order to carry the burden of historical memory (see Kaplan 2007: 3; Boehm-Schnitker and Gruss 2014: 13-16), in *The Colour* that memory becomes shared once Harriet finds refuge in Pao Yi's hut and starts an affair with him, a relationship which allows them both to leave their fears and solitude behind.

> As Pao Yi guessed, Harriet […] understood the role played by time in their love. She knew that in the Land of the Long White Cloud she and her lover had arrived by pure chance at a sequestered place and that the past had no business there. […] Harriet was too wise, too rational a person not to


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> understand that, one day, a different future would arrive. (Tremain 2004: 345)

As this passage shows, the blissful though brief relationship between Pao Yi and Harriet is enabled by their "nomadic subjectivity" (Braidotti 2011: 7), rooted in a present moment, in which their different origins and their stories are drawn together, for the sake of a short period of bliss. At the same time, by having a relationship with a person that they would never have been able to meet, had they not migrated to New Zealand, they find in each other the love, sexual gratification and peace that temporarily alleviate their common, painful experiences of migration. According to Melissa Kennedy, the relationship between Pao Yi and Harriet is "a lone cross-cultural blip in an otherwise flat, homogenous British colonial heritage" (Kennedy 2013: 84); indeed, their moment of greatest happiness is not just brief, but simultaneously signals the beginning of their forthcoming separation. Both are aware that their love will not last forever, but the legacy of this spell of bliss will have long-lasting consequences. Through Harriet's presence, Pao Yi is finally able to channel his memories of his wife's and son's long-silenced voices:

> One morning, Pao Yi was walking down the river […] when he heard a familiar sound in his mind, one which hadn't surfaced for a long time; it was the sound of Paak Mei's laughter. […] It was at that moment that Pao Yi understood that he'd been wrong about the sound he had just heard: Paak Mei wasn't laughing, she was weeping. She was weeping for the shame of being abandoned, for the shame of being promised riches and instead losing what little she had, for the shame of being betrayed by her husband with a white woman. (Tremain 2004: 349-350)

After long years of solitude and exclusion in a foreign country, Pao Yi understands that the safety of his own garden is not enough to give him the happiness and freedom he craves. The shame of his initial abandoning home and his loved ones drives him to return to China, his family, and his lake. The surrogate home created in the diaspora, through the garden and his relationship with Harriet, is a temporary comfort, but it stands for the


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material contingencies giving him the "capacity to revisit historical traumas that might still linger on" (Gruss 2014: 134). Pao Yi hears his wife's cry for help and is driven to take the opposite route of the heron box, back across the ocean in order to restore his own and his family's wellbeing.

The traumas of Pao Yi's individual story also have political and collective resonance: his personal suffering mirrors, and enhances, the traumas of Chinese migrants to the gold rushes, seeking success and prosperity, but finding renewed suffering and exclusion instead. His patterns of mobility, leading him to cross the Pacific twice, reveal that nomadism is often the result of traumatic experiences, and not a solely positive subjectivity to embrace. While his emancipation from his position of subalternity can only partially occur through nomadic strategies, his experience of trauma as the catalyst for his mobility across two continents determines his inability to settle indefinitely in the British colony. Even his return to China proves traumatic, signifying how he gives up not only his garden, but also Harriet and the child he has with her.

Conversely, Harriet's epilogue can offer a partial remediation of the suffering intrinsic in the Chinese diaspora. As she finds herself pregnant with Pao Yi's child, she decides to raise their son in a family of English friends, thus continuing Pao Yi's legacy within a non-normative family formation. This move confirms Pao Yi's and Harriet's stance of anti-hegemonic nomadism and allows their example to live on in the next generation of New Zealanders. The traces of Pao Yi's Chinese presence in the goldfields will not be erased; they will now have the face of his biracial son, raised as a new citizen in the new country, which at that point was still under colonial rule.

This solution is nonetheless problematic in that it begs a question on how fair it is, from an ethical point of view, to have the plight of the Chinese migrants to Antipodean gold rushes 'represented' by a white woman and her half-white, half-Chinese son. The child might biologically be Pao Yi's son, but he will nonetheless live within the inherently racist, white settler community and its culture. While the novel presents a biracial child as a positive solution, whether or not this conclusion provides veritable justice remains unclear, because the narrative cannot guarantee that this child will not be a victim of the same discriminations as his father. At the same time, the novel's epilogue highlights how the melting-pot society of New Zealand in the twentieth- and twenty-first centuries was partly


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shaped by pioneering mixed-race couples such as Pao Yi and Harriet (who would not have been allowed to marry under racist legislation in place), while at the same time urging readers to see beyond the boundaries of race, language and culture.

*The Colour* makes the memory of the Chinese diaspora in the Antipodes a fleeting and ghostly though defining element in the construction of New Zealand's national identity, and one that determines the separate courses of action of the two protagonists in a crucial way. In *Daughter of Fortune*, Allende instead portrays the *mestiza*-Chinese encounter as a story of shared journeys and destinies, before the protagonists find a stable new home in the Californian gold rush.

## 2. Intercultural Crossings in *Daughter of Fortune*

Written in Spanish by middle-brow Chilean-Peruvian author Isabel Allende, *Daughter of Fortune* addresses equivalent concerns about the boundaries of race and gender in the Victorian-era gold rushes as *The Colour*. Reading Allende's novel alongside *The Colour* reveals the fruitful connections between contemporary historical fiction of empire and the legacy of imperialism in South American literature, which show how the global concerns of the gold-rush novel represent an element of cross-cultural pollination to the prevalent concerns of the neo-Victorian project. Indeed, *Daughter of Fortune* fits Marie-Luise Kohlke's inclusive definition of the neo-Victorian novel, as a piece of "historical fiction related to the nineteenth century, irrespective of authors' or characters' nationalities, the plots' geographical settings, [or] the language of composition" (Kohlke 2014: 27). A story of individual formation occurring through mobility, the novel quite literally *makes* new memories of the legacy of empire in the Americas since the nineteenth century, by tracing even greater global networks of trade and commodification than does *The Colour*.

Allende's novel provides an example of how a global, multilingual and shifting dimension of neo-Victorianism participates in "exposing and spotlighting the Anglocentrism at work" in the imperial project (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 10), precisely because it actively retells the history of the Californian gold rush through the fluctuations of genders, as well as national and racial identities. Set across Chile, China and California, and with a predominant focus on topical nineteenth-century places of trade (Hong Kong, Valparaiso, San Francisco) and the sea passages between these


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locales themselves, *Daughter of Fortune* examines how human mobility can challenge capitalist and colonialist trade ideologies in areas that are not necessarily under the control of the British Empire, but which are nonetheless highly influenced by it. Hence Allende depicts Valparaiso as a city in the hands of a British elite of entrepreneurs, while San Francisco is an American frontier town starting to define its boundaries, where white men, Britons included, inevitably wield the most power.

The novel's focus on the relationship between a Chinese man and an Anglo-Chilean woman, who are outsiders both in Chile, where the story commences, and in California, underlines how, in the neo-Victorian gold-rush canon, the formation of individual identities through their experiences of commerce and mobility necessitates accounting for the hegemonic dynamics in place in imperialist and neo-imperialist societies. As in *The Colour*, the Chinese presence in the gold rush interrogates key cross-racial and cross-gender hegemonies. In contrast to Tremain's novel, which depicts Chinese culture and identity as a locus of memory and, at the same time, a source and remediation of the traumas of exclusion, Allende depicts being Chinese as a liberating possibility.

Described as a *Bildungsroman* "revised under a postmodern feminist discourse" (André 2002: 77), *Daughter of Fortune* follows the parallel narratives of Tao Chi'en and Eliza Sommers, the eponymous heroine and the Chinese doctor's partner-to-be. Like Pao Yi in Tremain's text, Allende's hero also comes from a poor family and has a talent for herbs and plants. Sold by his father at the age of eleven to a caravan of merchants, Tao Chi'en ends up as a doctor apprentice in Canton. His apprenticeship includes not only the art of medicine, but a fully rounded education under the tutelage of his master:

> Tao Chi'en learned to appreciate the delicate lace of a spider-web pearled with dewdrops in the light of dawn and to express his pleasure in inspired poems written in elegant calligraphy. In the opinion of the master, the only thing worse than not writing poetry was writing it badly. (Allende 2013: 159)

Tao's master promotes eternal wisdom and intellectual refinements as vital in the formation of a skilled doctor, but his world is increasingly


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incompatible with the international pressures on China and the ensuing violence of the First Opium War. As a practitioner of a millennia-old art, the master is dismayed by the destruction caused by the war and the Emperor's relinquishing of power to the "foreign nations inside Chinese territory, from which Europeans controlled trade, principally opium" (Allende 2013: 166). Distressed by the profit-driven colonial attitude depriving China of its resources and its cultural values, the master stages his departure from the world with a decadent *coup de théâtre*: he swallows gold.

Importantly, the master's dying act marks the contrast between two opposed systems of values, the peaceful and "civilized" world of pre-colonial China and the violent upheavals of the Opium War years (Allende 2013: 159), but it is also a powerful anticipator of Tao Chi'en's future. His master's suicide through the ingestion of gold depreciates the very commercial value normally attached to the precious metal and places it in the domains of life and death. Through this act, the meaning attached to the trope of gold shifts in the novel: from being the quintessential commodity and the symbol of the forthcoming dangers of the gold fever, which will take the apprentice to California, to becoming the poison that threatens to destroy life-saving practices and cultures.[6]

After his master's death, Tao Chi'en gains a strong professional reputation in Hong Kong, marries and, unlike his master, establishes working relations with European patients and colleagues. Although "the Chinese looked on the foreigners with scorn and disgust", while the Europeans "were imbued with the same concept of racial superiority, sure of their role as heralds of civilization in a land of dirty, ugly, weak, noisy, corrupt and savage people" (Allende 2013: 177-178), the protagonist decides to learn English. This allows him to make friends with a British doctor, Ebanizer Hobbs, who in turn is interested in "the local color of the city" (Allende 2013: 179). This relationship, which grows into a sharing of knowledge and expertise, allows the two men to find a common ground in medicine. Their trust and intimacy help overcome the prejudices that define the segregated existence for the two communities in Hong Kong during the years after the First Opium War. By gaining increasing knowledge in the other's field and culture, Tao Chi'en and Hobbs defy the racial divisions occurring in Canton and Hong Kong, to the point where Hobbs is called to save Tao Chi'en's wife Lin from dying in childbirth.


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The friendship between Hobbs and Tao Chi'en offers an interesting example of a neo-Victorian engagement with productive cross-cultural male friendship and interaction. Central to their relationship is the fact that the two men involved are cultivated open-minded scholars, and therefore used to being genuinely curious about the secrets of science. Moreover, they meet in a bustling city in Tao Chi'en's homeland, although one that has just fallen into the hands of the empire that Hobbs is a subject of; neither of the two has any form of power or hegemony over the other. Whereas the affair between Pao Yi and Harriet was destined to end because of the difficulties raised by both race and gender, in the case of Hobbs and Tao Chi'en's relationship, both categories are defied by the two men's factual equality in terms of rank, influence, and social standing in their respective communities. Allende provides an important case here of a positive Anglo-Chinese encounter in an Asian location, where the Briton acts as a respectful guest and manages to establish an authentic friendship by actively engaging with the culture he experiences around him.

This enabling relationship, however, comes to an end as Tao's wife Lin dies shortly afterwards, following her and Tao Chi'en's stillborn child. Inconsolable, Tao Chi'en leaves his friend and China on board a ship directed to faraway Chile. After a time in Valparaiso, working as a cook on one of Captain Sommers' ships, he eventually agrees to help the Captain's (illegitimate) young daughter Eliza Sommers on her journey to San Francisco, where she intends to reunite with her long-lost lover, Joaquín Andieta. The eponymous protagonist of Allende's novel, Eliza embodies a line of global networks and connections across the Americas and beyond. Raised by three wealthy single English siblings living in Valparaiso, Eliza becomes part of the "British colony" (Allende 2013: 4) with strong trade and financial interests in a country which had then only recently gained independence from Spain (1818). She is also half-*mestiza* and, under the influence of her nurse, grows up well versed in both Spanish and the indigenous Mapuche language. From her childhood, therefore, Eliza represents a plurality of cultures and languages, and, while not identifying particularly as English, Mapuche, Spanish or *mestiza*, she is able to aptly shift between cultures: she can play the perfect young English lady at her family's social events, while not disdaining going to the market with her nurse to do the shopping.


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Her nomadism, which crosses cultures, races, communities, languages and genders, is put to test once, pregnant with Andieta's child, she decides to travel to California with Tao Chi'en's help: in order to avoid risks, he makes her dress as a man and passes her off as his brother, "a deaf mute and a little slow, so there was no point in trying to communicate with him" (Allende 2013: 221). This stratagem has a double function. On the one hand, it makes the privileged Eliza unrecognisable to the rest of the crew and passengers and prevents her from being targeted as a potential prostitute, travelling by herself to the goldfields. On the other hand, Tao Chi'en is well aware of the human trafficking of women and girls occurring as a consequence of the Californian fever, given that prostitutes were part of the "support industry" of the gold rushes (Belich 1996: 347). Eliza's dressing as a man is crucial in saving her from the fate befalling the many prostitutes she will later contribute to rescuing. In addition, for a woman born and raised in the upper layers of a British elite community with significant economic capital at her disposal, impersonating a man of Chinese origins stands for a significant shift in terms of her racial positioning as well. The fact that Eliza happily and creatively embraces her new subjectivity in imitation of a Chinese identity constitutes in itself a way to partly defy Sinophobic attitudes and discriminations. Eliza's choice adds another racial layer to the multiracial identities she was born with, and shows how, in the frontier town, crossing between cultures and races is a liberating strategy that enables future success.

The sea journey also proves paramount in forging the personal bond between Tao Chi'en and Eliza. She has a miscarriage, while Tao, who assists her with his skill and instruments, starts feeling genuine interest and a certain attraction for his unfortunate travel companion. He thus begins to revise his perception of their relationship, previously viewed solely as an economic transaction, with Eliza using some of her jewellery to buy his protection.

> Until that night he had thought of Eliza as a business arrangement, and he had the pearl necklace in the bottom of his trunk to prove it. She was just a stranger, a girl for whom he had no particular feelings, a *fan wei* with big feet and an aggressive temperament […].[7] Now, with the misfortune of the miscarriage, she would never marry. […] He had to admit


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> that for a foreigner Eliza was not all that ugly, at least there was a slight Oriental air about her almond eyes […]. (Allende 2013: 205)

In Tao Chi'en's eyes, her mixed race heritage appears as simultaneously strange, as her non-Chinese "big feet" and her unfeminine "aggressive temperament" exemplify, and familiar, as underlined by her "slight Oriental air". Such a combination of domestic and foreign traits in Eliza's identity will prevail upon the ship's arrival in California. Indeed, once in San Francisco, the "port of entry for most Chinese migrants throughout their history" (Yung 1995: 8), Eliza stays in character as a Chinese man – although she, at times, also impersonates a Chilean boy in search of 'his brother' Joaquín and travels across the goldmines seeking out her previous lover, albeit to no success. During her peregrinations in the pits, she supports herself by writing letters for illiterate miners, then by playing the piano in a mobile brothel run by another woman dressed as a man. The "melting pot quality" (Ries 2011: 5) of the frontier is thus adopted by the active and performative shifts that allow Eliza to creatively reinvent herself in manifold ways: the girl who had shifted between three cultures in her Chilean childhood becomes an effeminate Elias, who makes practical use of the accomplishments that his female self, Eliza, had gained in the refined, British-Chilean household of her early life. Her nomadic consciousness results in a metaphorical 'goldmine' of inventiveness: while she actively employs her artistic talents to make a living, the ultimate resource keeping her alive is the art of impersonation, her art of choosing from a wide range of gender and cultural identities, in order to ultimately discover herself as constantly in transition.

Tao Chi'en, conversely, establishes a successful medical practice in San Francisco's Chinatown, where he caters to the increasing healthcare needs of the growing Chinese population. After having been the victim of Sinophobic attacks, he also decides to embrace a new identity, by changing his appearance: he replaces his pigtail with short hair and starts wearing suits like Western men: "[h]is new aspect made him stand out in Chinatown but he discovered that he was much better received outside it, and that doors opened that had been closed to him before" (Allende 2013: 334). As an unwelcomed new arrival in the frontier town, Tao Chi'en chooses to counter the racist stereotypes he and his fellow countrymen and women are victims


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of, by embracing the quintessentially Western model of masculinity, that of the successful professional man. Furthermore, by interpreting for and mixing with the white and powerful elite, he stands for an important Chinese precedent of the American dream. Whereas in *The Colour* Pao Yi's circumstances lead him to abandon his life as a settler, Tao Chi'en is able to experience a life similar to what the child of Tremain's protagonists might potentially become. The main difference between the two novels is that Pao Yi and Harriet's child embodies a second-generation New Zealander, whereas Tao Chi'en is himself the first-generation settler shaped by global networks of movement.

Significantly, Tao Chi'en is able to share his success with Eliza who, after years of unsuccessful searching for Andieta, eventually starts assisting him in his profession and in the fight against the trafficking and exploitation of child prostitutes between China and California. Sold in China and illegally transported into California, "[t]he minute they [the girls] crossed into Chinatown they disappeared forever in the subterranean labyrinth of dark rooms, false corridors, twisting stairs, hidden doors, and double walls where police never ventured" (Allende 2013: 350). By buying these girls their freedom and treating their bodily ailments, Tao Chi'en and Eliza not only challenge a criminal system and reduce the number of women forced into prostitution, but they also prove that generosity and mutual help, in a place ruled by individualistic desires and greed for power, are the most rewarding golden prizes one could find. Eliza's return to him also marks the beginning of their unexpected romance and the start of a life of happiness in their new home. America, the land of opportunities, and golden California have given them a common purpose to create, with their daily work, a better model for the increasingly more hybrid society of the future. The disruptive associations between gold and death, in driving capitalistic models of self-interest and individual profit, and in leading the symbols of cultures threatened by colonisation to their own demise, are ultimately countered by the generosity of Tao Chi'en's actions. His behaviour deploys gold to restore life to the victims of the gold rush subjected to the universal monetisation spurred by white male hegemonic ideology. Whereas Tao's master had ended his life with gold rather than sell himself to the British rule of capitalism, Tao Chi'en uses the same material to give his compatriots their freedom.


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Tao Chi'en's alliances with both the Chinese and the white communities refine the nomadic position of Pao Yi and Harriet in *The Colour*. He becomes a white-non-white man, familiar with a Western lifestyle based on individual success and freedom and the traditional Chinese medical techniques of his professional activity. Initiated by his Hong Kong friendship with Hobbs, Tao Chi'en's embracing of his condition of in-betweenness relates both to Braidotti's shape-shifting figure of the nomad and to Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestizaje*, a cultural position located in the topical locus of the borderland. Whereas the nomad is a dynamic subject challenging the relationship between peripheries and centre (Braidotti 2011: 5), Anzaldúa posits the ability to shape one's new identity at the intersection between the many cultures, races and places that constitute one's essence:

> I want the freedom to carve and chisel my own face, ... to fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a new culture – una cultura mestiza – with my own lumber, my own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture. (Anzaldúa 1987: 22, original ellipsis)

As Anzaldúa illustrates, identity and the making of one's culture are always in progress, on a journey, like Tao Chi'en and Eliza, but also like Pao Yi and Harriet in *The Colour*, constantly redefining themselves through physical movement and strategies of survival. Ultimately, by embracing their hybridity, as individuals and as a couple, Tao Chi'en and Eliza are not determined by their genders, their races, or their languages. Rather, by constantly fluctuating between Chinese, Chilean, English and Californian cultures, and, in Eliza's case, between genders, they define who they are by impersonating who they want to be. Eliza, the woman with a plethora of past legacies, embodies Anzaldúa's *mestiza* to perfection. Endlessly shifting between genders, racial identities and roles, Eliza incarnates precisely the "freedom to carve and chisel [her] face" of Anzaldúa's argument. At the same time, Tao Chi'en stands for a different type of feminist ideal: a male ally who literally saves imprisoned, exploited, and dying women, and who, in the case of his relationship with Eliza, does not shy away from encouraging women to reach their full potential.


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The adopted identities of both Allende's protagonists are fulfilled along the line of what Anzaldua has termed the *frontera*, that peculiar and problematic space that represents the crossings of civilisations: "This is my home/ This thin edge of/ barbwire" (Anzaldúa 1987: 3). With their stories of global travel, but most of all their creative strategies of survival, Tao Chi'en and Eliza manage to find their place in the world, precisely because they embrace their ontology as borderline. Not only are they symbols of gender, cultural and racial fluidity, but through their relationship they actively appropriate their condition of liminality, in order to make a home therein.

*Daughter of Fortune* is a successful story of settlement and adaptation, because it celebrates the rich cultural diversity of the frontier and allows, through the mobility intrinsic in border, its characters complete their *Bildung*. Placing its focus on identity as fluidity and as an on-going journey, Allende's novel provides a "historical and geographical expansion" of the neo-Victorian canon (Cox 2017: 115-116), which reclaims a piece of history without risking becoming a neo-colonial superimposition. Chinese spaces and culture appear more consistently in *Daughter of Fortune* than in *The Colour*, notably through the setting of entire chapters pertaining to Tao Chi'en's youth and early years as a doctor in China. These complement his identity in the diaspora, giving him a fully-rounded subjectivity and story, which provides the groundwork for the new nomadic identity he will find with Eliza once in the Americas. At the same time, the fact that he assists Eliza in acquiring a Chinese identity (albeit only in performative mode) is the strongest example of how neo-Victorian Asia operates as a recuperation of historical memory and becomes an active tool for the making of new social interactions.

## 3. Conclusion: Towards Chinese Neo-Victorianisms

If, as Elizabeth Ho claims, "'[t]he Victorian' has become a powerful shorthand for empire in the contemporary global imagination" (Ho 2012: 5), then neo-Victorian literature and scholarship have a significant role to play in recuperating stories of subalterns and subjects of empire who found imperial rule imposed upon them. Gold-rush novels such as *The Colour* and *Daughter of Fortune* make an important contribution in this respect, as they identify fruitful strategies in the cross-cultural and cross-racial alliances between women of English and *mestiza* backgrounds and Chinese men. Where Tremain portrays an encounter between two distinct backgrounds


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and cultures, Allende complicates matters in that she has a *mestiza* heroine crossing races and genders during her process of formation, before settling down with a Chinese man. Moreover, while Tremain's references to China remain limited to the domain of characters' memories, in Allende a significant part of the narrative takes place in Chile, where Tao Chi'en and Eliza meet for the first time, and in Tao's country of origin. This difference adds a further layer to the neo-Victorian, postcolonial and diasporic agenda of the texts analysed here. *The Colour* focuses on the ways in which nineteenth-century New Zealand became a predominantly white settler colony, through the discriminations enacted against Chinese migrants and, to an extent, the systematic exclusions of the Maori communities. Conversely, *Daughter of Fortune* challenges the white male settler paradigm by highlighting a history of alternatives in the cross-continental patterns of mobility, and the cross-racial identities represented by Tao and Eliza.

Neo-Victorian gold-rush fiction creates Anglo-Chinese encounters where shared memory shapes communities and connects individuals, taking the form of material culture (in Tremain), and mobile, cross-cultural, cross-gender networks (in Allende). This approach is in keeping with the neo-Victorian corpus as one "haunted by the desire […] of historical recollection, the process of remembering" (Mitchell 2010: 8). At the same time, by restoring the memory of the Chinese diaspora to the representation of the nineteenth-century gold rushes in New Zealand and California, these novels amplify the outlook of the frontier narrative in the neo-Victorian as a place where "local, inter- and transnational nineteenth-century pasts" intersect in networks and exchanges of constant mobility (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 7). Such historical fictions set in the gold rush actively operate in redefining and challenging received notions around the age of white imperialism and settlement.

Fluctuating nomadism appears as liberating and open to plural reinventions and reinterpretations, including those necessary investigations that neo-Victorian fiction and scholarship need to develop further. Indeed, the representation of the Chinese diaspora from the perspectives of two white, postcolonial, Anglophone and Hispanophone authors does not exhaust the breadth of scope that neo-Victorian writing can embrace. Chinese historical fiction set in the period in question, engaging with historical recuperation of the First Opium War or the Chinese diaspora,


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would be a primary and welcome addition to this reflection and, indeed, to the field as a whole. In this context, the nomadic and unstable dimension of the diasporic narratives analysed here merely represents a starting point. Nonetheless, these two novels place the Anglo-Chinese relationship at the centre, thus complicating the historiographic notion of the Chinese miners as collateral damage in the narrative of imperial settlement, and disrupting ideals of white masculinity that the history of imperialism in the Victorian period stands for. Ultimately, the growing body of neo-Victorian texts transcending languages and nationalities, in favour of a liquid and mobile terrain, shows how the notion of delimited space can be contested and reinvented: ghostly and transitioning identities challenge the existence of borders in Allende and Tremain, and offer the beginning of new neo-Victorian, cross-cultural, cross-linguistic and cross-oceanic conversations.

## Notes

1. Author's own translation.
2. Henceforth referred to as *Daughter of Fortune*. All references in this article are from the English translation of Allende's Spanish original.
3. The 1840 Treaty of Waitangi determined that land sovereignty lay in the hands of the Crown and that Maori inhabitants of New Zealand became British subjects. Unlike Maori communities, Chinese migrants in New Zealand were not given the same rights as British subjects.
4. Poll taxes aimed at limiting migration and mining rights for non-white communities and Chinese migrants in particular were introduced in California (1850), Australia (1855) and New Zealand (1881). In California, higher taxation was imposed on mining certificates for foreign miners, targeting specifically Chinese and Mexican miners. In Australia and New Zealand, instead, a taxation of £10 was imposed on every Chinese person seeking entrance by sea.
5. Mixed-race unions were prohibited by anti-miscegenation laws in California since 1850, and by the Aboriginal Protection Act in Australia since 1897. Chinese men in the Antipodean gold rushes were very seldom granted permission to marry.
6. The fact that the master ends his life *because* of the First Opium War and its disastrous consequences on Chinese economy and politics provides, like Harriet's Chinese tea box in *The Colour*, a connection between the story and


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its broader political implications. Indeed, the common denominator across Tao Chi'en's cross-continental story (and across Pao Yi's) is the impact of the greedy, Western-driven desire for resources and profit, to which Allende's hero opposes a preference for cultural enrichment and the mysteries of the human body and mind.

7. Unlike Tao Chi'en's late wife Lin, Eliza, as a non-Chinese woman, has no bound feet, of course.

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