Last Empress Fiction and Asian Neo-Victorianism

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Abstract:
This article claims that 'Last Empress' fiction about the Empress Dowager Cixi reveals the postcolonial ethics of Anglophone neo-Victorianism. 'Last Empress' texts naturally tend to be bookended by the narrative of a naïve yet ambitious teenage concubine entering the imperial palace and the image of the Empress Dowager, as depicted in Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 film, *The Last Emperor*, rotting on her deathbed. This emphasis on Cixi's ageing body as a metaphor for China's perceived humiliations in the past manages and contains, for Western readers, a similar commodification of 'China' as a new economic and political powerhouse and brand. This article reads a range of 'Last Empress' texts from Anchee Min's popular historical fiction, *Empress Orchid* (2004) and *The Last Empress* (2007), to metafictional critiques such as Da Chen's *My Last Empress* (2012) and Linda Jaivin's *The Empress Lover* (2014), to the Singaporean blockbuster musical, *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress* (2002), and situates them amongst arguments about race, ageing and neo-Orientalism. Cixi's continued visibility in biographies, fiction, and film recasts conventional understandings of neo-Victorianism as neo-Victorian gerontology: the problematics of rejuvenating (women in) the past, (post-)feminist 'time crisis', and new kinds of invisibility for women past and present. At the same time, 'Last Empress' fiction offers opportunities to reflect on the geographical pressures Asia can put on the 'neo-' in the term 'neo-Victorian' and the difficulties of performing truly global neo-Victorian readings.

Keywords: ageing, Asian neo-Victorianism, China, Cixi, Last Empress fiction, global neo-Victorianism, neo-Victorian gerontology, post-feminism.

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Western audiences perhaps first became familiar with Cixi, the Empress Dowager of China (1835-1908), from Bernardo Bertolucci's sumptuous, Orientalist film, *The Last Emperor* (1987).[1] The dying Empress was portrayed by Asian-American actress Lisa Lu, famous for playing the young Cixi in Hong Kong productions of movies about the Empress Dowager in the 1970s. Summoning the young child Puyi to the Forbidden City, Bertolucci's Empress appears grotesque, her face a hideous mask of the "longevity" and power she embodies even on her deathbed (Bertolucci 1987: 04:26). Announcing the Emperor's death fills her with a sinister glee.

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She informs the cherubic young boy that she has lived in the Forbidden City for a "long, long time", that her subjects revere her as the "Old Buddha" (Bertolucci 1987: 02:53, 03:17). She then proceeds to lay down the law of patriarchy for him, distinguishing carefully between "emperors" and "little men", "real men" and "eunuchs" (Bertolucci 1987: 03:41, 04:40). In her dying breaths, she names Puyi as her heir; after her passing a eunuch stoppers her mouth with a black pearl and covers her face. Bertolucci's opening sequence captures the major themes of what I term 'Last Empress' fiction, which combines a number of prominent tropes: the symbolic death of the Chinese empire; ambivalence towards female power; the dynamics of neo-Orientalist visuals; and the exploration of the motivations of an ageing monarch who ruled nineteenth-century China, like her British counterpart, Victoria, for a "long, long time". Bertolucci stages the death of Cixi as the event that gives birth to the trauma of the Cultural Revolution. To do so, he created a world of troubled masculinity and patriarchal power that erased Cixi and other female figures from history, thus restoring the male exceptional figure as the rightful topic of the biopic. However, it is Puyi's story that is rare. Usually, at the moment of Cixi's death, 'Last Empress' fiction flashes back to her girlhood when a young concubine named 'Orchid' or 'Yehonala' first enters the Forbidden City, transforming the narrative into what I will be calling, 'Asian neo-Victorian' biofiction.

Born in 1835 to a minor Manchurian provincial official, little is known about the young Orchid before she entered the Forbidden City as a low ranking concubine of the Emperor Hsien Feng in 1852. After an invasive and lengthy selection process, Yehonala joined the imperial harem and was left to languish in the Great Within until she caught the attention of the Dragon Throne. For a few months, the young girl become the Emperor's favourite sexual partner and, fortunately, gave birth to a male heir, the future Emperor Tung Chih in 1856. Yehonala's success soon elevated her in status to an imperial consort of the first rank, second only to the Empress Niuhuru (sometimes Nuharoo). Since so little of Yehonala's life exists in palace records before the birth of her son, this era of her life is rife with fictionalised and sensationalised accounts of her childhood, her sexual proclivities, and her political ambitions. Yehonala came to prominence during the disastrous concessions China made to foreign powers during the First (1839-42) and Second (1856-60) Opium Wars and after a decade of bloodshed and famine caused by the Taiping Rebellion. Emperor Hsien

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Feng, weakened by ill health, suspected venereal disease and stress, resolutely resisted Westernisation on all fronts leading to the destruction and looting of the Summer Palace by French and British troops under Lord Elgin's command. The burning of the Summer Palace haunted Cixi throughout her reign becoming a symbol of China's humiliation at the hands of Western power and an index of Cixi's extravagant spending and corruption. But the might of the British navy and the powerful displays by foreign militaries forced her to rethink China's relationship to the West and modernisation. After the death of the emperor in 1861, versions of events begin to differ wildly: did the newly named Empress Dowager Cixi stage a coup by aligning herself with powerful men such as Prince Gong and Prince Chun, the dead emperor's brothers, ordering the execution and suicides of those that opposed her regency? Or did the emperor name Cixi and the Empress Nuharoo the co-regents of his five-year old heir, allowing the two women to effectively rule 'from behind the curtain'? After her son's mysterious death, did Cixi consolidate her power by adopting her three-year old nephew, effectively prolonging her reign through the second half of the nineteenth century? Regardless of scandals and myths, Cixi survived the coup of her son's 100 Days' Reform and the Sino-Japanese war, and oversaw the breakup of China to foreign concessions and so-called 'unequal treaties', which reached its climax in the Boxer Rebellion in 1900.

Biographer Sterling Seagrave begins his study of Cixi, the 'Dragon Lady', with a detailed report of the immense damage inflicted on her reputation by Victorian con man and pornographer, Edmund Backhouse. In collaboration with J. O. Bland, Backhouse fabricated the Chinese sources for his opus, *China Under the Empress Dowager* (1911), casting her as a

> ruthless, single-minded tyrant, an iron-willed, oversexed Manchu concubine who usurped her power in 1861 to rule China with perversion, corruption, and intrigue for half a century until her misrule caused the collapse of an empire that had endured more than two thousand years. (Seagrave 1992: 12)

Decades of incestuous citation of Backhouse by scholars of Cixi's reign propagated this supposed myth, a trope this article will return to in its discussion of contemporary Last Empress fiction. Backhouse's supposed

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memoir of his time in Peking, *Decadence Mandchoue* (1943, 2011), chronicled more than two hundred sexual encounters with an aged Cixi, who fetishised Backhouse's homosexuality, transforming her into a nymphomaniac with an insatiable appetite for orgies and depravity. Since Backhouse, Seagrave and others have attempted to 'correct' her image, combing through the archives for the 'truth'. Many could not resist interpreting Cixi as a femme fatale, a villainess, a murderess, a xenophobe, and a political Conservative. Marina Warner, for example, paints her as a wicked opportunist, who exploited Confucian values to justify her claim to the throne and many of her unpopular and disastrous policies (Warner 1972: 36). In her play, *Empress of China* (1984), Ruth Wolff portrays Cixi as a "stubborn bitch" who can only survive by "wearing the mask of cruelty" (Wolff 1984: 292, 291). Using their access to Cixi to embellish intimate details of private moments in the inner sanctum of the Forbidden City, Western missionaries, Eurasian ladies in waiting, and overseas artists such as Katharine Carl attempted to soften her image and rescue her from being a "Manchu Marie Antoinette" (Hayter-Menzies 2008: 175). With her insider knowledge of China, the American Pulitzer Prize winner, Pearl S. Buck, modelled Cixi as a proto-feminist, a dedicated reformer and a victim of an oppressive and unyielding patriarchy in her novel *Imperial Woman* (1956). More neutral versions of Cixi as politically savvy and intellectually adept emerge in the late-twentieth century: biographer Keith Laidler dramatically describes how Cixi "wore ambition like a diadem", carefully targeting powerful men and eunuchs who would help her further her political aims to play and win the "great game" (Laidler 2005: 48). Even Jung Chang, who attempts to reverse the image of Cixi as a ruler who wanted to isolate China, instead forcibly dragging "medieval China into the modern age", can only claim "she was a giant, but not a saint" (Chang 2014: 371). Recent scholarship has focused on Cixi's own attempts to control the dissemination of her own image, embracing photography and theatricality, in order to mitigate the terms of her own celebrity.

Anchored by the recent publication of Chang's controversially revisionist biography, *Empress Dowager Cixi: The Concubine Who Launched Modern China* (2014), a cluster of Last Empress texts (including films) have regained prominence, specifically those written by writers of the Asian diaspora.[2] This article begins with a discussion of Anchee Min's popular historical novels, *Empress Orchid* (2004), and its sequel, *The Last*

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Empress (2007). According to Min, the first novel "is about a young, innocent woman who rose to be the ruler of China" and the sequel, about how "she stays there […] forced, against her nature, to make hard decisions" (Min qtd. in Dowling 2006: 7). While the first book follows the narrative of a historical romance, celebrating the illicit relationship between Cixi and Yung Lu, the commander of the Imperial Guard, the dullness of its sequel invites readers to consider neo-Victorianism's investments in youthfulness. Like the recent interest in 'young' Queen Victoria (with the film *Mrs Brown* [1997] being a note-worthy exception), to be deserving of a contemporary biopic requires youth, which structures the genre as a coming-of-age story, if not even converting into an "unabashed 'chick flick'" (Bingham 2010: 372), depicting young, inexperienced and headstrong girls constrained by the world of decorum and tradition and struggling with the pitfalls of early celebrity. That Last Empress fiction thematises Cixi's struggle with her age and her distrust of younger women like her daughter-in-law, Alute, whose "shy manners" and youthful looks hide a "strong and willful mind, an unquiet character with a monstrous ambition" (Min 2007, 74), spotlights how few examples of aging women exist in neo-Victorian fiction. Only A. S. Byatt's "old witch in a turret" (Byatt 1990: 543), the Victorian poet Christabel Lamotte, revived and passed over for the younger Maud Bailey in the present in *Possession: A Romance* (1990), and Dorothea Gibson or 'Dodo', narrator of the "appropriated biofiction" (Kohlke 2013: 4) about Charles Dickens's wife, in Gaynor Arnold's *Girl in the Blue Dress* (2008), jump to mind. Arguably, this dependence on rejuvenation in the consumption of Cixi and nineteenth-century China in the present speaks to anxieties about the country's rapid ascent to global power. The reluctance to engage with aged or physically deteriorating women of the past also underscores a rivalry between old and new versions of the past that requires rethinking the transition between past and present as perhaps *old* but not necessarily, as Rosario Arias and Patricia Pulham argue, *spectral* (Arias and Pulham 2010: xi).

In a review of *Empress Orchid* for *The Guardian*, Julia Lovell critiques the ubiquitous appearance of Cixi in fiction: "Western fascination with Cixi," she laments, "springs from the west's fascination with itself: she appeals primarily because her rule coincided with western invasion of China" (Lovell 2004: n.p.). Lovell's comments foreground that, as with any historical appropriation including neo-Victorianism, the interest in revealing

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the lives of past historical figures appears less about 'them' and more about 'us'. But Lovell's monolithic "west" requires nuance, especially given the current context of globalisation and, for many writers of Last Empress texts, the histories of immigration and multiculturalism that inform their contributions to writing (in) the West. Min's Last Empress novels, I argue, provide insight into Asian women writing a problematic feminist agenda for a globalised audience. While Last Empress fiction originating in the West may tell us little about China, it can explore what "claiming China" (Kong 2010: 138), or as I prefer, 'rejuvenating' China, may mean for Asian-American writers or those of the Chinese diaspora. Last Empress fiction such as Da Chen's *My Last Empress* (2012) and Linda Jaivin's *The Empress Lover* (2014) self-reflexively addresses the limitations of Last Empress fiction's inclusion under the umbrella of neo-Victorianism by problematising the act of "claiming China" for twenty-first century critique and consumption (Kong 2010: 138). This article ends with a discussion of the musical *Forbidden City: Portrait of the Last Empress*, originally adapted for the Singaporean stage in 2002 by Singaporean composer Dick Lee and lyricist Stephen Clark from Katharine Carl's account of painting Cixi's portrait for display at the St Louis Exposition in 1904. What Lovell describes as the "Western invasion of China" (Lovell 2004: n.p.) has been recast by Asian neo-Victorianism as Westernised Chinese heritage for the Chinese diaspora, thus staging possibilities of an explicit neo-Victorian project within Asia.

Nineteenth-century China in neo-Victorianism marks the frontier of neo-Victorian studies: despite encroaching on, or colonising, other fields and nationalistic literary divides, Last Empress fiction also offers productive co-minglings. Tracing the life of the hyphen in the identity of hybrid, immigrant authors, Belinda Kong reads the directionality of the hyphen in contemporary Asian-American writing as "claiming [nineteenth-century] China", instead of America, and "advancing a model of Asian-Americanness that reads the hyphen backwards" (Kong 2010: 138). And while Kong may argue that the hyphen has reached the state of its afterlife, reading Last Empress fiction's through neo-Victorianism's critical apparatus proves otherwise, demonstrating that nineteenth-century China continues to have an urgent relevance in contemporary American and Asian diasporic life. Last Empress fiction tends to be written by expatriate Chinese authors with Western, often feminist, values and hybrid understandings. They speak

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for an exoticised female representative of a Chinese past, who is seen to be resisting backward, non-feminist cultural traditions. The 'neo-', in this case, references a distinctly American present holding forth the possibilities of gender equality and self-determination. The past forms fertile ground for exploring democratised gender values, thus connecting women across time and space through the experience of mutual oppression and supposed liberation. Min's work creates a genealogical line (a preferred trope in Asian-American women's and neo-Victorian writing) between Cixi, herself an immigrant, and "all the adopted daughters from China" to whom her book is dedicated (Min 2004: n.p.). This raises the possibility of including under the rubric of Asian neo-Victorianism works such as Maxine Hong Kingston's *China Men* (1980), a collection of vignettes chronicling sojourners and early nineteenth-century male immigrants to America or, more recently, Peter Ho Davies's *The Fortunes* (2016). Inclusion of such examples identifies this strand of Asian neo-Victorian fiction as specifically for an Asian (and) American readership and thus shifts our attention to a geographical understanding of the 'neo-'. Asian neo-Victorianism addresses not only a geographical location or setting, peopled with Asians living in and often excluded from Anglophone accounts of the nineteenth century, but also theorises about a lasting moment of contact between the British Empire and, in this case, the Chinese Empire, in the era that still informs in very real ways, the geopolitics of the present. For this project, the term neo-Victorian best describes this past and current entanglement of empires where 'Victorian' is always already a transnational movement.

1. Post-feminism, Ageing and Last Empress Fiction

In a genre where both 'Victorian' and 'Chinese' become associated with the subordination of women, Last Empress fiction challenges readers to understand cultural difference without asserting the West as culturally and politically superior. Describing the Western penchant for novels set in China, Helena Grice cautions that

> because many stereotypical images of Asian women have emerged from the very same experiences that these texts describe, such as footbinding and prostitution, these narratives may (albeit inadvertently) ultimately invite a voyeuristic fascination. (Grice2009: 113)

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To productively counter such voyeurism, Min's novels carefully turn the Forbidden City into a gendered third space that serves simultaneously as an exotic global commodity and a transnational space that can elide cultural differences. The exoticised confines of the palace compound form a fishbowl of shared postfeminist crises: the space represents dominant forms of patriarchal repression where "thousands of females compete for one male's attention" and "a place where females ganged up on one another" (Min 2004: 23, 72). In their introduction to *The Female Figure in Contemporary Historical Fiction*, Katharine Cooper and Emma Short note that

> [i]n situating their commentaries on contemporary sexual politics within a historical period, writers effectively distance themselves (and their readers) from the types of sexual behavior or gender politics they wish to explore, allowing them more freedom to depict and to interrogate the socio-sexual norms and practices of the present. (Cooper and Short 2012: 10)

While Last Empress fiction promotes salacious plotlines such as sex with eunuchs and secret visits to Beijing brothels – Buck goes so far as to suggest that 'Jung Lu' rather than the Emperor fathered Tung Chih – sexual freedom takes a back seat to age. Without capturing the Emperor's attention, Orchid sees herself "withering, and soon spring will vanish and the peony will be dead" (Min 2004: 97). She will turn into one of the senior concubines, languishing in the Hall of Benevolent Tranquility, surrounded by images of Buddha, the afterlife and reincarnation. Entering the aptly named Hall of Abundant Youth, Orchid suddenly stumbles upon hundreds of old women chanting and praying. In that moment, she recalls, "reality escaped me. I became one of the concubines on the floor. I could see myself carving gourds. I could see my skin wrinkle and crease into folds. My hair was turning white and I could feel my teeth falling out" (Min 2004: 110). Depicted as crones with "toothless jaws", "hair so thin that they looked bald", backs "hunched" and limbs like "gnarled trees", the crones attack Orchid, falling on her with "long-nailed fingers" and calling her an "intruder" and a "slut" (Min 2004: 110-111). Luckily, her eunuch, An-te-hai, intervenes; throwing gourds at the crones to distract them, he yells,

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"Toothless ghosts… Go back! Back to your coffins!" (Min 2004: 111, original ellipses). The women function as reminders that without producing an heir, Orchid cannot secure her place in the palace. Haunted by these 'leftover' women of the Emperor's harem, Orchid's encounter draws our attention to an ageist tendency to not just resurrect the past or render it spectral but to make it youthful again.

The abandoned concubines resonate strongly with the contemporary phenomenon of 'leftover' women in China: single, usually highly educated women deemed unmarriageable by their early thirties, because they have chosen autonomy rather than marriage. Marriage, according to the Chinese government's narrative, promotes social harmony and stability; despite the backhanded acknowledgement of their gains, leftover women threaten population drives, employment rates, and gender norms (see Fincher 2016: 21). As single women, their choices have forced them off the normative timeline of marriage and motherhood, branding them as failures. Having achieved her status as concubine to the Son of Heaven – the nineteenth century equivalent of the "three highs", i.e. high levels of education, professional achievement and salary (Fincher 2016: 15) – Orchid represents what little bargaining and empowerment can occur within systems that perpetuate such myths about the expectations and 'shelf life' of women. Read this way, Min's novels offer readers a different interpretation of life in the Forbidden City. Yehonala's 'unnaturally' close relationship with her beloved eunuchs, An-te-hai, who was mysteriously murdered, and Li Lien-ying, who reportedly mourned his lady until his own death, for example, resists a paternalistic system that rewards women who embrace traditional norms such as marriage and motherhood. In the 1970s, Germaine Greer proposed how "the characteristics that are praised and rewarded" in the submissive woman, who assents to her sexual objectification, "are those of the castrate – timidity, plumpness, languor, delicacy and preciosity" (Greer 2008: 17). Social conditioning, patriarchal regulation, disciplining of sexuality, and the governance of female excess makes eunuchs of women. Yehonala struggles against these traits to become a female ruler, accused throughout her reign of "crossing the male-female line" (Min 2007: 24). Yet, finding solace and developing a profound alliance with her eunuchs rather than the other concubines rewrites the stereotypes of unmanliness, sexual and financial corruption as a kind of 'sisterhood'. "By identifying with the eunuchs", Yehonala states, "I tended my heart's wound. The

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eunuchs' pain was written on their faces. They had been gelded and everyone understood their misfortune. But mine was hidden" (Min 2004, 80). This affinity between women and eunuchs can be taken further as a gloss on ageing women: Dr. Robert A. Wilson, a hormone therapy pioneer during the 1960s suggested that "with the loss of reproductive function, [women's] sexual attraction is also in question"; ageing women must face the "unpalatable truth" that "all postmenopausal women are castrates" (Wilson qtd. in Whelehan and Gwynn 2014: 3). Rendered invisible and "hidden" by their loss of youth, women, like eunuchs, become defined by lack and incompletion.

The Forbidden City "has been an exasperating place of ritual where the only privacy has been inside my head" (Min 2004: 1). Attuned to the art of performance, Yehonala likens herself to a "painting from the Imperial portrait gallery" (Min 2004: 1). Bored by etiquette "even before I got out of bed" and fearful of running out of time to secure the emperor's favour (Min 2004: 85), Yehonala begins to exhibit the anxieties of post-feminism that Diane Negra has termed, women's "chronic temporal crisis" (Negra 2009: 48). Capitalising on her status, Yehonala's family begs her to find her sister, Rong, a wealthy husband. After arguing about the role that love might play in an arranged marriage, Yehonala tries to appease Rong by telling her, "I want you to be aware of your beauty every minute from now on" (Min 2004: 219). A traditional Chinese girl, Rong does not know what a "minute is" and Yehonala has to explain that clocks are boxes with "little ticking hearts inside" (Min 2004: 219), or metaphorical 'biological clocks', that measure time. Imported from the West, the obsession with the temporal has indeed been "made by men in foreign countries" (Min 2004: 219). No wonder that Yehonala's "enthusiasm for the timepieces was quickly spent" (Min 2004: 85), as she struggles to slot her life into the temporal timeframe mapped out for her and then, in *The Last Empress*, to extend the expiration date imposed upon her.

While romance dominates the youthful narrative of *Empress Orchid*, awkwardly placed 'makeover' scenes provide the only relief to *The Last Empress's* focus on a litany of historical events precipitated by the Dowager Empress's unpopular decisions and policies. As China unravels out of her control, Yehonala must contend with her wrinkles that were "too numerous to hide" and teeth that "were not as white as they used to be" (Min 2007: 138). Meanwhile the international press "pour[s] venom" on her reputation:

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"'She Did It Again: Yehonala Sacrificed Her Own Child on the Altar of Her Ambition!' shouted one headline in the British press, and the story was picked up by the Chinese papers" (Min 2007: 120). Such intertwinings of age with rumour indicate an understanding of what Sadie Wearing, in the context of postfeminist age and time, has called "chronological decorum" or "rigid demarcations of the appropriate, the decorous and the natural" (Wearing 2007: 281). By becoming the Empress Dowager at the age of thirty-eight, a title that disrupts age and denotes power, Yehonala sidesteps, in the most radical of ways, the naturalised and feminised timeline of birth, marriage and motherhood. She remains, like neo-Victorianism, visible past her time and therefore renders herself anachronistic, drawing upon her head international ire and outrage.

Min attempts to humanise and explain the accusations of murder and corruption against Yehonala but in doing so transforms her crimes into what Wearing, quoting Russo, has called the "scandal of anachronism" (Russo qtd. in Wearing 2007: 280). Straying from the perceived natural timeline for women (and women's bodies) and not acting appropriately for one's age, according to Russo, "is not only inappropriate but dangerous, exposing the female subject, especially, to ridicule, contempt, pity and scorn" (Russo qtd. in Wearing 2007: 280). The Forbidden City's excruciating etiquette serves to police those women within its confines who do not, like Yehonala, 'age' well. Min takes care to compare Yehonala with Nuharoo, the other Empress Dowager, in order to contrast "chronological propriety" (Wearing 2007: 298). Yehonala explains Nuhuroo's jealousy and pettiness towards her as the anguish of childlessness: "Everyone in the Forbidden City except the Emperor understood the pressure Nuharoo was under after several years of marriage and no sign of fertility. That such pressure could lead to strange behavior was common in childless women" (Min 2004: 197). Nuharoo compensates for her "strange behavior" by obsessing over her religious regimen and personal beauty care. Attending to her afterlife and her looks rather than matters of state, Nuharoo advises Yehonala to "lie in the bed others have made, and walk in the shoes others have cobbled" (Min 2004: 233). After the emperor's death, Nuharoo even sends Yehonala the "*The Proper Conduct of an Imperial Widow*, but it did little to bring me peace" (Min 2007: 4). Maintaining her looks and 'ageing well' should be Yehonala's primary responsibility instead of defying time and conventional standards of femininity by "crossing the male-female line" (Min 2007: 24).

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The eunuchs' plot to have Yehonala perform the role of Kuan-Yin Buddha (the Goddess of Mercy) to "invite good spirits" (Min 2007: 295) can be read as a form of cosmetic surgery, in the sense that the Empress's body must be seen to 'match' the spirit of her mind. Captured in photographs that remain potent to this day, scholars have argued that Cixi's self-representation played a large part in international and domestic diplomacy to frame and consolidate her power as the head of the Qing dynasty. Others analysing her poses as Kuan-Yin claim that her desire for power could be mitigated by manipulating the "malleable gender identity of Guanyin" that would both cement her role as a female ruler and challenge the "traditional view of the sovereign as a patriarch" (Li 2012: 77). In Min's novels, however, the photographs take on the qualities of eternal longevity, a mythical woman forever young and powerful. Like Anne McClintock's masterful discussion of imperialist cartography's "porno-tropics" (McClintock 1995: 22), the novel shows a male investment in the female sovereign's fictional 'youthful' body as a metric of the nation's health. Yehonala's body performs sovereign power and youth, ensuring that China's political bravado is similarly structured as vanity.[3]

Neo-Victorianism thus lends itself well to discussions of temporality and the female body. In an Asian context, neo-Victorianism can become a useful, perhaps more deliberate expression, of what Shu-mei Shih has described as a "contradictory assignation of temporal value to Chinese women, first as 'forerunners', thus ahead of Western women and then as backward sisters living in an 'underdeveloped' country under 'double oppression'" (Shih 2005: 99). Certainly, Min's construction of Yehonala as ahead of her time yet inviting contemporary pity encapsulates such a contradiction. If, as Negra and Tasker have argued, "postfeminism evidences a distinct preoccupation with the temporal", whereby women's lives are defined as "timestarved […] overworked, rushed, harassed, subject to their 'biological clocks' etc. to such a degree that female adulthood is defined as a state of chronic temporal crisis" (Negra and Tasker, qtd. in Negra 2009: 48), then it shares with neo-Victorianism an emphasis on the ways in which the nineteenth century continues to inhabit the contemporary, disrupting smooth national narratives, troubling the ethics of recovery and demanding witness. Like Yehonala, the nineteenth century refuses to be 'properly' past in its rejuvenation by popular culture for ready consumption. Like neo-Victorianism, Yehonala's body starts to 'leak' time. As Yehonala

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nears death, she calmly notes the disintegration of her body: "my stools lacked all formation. I began coughing up blood" (Min 2007: 299). Her reappearance in Last Empress fiction signals what Negra has called the "historical misplacedness" that post-feminism experiences when feminism is declared "obsolete"; Yehonala's ambition and her inability to 'age well' and appropriately evinces her own 'historical misplacedness' in both past *and* present. The global anxiety about the rise of 'New China' in the present can also be mapped in Last Empress fiction. As Wearing has argued in the context of post-feminism, the rejuvenation process produces a "buoyant and optimistic cultural imagery around which marketing and consumerism have rallied" (Wearing 2007: 293); the so-called 'Chinese Dream' which relies heavily on the credo of "the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation" (Wang 2013: n.p.), revolves around the same sentiments. The anxiety, however, around China's meteoric rise to power seems to rely on the apprehension that China has, like Yehonala, somehow jumped the narrative. Like the woman who refuses to 'age well', China is perceived by the West to have developed out of time, anachronistically and faster than the narrative of global economic development generally allows.

2. Neo-Victorian Avatars in Asia

I turn now to a discussion of Da Chen's *My Last Empress* (2012) and Linda Jaivin's *The Empress Lover* (2014), both recent examples of metafictional approaches to Last Empress fiction that serve as critiques of neo-Victorian appropriation. These novels move away from biofiction to challenge the lure of neo-Orientalism for contemporary fiction and explore the ways in which Cixi continues to seduce writers away from examining more urgent and traumatic periods of China's modern history. By revealing the sexual exploits and origins of our neo-Victorian avatars, a Sinophile Victorian royal tutor who falls in love with a thirteen-year old empress, and a Eurasian China 'expert' whose origins lie in the pornographic encounters Backhouse penned between himself and Cixi, Chen and Jaivin complicate the relationship that the present has with China in neo-Victorianism.

The Australian-Chinese narrator of *The Empress Lover*, Linnie, holds in tension an origin story that leads from the late-nineteenth century to the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 to the present. Orphaned at birth and sent to Australia, Linnie mishears adults referring to her as "Miss Edgy Nation" (Jaivin 2014: 47). She soon realises that the aloofness with which

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people have been treating her is the product of her mix-raced origins. Raised on "so much Victoriana that every time I developed a cough I grew hopeful that it might be consumption" (Jaivin 2014: 49), Linnie soon seeks Victoriana more suited to her hybrid background by turning to Backhouse and Bland's biography, *China Under the Empress Dowager*. The biography directly addresses Linnie with its opulence and depictions of luxury, the Empress's gaze, she recalls, "held my own with what seemed at the time an almost eerily knowing, vaguely amused expression" (Jaivin 2014: 53). It was everything a neo-Victorian critic might want,

> a Byzantine narrative of degenerate rulers, powerful concubines, rival clans, oracular forecasts, sieges, invasions and epic struggles for power – and all of this, wonderfully I thought, with a clever and beautiful woman at the centre. (Jaivin 2014: 54)

"Intoxicated" by the exoticism of China, for Linnie, the narrative "brimmed with the history I craved for myself", encouraging an obsession with imperial China that leads her to write her Honours thesis in high school about the "Western Representation of the Empress Dowager Cixi, from Portrait Artist Katharine Carl and Biographers Bland and Backhouse to Hollywood and Beyond" (Jaivin 2014: 58-60). As Linnie's interest in Cixi grows, so does her study of Backhouse and his pornographic work. Her historical research leads her to that other "closed kingdom" (Jaivin 2014: 59), China during the Cultural Revolution, and, even after experiencing a devastating romance with a counter-revolutionary, Q, during the upheavals of China's pro-democracy movement, Jaivin's heroine still seeks creative refuge in the history of the last empress. As an adult in Australia, she entitles her first novel, "*The Empress Lover*", crafting the plot so that it was "like every pot-boiler that's ever been written about the 'exotic East'" (Jaivin 2014: 62). Yet, at its centre, she imagines a "perverse, eccentric gay man and a powerful female ruler"), producing what she describes as the "ultimate penny dreadful for our feminist, post-colonialist, post-modern times" (Jaivin 2014: 62). Yet, with no interest in her novel in 1980 (A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, it is to be noted, was published in the watershed date of 1990), Linnie decamps back to China to work as a "foreign expert" and translator for a Chinese publishing house (Jaivin 2014:62).

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Amidst the relentless development of Beijing, a postman on a horse "dressed from head to toe in the uniform of a Qing dynasty postman" delivers to Linnie a letter from a mysterious man, who had "written my Chinese name and address in brush and ink the old-fashioned way, in vertical columns and using the complex old-style characters that few people in the mainland were even able to read these days, much less write" (Jaivin 2014: 31, 34). The writer is a man who should have long been dead, Dr. Reinhard Hoeppli, "the professor-doctor who encouraged Backhouse to write his scandalous 'memoirs'" (Jaivin 2014: 68), *Decadence Mandchoue,* in the 1940s. After arranging a meeting at an impossible to find Beijing address, Hoeppli shares Backhouse's final letter, a "wild tale, far-fetched and fantastical" (Jaivin 2014: 1) that reveals that Linnie is the direct descendent of Backhouse's "lustful and long affair with this remarkable and unusually erotic woman, ruler of China, and nearly four decades my senior" (Jaivin 2014: 279).

However, unlike *Possession*, where the discovery of Maud Bailey's origins leads to an uneasy but ultimately recuperative fantasy of reconciliation with the nineteenth century, Linnie's encounter with Hoeppli transforms into a gesture of refusal. Linnie, we come to suspect, was misled by the postman, a neo-Victorian envoy that led her away from the present and into the deep past. As Linnie reunites with a poet and Daoist philosopher from her youth, known only as "the Sage" and, coincidentally, the owner of the bar in which she met Hoeppli, she finally recalls other histories than the Victorian:

> September 11, bombs in Afghanistan, explosions in Iraq, killings on Tahir Square, Syria, – the news makes me ill so I retreat from it altogether. I say I came back to China because it's so real, but maybe I'm here because it's so unreal, because the censorship of the news and of history makes it easier to live in a fantasy world. (Jaivin 2014: 304)

Jaivin's rather unconventional novel can be read as an accusation: neo-Victorianism is a convenient "fantasy world", a distraction from the traumatic experiences that structure China's modern political history, from the "withdrawal of almost all rights in China during the Cultural Revolution" (Grice 2009: 8) to the brutal suppression of the student-led

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democracy movement in 1989 to a present in which there are "no memorials, no plaques, nothing on TV, nothing in the bookshops" that commemorates these traumatic events (Jaivin 2014: 305). To be the foreigner who "truly understands China" (Jaivin 2014: 241), Linnie must not focus on her own Asian neo-Victorian origin story but must turn her attention and memory work to the contemporary loss of human rights.

If *The Empress Lover* questions the 'love' the present has for Cixi that blinds scholars, critics and writers to more urgent events in China's recent history, Da Chen's *My Last Empress* contorts even further the neo-Victorian avatar's relationship with nineteenth-century China in order to portray how the imbalance between East and West persists in the present. The reader's substitute in the novel is Samuel Pickens, heir to a New England fortune, who, as a schoolboy, falls in love with Annabelle Hawthorn, daughter of an American missionary stationed in China. "Born at dawn when the Qing Dynasty was dusking", Pickens gushes, the "blond and blue-eyed whimsical Annabelle, after growing up in the Orient, liked to dress up as a Chinese empress" (Chen 2012: 10). This kind of role-playing acts as a reminder of the accusations I began this article with, for example, Lowell's claim that the "Western fascination with Cixi springs from the west's fascination with itself" (2004: n.p.). Immediately after consummating their budding relationship, Annabelle dies in a fire caused by her opium pipe. From that moment on, like Vladimir Nabokov's Humbert in *Lolita* (1955), upon whom Chen's protagonist is partly based, Pickens becomes haunted by the ghost of Annabelle and, lured by sexual fantasies of the Empress and the Orient, begins learning Mandarin and enrols in Oriental studies, so that soon "Annabelle's Peking shanghaied my Yale" (Chen 2012: 22). After his parents and first wife conveniently die, Pickens seizes the opportunity to travel to China to become tutor to the young Emperor to teach him "Western things" (Chen 2012: 47). Yet, a visit to a Chinese exorcist soon reveals the extent of Annabelle's hold over Pickens, and thus, us neo-Victorianists: "maybe [Annabelle] was being her ghostly self, binding you solely to her service so you would let yourself be ridden hither and thither on errands for her and no others" (Chen 2012: 60). Like Pickens who enters the Forbidden City in search of his last empress, and Linnie who is misled by her Qing postman, neo-Victorianists 'shanghaied' by the search for neo-Victorianism in Asia might also be "ridden hither and thither" for an appropriate, less sexualised, past for a Chinese or an Asian-American future.

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Chen addresses this appropriateness by hijacking tropes of Last Empress fiction. Parodying the rejuvenation theme, Chen has Pickens lust after the thirteen-year old Empress Qui Rong, the 'last empress' of the young emperor, a "dazzle of a nymphet blonde, thirteen and no older" (Chen 2012: 83). Pickens doesn't know when his "penchant for the young, the tender, or the ghostly" emerged, but he passes up "Grandpa" – the moniker for that "old hag" Cixi – for the "trilingual and white-skinned" Q (Chen 2012: 3, 91, 103). Pickens ingratiates himself to Grandpa's court in order to seduce his biracial Lolita who, because she has been many years a concubine, is eager to submit to his advances and elicit his help in order to find her birth father. On an errand to tackle rampant corruption in the Forbidden City with Q as his liaison, Pickens soon discovers that the mysterious origins of his beloved can be traced back to none other than Annabelle, who has, like the spectral remnants of the Victorian in the present, loomed throughout the text and Pickens's life, "formless, airlike, ubiquitous, and pervasive" (Chen 2012: 17). Q is revealed to be none other than Annabelle's daughter, fathered by the warlord Wang Dan, who kidnapped the young Annabelle in a skirmish against Christians and impregnated her. Like Last Empress fiction, Q's attractiveness lies in her biraciality. Although exotic in appearance, she cannot threaten Pickens nor the reader as she remains both recognisable and (sexually) accessible as the Lolita figure. The depiction of Q as Lolita implies that Last Empress fiction can be considered 'Asian neo-Victorian lite', exotic enough in setting but familiar enough in content. Pulling up knee socks, riding a motorcycle, or dressed in a "red *qipao*, a bewitching dress hugging her pubescent shape and tart nipples" (Chen 2012: 128), Q muddies the image of the child enough to fulfil Pickens's Orientalist and colonialist fantasies. As a metaphor for America's colonialist fantasies, intergenerational love forms a landscape, a "pedophiliac picturesque" (Freeman qtd. in Cavanaugh 2007: 35), which, according to Elizabeth Freeman, codes the 'knowing' or sexually precocious child as an Other to be conquered by the colonial male, who has been given "permission to conquer 'foreign' lands precisely because she is lascivious and invites his colonial advances" (Cavanaugh 2007: 35).

Chen also deploys Pickens's paedophilia as a critique of Orientalism and neo-Victorianism's scopophilia. As Jason Lee has argued, "pedophilia is primarily concerned with looking, with observation […] the pedophile is the most contemporaneous of beings, encapsulating the desire of the age –

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the love for, and worship of, the image" (Lee 2009: 9). Parodying the neo-Victorian desire to see 'behind the curtain' of Cixi's reign, Pickens, who has been tasked with delivering a naked Q to the emperor's chambers, panders to the reader's curiosity by ripping away the "lumbering thrall of the mosquito net", revealing sexual acts that "never have I, in all my sordid years, encountered" (Chen 2012: 12, 122). Readers are temporarily forced to participate in Pickens's voyeurism of "two ungrown" persons (Chen 2012: 120). However, as Q professionally enacts positions from the "*Yin Gong Yan Shi*, a hand-drawn pictorial of coital poses and positional perversions long cherished by emperors, and equally treasured by their concubines", and abuses the emperor's body, she looks backward at Pickens, "locking her gaze my way into my cleaving heart" (Chen 2012: 121, 120). With a series of looks, Q subverts the culture of voyeurism in Orientalism, magnified in Pickens's paedophilia, and signals both her seizing of and complicity in the economy of the gaze to further her own already limited ambitions. In her analysis of Leila Sebbar's *Sherazade* trilogy (1982 – 1990) and the colonial gaze of identity cards, Karina Elleraas describes how the heroine engages in a "recalcitrant exhibitionism" that "does not oppose Orientalist imagery, but simultaneously integrates and destabilizes its embedded fantasies of female identity" (Elleraas 2003: 38). In a different kind of harem than the pornographic photoshoot in which Sherazade participates, Q makes a show of skewering the emperor with his own "*ru yi* – a smoothly polished wrist-thick jade stick, the emperor's good luck vade mecum of Buddhist import and potency" and melts Pickens's "ape heart" (, securing from him the promise to "leave this place" (Chen 2012: 121, 122, 126). After unmanning the emperor and the Orientalist imagery and power associated with him, Q proceeds by her actions to literally dismember Pickens, the neo-Victorian stand-in, who keeps problematically rejuvenating Orientalism for his own ends.

Pursued by the dowager's imperial forces after discovering the pair has left the Forbidden City, Pickens makes desperate plans to flee for America. Betrayed at the last minute, Q escapes, leaving Pickens to bear the wrath of Chief Eunuch Li who presents him with a choice: "Qiu Rong or castration?" (Chen 2012: 259). Pickens chooses "ignoble emasculation for glory […] for my twin archangels, A and her kindred Q" (Chen 2012: 259). If the Victorian is reconstructed using the traces and fragments of the nineteenth-century past, Pickens and In-In, his eunuch servant, can also only

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dream of future reconstruction, each preserving his "treasure" or castrated parts, all "dried and useless", so that, as Pickens says, "in the next life I will be made whole again" (Chen 2012: 264). Forced to live out the rest of his days attended by In-In at Annabelle's ancestral home, a "three-room shanty built by the Reverend Hawthorn" (Chen 2012: 267), on the outskirts of Beijing, and now rendered abject by his castration, Pickens is paid a visit by a visibly pregnant Q. No longer the innocent child, she fails to excite her former lover; instead Pickens sees her as ruined because "aged, not by moons but by years and years and years" (Chen 2012: 265). The nineteenth-century object of his (and our) lust and desire has grown up; unable to rejuvenate Q, Pickens, like Humbert, reunites with his mythical lost Annabelle. Reading the past now with supposed "clear-eyed lucidity", readers might also "ponder, gaining new insight" (Chen 2012: 269), into Pickens's status as a eunuch linking his punishment with Greer's 'female eunuch' and the disappearance of ageing women from contemporary cultural narratives such as Last Empress fiction.

3. Staging Asian Neo-Victorianism: The Musical

Given Cixi's patronage of Peking opera and Min's emphasis on highly scripted performance in even the most intimate spaces within the Forbidden City, the reappearance of the Last Empress narrative in the form of a musical seems inevitable. I turn now to *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress*, a musical commissioned to premier at the opening of 'The Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay', a multi-million complex built to herald Singapore's commitment to an artistic and cultural "renaissance" (Peterson 1996: 19) in 2002. Billed by the Singapore Repertory Theatre as a star-studded, East-meets-West performance, *Forbidden City* was scripted by Stephen Clark and directed by the late Stephen Dexter, both big names of the West End, with music composed by Singaporean pop singer turned composer, Dick Lee, and with the Singaporean actress and singer, Kit Chan, cast as the young Cixi. The musical incorporates elements of American artist Katharine Carl's report of her time in the imperial court painting a portrait of Cixi for exhibition at the St. Louis World's Fair in 1904 with the basic elements of Last Empress fiction detailing Yehonara's selection as a royal concubine, the birth of her son, her rise to power and the challenges of the Boxer Rebellion. Hoping for a friend in Carl, the Empress Dowager narrates the story of her life, aiming to dispel the myths of Cixi as the

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ruthless 'Dragon Lady'. As "the only European who has ever had a chance to study this remarkable woman in her own milieu" (Carl 2001: xxiv), the artist is anxious to paint a sympathetic portrait of a great woman she feels she has come to understand and whose story she learns over the course of many sittings. However, Carl's emotional attachment to the portrait is made suspect by its comparison British journalist George Morrison's financial investments in spinning sensational stories of Carl's letters about Cixi to "shade and shape the words they read" (Clark 2002: track 1).[4] The curtain falls on the enduring mystery of Cixi's portrait and the Empress's final betrayal as the young Yehonara steps out from behind the painting of the aged Empress to judge Carl's disloyalty: any chance to know the 'true' Yehonara is lost to Morrison's "stories" (Clark 2002: track 13).

Like other examples of Last Empress fiction, *Forbidden City* stages a performance of ageing femininity. Played by one of the Philippines' veteran theatre actresses, Sheila Francisco, the Empress Dowager frames the narrative for Carl's commission and then remains on stage for almost the duration of the performance, watching silently as the events of her life unfold before her. Reviewers have praised the maturity of Francisco's voice and her ability to emote even while remaining largely silent, overseeing the stage as her youthful counterpart creates the dramatic plot of the musical. In a few scenes, where the Dowager recalls her love for the emperor, for example, young and old Cixi sing together, seeming to bridge the boundaries between generations. However, Francisco's silent presence reinforces the post-feminist approach to ageing: the audience's gaze and Carl's Western perspective transform *Forbidden City* into a spectacle of the Orient *and* the ageing woman. Both hinge on simultaneous hyper-visibility – the visual codes of Orientalism and the scrutiny devoted to women in the spotlight – and invisibility, with both the Orient and the older woman rendered Other, to be seen and not heard.

The Last Empress narrative's transportation to Singapore most clearly illustrates the cultural work that Asian neo-Victorianism can do for a Chinese diasporic present. Nonetheless, the musical format dulls the critical edge that guides Chen or Jaivin's work, for example. Drawing on the tradition of 'Oriental' musicals such as *The King and I* (Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, 1951) and *Miss Saigon* (Claude-Michel Schönberg and Alain Boublil, 1989), *Forbidden City*, according to its artistic director, was to be a "musical retelling history" and a lavish export, "designed to be

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fit into two containers" (home2009singapore 2009, n.p.), which would launch Singaporean talent onto the global stage. In the bid to deliver the "Great Singaporean Musical" that would both tap into and rival the market generated by imported productions such as *Les Miserables* (Schönberg and Boublil, 1980) and *Phantom of the Opera* (Andrew Lloyd Webber, 1986) and launch the city as a "regional center for theatre" (Peterson 1996: 122), Cixi's story became Singapore's story.

In the late 1990s, the Singapore government began to 'stage manage' the city-state's cultural life. After achieving independence from Britain and Malaysia, Singapore rose quickly to become one of Asia's economic 'tigers' by implementing state capitalism at the expense of civil liberties under its policy of so-called 'soft authoritarianism' (Peterson 2001: 9). Like a kind of Forbidden City, Singapore carefully manipulates and promotes cultural and social policies, and manages dissent, political dissatisfaction, difference and fragmentation. Singapore's performing arts, indeed all its creative output, comes under the purview of state censorship and strict control in the interests of social cohesion and political unity. According to William Peterson, due to Singapore's unique decolonisation and independence, "the construction of a common past and a shared culture has become as important to the nation-builders of contemporary Singapore as economic development" (Peterson 2001: 3). Aside from the domestic popularity of indigenous Western-style musicals such as *Nagraland* (Dick Lee, 1992) and others, *Forbidden City* emerges as one of Singapore's most popular productions, despite the seeming irrelevance of its historical subject matter, and appears to fulfil the official brief of a "common past" and "shared culture". For better or for worse, *Forbidden City* reinvents a version of the nineteenth century that gains value by, as Lysa Hong and Jianli Huang argue in the context of Singapore's heritage machinery, "conscripting Chinese diasporic culture into national identity" (Hong and Huang 2008: 229).

I return to the idea of 'Asian neo-Victorian-lite', previously discussed in relation to *The Empress Lover*, as a strategic cultural tool in the Singaporean context of *Forbidden City*. Lavish Orientalist sets and costumes craft Chineseness into the 'traditional' pan-Asian culture in Singapore (at the expense of its diversity of ethnic minorities); yet the musical's 'lite-ness' (the East-meets-West script coupled with Dick Lee's translation of Western musical motifs into performances by traditional Chinese instrument) does not challenge the myth promoted by many Asian

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cities that they are open to the West yet confident in their 'local' Asian identity. Such 'lite-ness', however, creates some interesting results: 'Shadow', a Singaporean blogger, offers a mostly positive review of *Forbidden City's* theatricals but complains, interestingly, of the cast's "poor enunciation" and the audience's reliance on "Chinese subtitles to keep them in the loop" (Shadow, 2006: n.p). The review eventually descends into a personal rant about Shadow's lack of knowledge about Cixi and Chinese history:

> I must admit that I first heard of her, belatedly, in the musical. Chinese language teachers in Singapore government schools would have inculcated their students with a sense of shame to accompany this sort of confession. An ethnic Chinese unable to speak Chinese?! A yellow-skinned person wooly- minded about the history of the country of his/her forefathers?! The disgrace! Without knowledge of this history, a Chinese person is surely without identity. (Shadow 2006: n.p.)

On the one hand, Shadow's comments reveal how, using a neo-Victorian lens to view Last Empress fiction, can form the much-desired Singaporean communal identity albeit by "consenting" (Ang 2000: 291) to Chineseness of the most "wooly-minded" kind. On the other hand, a postcolonial neo-Victorian reading attuned to the nineteenth century as an era of empires might also open up Shadow's comments as an index of ethnic imperialisms "inculcated" by Singapore's education system and cultural policies that privilege a Chinese economic elite. The linking of an explicit neo-Victorian project in Singapore to heritage raises questions of tradition and assimilation that occludes multiculturalism in favour of a 'global' version of the city-state, which remains palatable because of the blankness of its Chineseness.

4. Some Closing Thoughts about Last Empress Fiction

This article's critical analysis of recent Anglophone Last Empress texts through a neo-Victorian lens, in part, responds to Antonija Primorac and Monika Pietrzak-Franger's question of whether or not the term 'neo-Victorian' can sufficiently and appropriately "accommodate the range of (historical and geographical) perspectives from which to study the

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Victorians and their legacies" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 9). Insofar as the Chinese nineteenth century has been shaped by British (and American, French, German, Russian and Japanese) imperial policies, I argue that it is productive to consider Asian neo-Victorianism as part of a push to view neo-Victorianism more broadly as part of "today's global 'Empire'" (Primorac and Pietrzak-Franger 2015: 9), *pace* Hardt and Negri. Admittedly, sensitivity is required in acknowledging the ways in which defining Asian neo-Victorianism involves, perhaps even requires, acts of appropriation that, while expanding neo-Victorian studies to under-examined subjects and new geographical contexts, may also encroach upon or even contract other well-established fields such as Asian-American studies. In choosing Last Empress texts for this study, I have been made acutely aware of the weaknesses that many neo-Victorian scholars, like myself, may face when claiming a truly global neo-Victorian approach. What collaborative and cross-cultural interpretations have been neglected in my inability to 'translate', in the widest possible terms, Chinese or other non-English examples of Last Empress fiction and scholarship? I am unable to read in the original Chinese texts such Zhu Xiaoping's *The Emperor's Doctor* (2001) and Xu Xiaobiu's *Princess Derling* (2005) that pit private narratives against the decline and modernising forces of the late-Qing dynasty. What I miss, therefore, is the opportunity to understand and contextualise more fully phenomena such as the 'rise of China' or the differential cultural mediation of some of the issues I have highlighted in Last Empress fiction, such as contemporary anxieties about women and ageing.

Made available to writers of the Asian diaspora, Cixi remains a powerful cultural touchstone and figure, whose temporally expansive body can address the post-feminist crises of ageing and power and contemporary anxieties about China's 'rise' to power. In the hands of writers such as Chen and Jaivin working with more self-reflexive neo-Victorian protocols, the Last Empress motifs force neo-Victorian scholars to confront their attraction to the version of nineteenth-century China that Cixi represents instead of more contemporary urgencies such as authoritarianism or human rights abuses. Last Empress fiction puts pressure on neo-Victorianism's geographical boundaries, opening up new collaborations with area studies and other cross-cultural and comparative fields.

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Notes

1. 'Cixi' or 'Tzu Hsi' was an honorific named bestowed upon the Empress after her promotion following the birth of her son. Jung Chung reports that Cixi's given name was "Lan" or "Orchid" and that she gained the title "Lady Yehonara" (or Yehonala) to designate her Manchurian tribe and clan (Chung 2014:11). Seagrave Sterling begins his sympathetic biography with the phrase, "we do not even know her name" (Seagrave 1992: 18).
2. For a more detailed discussion of Last Empress fiction, biographies and historical sources produced in China and in Chinese, please see Yuhang and Zurndorfer 2012. A wider discussion of non-English texts is beyond the scope of this article and my linguistic capabilities, yet a transnational comparison would no doubt yield important expansions to neo-Victorian studies.
3. In 1899, the Dutch-American painter, Hubert Vos, was privileged to be one of the few European male painters allowed close access to Cixi as a portrait artist. He completed two portraits: one followed the dictates of Cixi herself to show "no shadows, no shadows, no shadows, no wrinkles"; in the other Vos presented her "as old as she is" (Anderson 2011: 103, 105). Cixi's desire to manipulate the youthfulness of her public appearance reveals a woman deeply concerned and invested in both personal and national pride.
4. The real Morrison, known as 'Morrison of Peking' for his tabloid journalism, Sterling Seagrave points out, was misled by the infamous Backhouse and thus "misread all the signals and blundered backward into greatness" (Seagrave 1992: 274).

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