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Citation for published version:

Keown, M 2019, 'From sojourners to citizens: The poetics of space and ontology in diasporic Chinese literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, vol. 55, no. 6, pp. 808-823.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2019.1680155>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1080/17449855.2019.1680155](https://doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2019.1680155)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Journal of Postcolonial Writing

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Journal of Postcolonial Writing on 27 Dec 2019, available online: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/17449855.2019.1680155>].

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From sojourners to citizens: The poetics of space and ontology in diasporic Chinese literature from Aotearoa/New Zealand

The University of Edinburgh

Email : michelle.keown@ed.ac.uk

Abstract: This essay analyses the work of two contemporary Chinese New Zealand poets, Renee Liang and Alison Wong, who explore the historical and contemporary experiences of the Chinese diasporic community in New Zealand. Written in the aftermath of the New Zealand government's 2002 apology for the discriminatory poll tax levied on Chinese gold miners in the 19th century, Wong's poetry meditates upon the attenuated lives of Cantonese immigrants subjected to racial abuse and geographical segregation by the dominant Pākehā (European New Zealand) community. Liang, on the other hand, explores changing attitudes towards New Zealand's long-established Chinese diasporic community in the wake of the 1987 Immigration Control Act, which allowed thousands of new Asian immigrants to enter and work in New Zealand. Both poets use architectural and phenomenological imagery to explore the ways in which Chinese migrants have transformed from a putatively temporary labour force (sojourners) into an established diasporic community (citizens).

Keywords: Chinese diaspora; Alison Wong; Renee Liang; gold mining; phenomenology; architecture

Introduction

The last three decades have witnessed seismic shifts in Aotearoa/New Zealand's cultural landscape. Where the 1970s and early 1980s were characterised by the politics of biculturalism (focused on the relationship between indigenous Māori and the ethnically European settler population), the 1990s and beyond have seen the emergence of a tentative multiculturalism, largely in response to a rapid increase in the size of Aotearoa/New Zealand's Asian and Pacific populations.

This essay responds to the increased visibility of Asian New Zealand creative writers since the 1990s, when changes in immigration legislation led to a doubling of New Zealand's Asian population between 1991 and 2001, and to widespread anti-Asian sentiment fuelled by news media stories on the so-called "Asian Invasion" (see Butcher and Spoonley 2011). This hostility has been directed primarily towards peoples from East Asia, most notably ethnic Chinese (who represent the largest of New Zealand's "Asian" population groups), but a more positive consequence of this furore has been an increasing interest in revisiting and documenting the history of New Zealand's more established Chinese diasporic community, whose history dates back to the arrival of Cantonese gold miners in the mid-1860s.

In keeping with the aims of this special issue, this essay traces the trajectories of New Zealand's Chinese diaspora across an extended historical period, as explored in poetry by ethnic Chinese New Zealanders. The Chinese miners who travelled to the New Zealand goldfields from the 1860s followed in the wake of migrants from the coastal provinces of South China – the area known as the "hearth of the Chinese diaspora" -- who formed substantial labour, trading and farming diasporas in the US, Canada, Southeast Asia and the antipodes during the 19th and early 20th centuries (Ma 2003, 2, 4). In New Zealand, as was the case in many other "secondary cores" of Chinese settlement, Chinese migrants designated as "sojourners" (by white settler populations reluctant to accommodate Chinese as long-term residents) nevertheless remained beyond the gold rushes, moving to urban centres and establishing small businesses (growing and selling fruit and vegetables, and establishing laundries, as noted above) before later moving into other, often middle-class occupations (Ma 2003, 8). Chinese

New Zealanders survived as a “model minority” until the arrival of “second wave” Chinese diasporans in the last quarter of the 20th century, when concerns about political instability (particularly relating to the 1997 handover of Hong Kong from Britain to China) prompted large-scale emigration from Hong Kong, Taiwan and Southeast Asia to the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand and Europe (Ma 2003, 2; Ip 2003, 342).

While the Chinese diaspora cannot be designated “postcolonial” in any straightforward sense,¹ nevertheless Chinese migrants have been entangled in the vicissitudes of western colonialism in the Pacific, often channelled into exploitative indentured labour in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and subjected to racial prejudice from white “host” communities from the US to South Africa, with “orientalist” stereotypes persisting to the present day. As I outline in more detail further below, New Zealand Chinese, like those in other British settler colonies, were vilified for their putative pecuniary motivations and moral turpitude, with 19th-century racial stereotypes of avaricious “hordes” transmuting into late-20th-century racist rhetoric figuring Chinese and other Asian immigrants as unwelcome “astronauts” benefiting from transnational business networks while draining state resources in New Zealand (Trlin and Watts 2004, 114; Ip and Murphy 2005, 10; see also Keown 2008).

Partly as a consequence of these modalities, the 1990s and beyond have witnessed an increasingly visible Chinese presence within the creative arts in New Zealand, and this essay explores the work of two poets of Chinese descent (Alison Wong and Renee Liang), focusing on the ways in which these authors confront the often

traumatic histories and contemporary experiences of New Zealand's Chinese diaspora. Given that, as Laurence Ma (2003) notes, "space and place are the primordial structural elements of diasporas" (8), providing located contexts for movements of people and goods, and enabling social networking between diasporic subjects, particular attention will be paid in this essay to the ways in which both poets use language and imagery to explore the relationship between the landscape or "built" environment, and personal or communal histories. In analysing these dynamics, I will draw on postcolonial, phenomenological, poststructuralist and architectural theory, including (in particular) the work of Homi Bhabha, Jacques Derrida, Martin Heidegger, and Neville A. Ritchie. While a small body of scholarship has emerged on Alison Wong's fiction, to my knowledge mine is the first published scholarly analysis of both Wong's and Liang's poetry.²

New Zealand's expanding Asian diasporas: the context

New Zealand's Asian diasporic population increased rapidly following changes in immigration policy in the late 1980s, when rising per capita incomes in various East and South-East Asian economies made them attractive trading partners for New Zealand, and the New Zealand economy was deregulated in order to keep pace with a new era of free-market monetarism and the increasingly global integration of production, trade and finance (Palat 1996, 36; Ongley 1996, 22-23; see also Keown 2008). The Immigration Control Act of 1987 ended the long-established policy of selecting immigrants on the basis of nationality and culture (a system which had previously favoured immigrants of European origin), and in 1991 a new points system was introduced which gave preference on the basis of age, qualifications, occupation,

business skills, and available investment capital (Bartley 2004, 157; Ho and Bedford 1996, 210; Palat 1996, 48). The new selection criteria allowed tens of thousands of Asian migrants to enter the country: 2001 Census statistics revealed that within a decade, the Asian diasporic population in Aotearoa/New Zealand more than doubled (from 99,756 to 238,176) and by the 2013 census it had reached 11.8 per cent of the national population (up from 9.2 per cent, or a total of 354,552 people, in the 2006 census). (Johnson and Moloughey 2006, 4; <http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/info-about-2013-census-data/information-by-variable.aspx>). New Zealand's Asian population is growing faster than any other ethnic group, with a 33 per cent increase between 2001 and 2006, and it is predicted to make up 14.5 per cent of the total New Zealand population by 2021 (http://archive.stats.govt.nz/browse_for_stats/population/estimates_and_projections/NationalEthnicPopulationProjections_HOTP01-21.aspx).

Although the strengthening geopolitical links between Aotearoa/New Zealand and Asian countries have been publicly welcomed by successive New Zealand governments since the early 1990s (Spoonley and Macpherson 2004, 186), the rapid increase in the numbers of Asian immigrants during this period caused disquiet within a considerable proportion of the New Zealand public. Popular opinion polls conducted through the 1990s and beyond revealed that a majority of New Zealanders consistently held that the number of immigrants from Britain -- historically the origin of the majority of New Zealand's settler population -- was "just right", while the numbers from Asia and the Pacific Islands were "too high" (Bandyopadhyay 2006, 136; Ip and Murphy 2005, 15). The news media ran numerous stories on the putative "Asian Invasion" during the 1990s, and stereotypes focusing on Asians' putative

economic greed, poor driving skills and inability to speak “good” English (and hence to “integrate” into New Zealand culture) gained wide popular currency, and were exploited by right-wing politicians who invoked anti-Asian rhetoric in order to court the popular vote during successive election campaigns (Ip and Murphy 2005, 14-15; Spoonley and Macpherson 2004, 189; Trlin and Watts 2004, 116).

The “Asian” panethnic label encompasses a wide array of cultures from a vast area covering almost one third of the earth’s land mass, but the post-1987 anti-Asian backlash in Aotearoa/New Zealand has been directed primarily towards peoples from East Asia, most notably Chinese immigrants from various regions including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Singapore and Vietnam (Ip and Murphy 2005, 13; Johnson and Moloughney 2006, 2). Ethnic Chinese represent Aotearoa/New Zealand’s largest Asian diasporic community, having increased from 19,506 in 1986 to 171,411 according to the 2013 census (. http://archive.stats.govt.nz/Census/2013-census/profile-and-summary-reports/ethnic-profiles.aspx?request_value=24737&tabname=Keyfacts). The majority of the current population comprises recent migrants, but many New Zealanders remain unaware that the Chinese are Aotearoa/New Zealand’s longest-established Asian diasporic community, with a history dating back to the arrival of Cantonese gold miners in the mid-1860s.³

The enduring popular myth that New Zealand boasts relatively harmonious race-relations in contrast to other settler societies such as Australia may help explain the relative lack of discursive engagement with the history of New Zealand’s Chinese diaspora, which was subject to a range of discriminatory immigration and social policies throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Between 1881 and 1920,

for example, successive Restriction Acts were passed in order to limit Chinese immigration, and those who did arrive were subject to a poll tax, set at £10 in 1881 and raised to £100 in 1896 in order to further discourage potential immigrants. No other ethnic group was subject to this prohibitive tax, which was not repealed until 1944, when Sinophobia had begun to ease as a result of China becoming an ally against Japan and the other Axis nations during the Second World War (Ip and Murphy 2005, 27).

Newspaper reports and political cartoons of the early 20th century, when prejudice against Chinese immigrants was at its height, tellingly prefigure some of the racist hyperbole of the 1990s: references were made to the “Asiatic Invasion” as a threat to New Zealand’s cultural identity, and at times of economic depression, Chinese were blamed for taking jobs away from more deserving New Zealanders, in spite of the fact that – unlike many of the late 20th-century migrants – they tended to enter labour-intensive, low-profit occupations that were often shunned by European settlers. As noted earlier in this article, during this period Chinese were negatively characterised as “sojourners” who came solely to make money and “flee in pursuit of new opportunities” (Moloughney et al. 2006, 72-3), foreshadowing late 20th-century and contemporary characterisations of Asian immigrants (particularly Taiwanese and Hong Kong Chinese) as “astronauts” who maintain transnational business links with their home countries and who are perceived to be making a “minimal” contribution to the economy of New Zealand, while their dependents exploit New Zealand’s education and healthcare systems and despoil its environment (Trlin and Watts 2004, 114; Ip and Murphy 2005, 110).

The “sojourner” label is a significant one within the context of diaspora and migration studies, in that it signalled expectations (on the part of the New Zealand “host” community) that the 19th-century goldseekers would return to China rather than settle permanently in New Zealand. Although racist public discourse figured the Chinese as economically rapacious, in fact the impetus for the first wave of Chinese migrant miners came from the Dunedin Chamber of Commerce, which in 1865 sponsored a scheme to bring in Chinese miners after diggers of European descent began moving away from Otago in response to new gold rushes in Marlborough, the West Coast, and other areas further north (Eldred-Grigg and Zeng Dazheng 2014, 42). Chinese miners had a reputation for generating productive yields on claims abandoned by less patient miners, and this was borne out in the Otago goldfields, where many Chinese diggers earned enough within their first year or two to return home with their earnings – typically, £100 was considered an ideal sum (Crawford Campbell 2008, 230; Eldred-Grigg and Zeng Dasheng 2014, 62).

The vast majority of these miners were married Cantonese men from the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong, driven by deteriorating economic conditions and political instability at home to seek economic opportunities abroad, with the objective of eventually returning home to their families and communities. However, many Chinese miners in New Zealand died in poverty, or through misadventure, murder and suicide, without achieving their objectives (Ng 2003). As noted earlier in this article, many of the Chinese immigrants, like those in other white settler colonies such as Australia and the USA, were met with intense hostility from Pākehā (ethnic European) miners as well as the wider white settler population; many were subjected to violent attacks, robberies and geographical segregation (Crawford Campbell 2008, 230). Later in this

essay I consider (via readings of Alison Wong's poetry) two South Island Chinese mining settlements – Round Hill in Southland, and Arrowtown in Otago – in which Cantonese miners established discrete communities, traces of which are still visible to this day as testimony to the resilience and adaptability of the so-called “sojourners” who evolved into one of New Zealand's longest-established diasporic communities.

The “sojourner” status accorded to Chinese miners in New Zealand by the white “host” community can be illuminated through a consideration of Jacques Derrida's (2000) theories on hospitality. As Derrida notes, the notion of hospitality commonly rests on an unequal power dynamic in which the “host” makes claims to “ownership” of a house, country or nation, and “guests” or “visitors” must be kept under control, even to the point of exclusion (151-152). Such a formulation encapsulates the attenuated position of the Chinese miners, who were uniquely designated “sojourners” to reinforce the dominant culture's sense of their perpetual outsider status, further enforced through negative stereotyping in newspapers, parliamentary debates and other forms of public discourse, as well as through the increasingly prohibitive legislation passed through the late 19th and early 20th centuries.⁴ Totalling around 5,000 at the time the first anti-Chinese act was passed in 1881, by 1916 the Chinese population had declined to around 2,000 (in large part as a result of these discriminatory laws). As noted earlier in this article, this small diasporic community nevertheless endured, moving into urban centres (and other occupations) following the end of the gold rushes.

The outbreak of the Second World War marked a major turning point in the transformation of the Chinese community from “sojourners” to a settled diasporic

community. In 1939, when Japan invaded south China, the New Zealand government allowed the wives and children of New Zealand-based Chinese men to enter the country as refugees. This was intended as a temporary measure, but a petition by the Dunedin Presbytery in 1947 resulted in the Chinese families being granted permission to stay, thereby allowing them to form the basis of an established diasporic community which, by 1966, numbered some 10,200 people (Ip 2003, 305).

Nevertheless, the 1920 Immigration Restriction Act, which required every aspiring immigrant not of British or Irish descent to apply for a special entry permit, ensured a continuing bias towards accommodating immigrants of European origin, and by 1986 only 0.6 per cent of New Zealanders (some 19,000) were of Chinese ancestry. As Manying Ip (2003) notes, this small Chinese diaspora survived by becoming a “model minority”, forming an “unobtrusive”, largely middle-class constituency prepared to “integrate” into the dominant white settler culture (342).

The 1987 Immigration Act and transformations in New Zealand’s Asian diasporic communities

This dynamic changed with the rapid expansion of Chinese and other Asian diasporic populations in New Zealand following the 1987 Immigration Act. The anti-Asian sentiment of the 1990s and beyond has been directed primarily against newly-arrived migrants, who have been accused of a brash overconfidence and failure to “integrate” into mainstream New Zealand society. However, members of the more established Chinese diaspora, who had largely retreated into the margins of public life due to decades of racial discrimination and the pressure to “assimilate” to the dominant Pākehā culture, suddenly found themselves being mistaken for recent migrants,

questioned about “their ‘right’ to be here” or patronisingly complimented on their “good English” (Johnson 2005, 229; Warrington 2007, 351; Liang 2007).

A more positive consequence of the post-1987 public furore over Asian immigration has been an expanding interest in revisiting and documenting the history of the more established Chinese diaspora in New Zealand, particularly following Labour Prime Minister Helen Clark’s 2002 official governmental apology for the poll tax. A number of important historical studies of New Zealand’s Chinese diaspora have emerged since the early 1990s (see, for example, Ip 1996; Ip 2003a; Ip and Murphy 2005; Ng 1993-99), and the same period witnessed an increasing Chinese presence within the creative arts. In the field of (anglophone) New Zealand literature, for example, where representations of Chinese New Zealanders had previously been produced primarily by Pākehā writers (see Millar 2005), since the 1990s a number of young Chinese New Zealand authors (including *inter alia* Lynda Chanwai Earle; Renee Liang, Tze Ming Mok; Chris Tse; and Alison Wong) have explored the history of their community from an intensely personal “insider” perspective. In the remainder of this essay I explore the work of two of these writers -- Renee Liang and Alison Wong -- in terms of their specific contribution to historicising the Chinese diaspora in New Zealand through phenomenological perspectives.

Renee Liang: transcending linguistic and geocultural borders

Renee Liang (2005/2007) is a second-generation Chinese New Zealander whose poems “Banana” and “Chinglish” articulate the experience of being treated as an “alien” or outsider both by non-Asian New Zealanders and by other Asians at home

and abroad, thus exploring the condition of ontological instability commonly associated with the experience of postcolonial diasporic subjects (see Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1994). Where “Banana” explores the ostracisation of putatively “westernised” New Zealand Chinese (pejoratively characterised as “yellow” on the outside but “white” on the inside, like the fruit after which they are named), Liang’s poem “Chinglish” explores a sense of dislocation with specific reference to language, beginning with a personal anecdote about a (presumably Pākehā) “shop lady” who compliments her on her “very good” English, assuming she is a recent immigrant to the country. Liang’s first impulse is to reply, in colloquial New Zealand English: “of course it bloody is,/-I was born here”, but the poem proceeds to meditate on the ironies of her decision to neglect the Chinese she spoke as a small child in order to assimilate to the dominant anglophone New Zealand culture.

Notably, the poem explores the ways in which language is perceived as demarcating cultural barriers in very literal or material terms: Liang recalls that: “We kids built houses / with wooden blocks / painted with Chinese characters. We fought over/ longer characters/ on bigger blocks, // better for building walls” (2007, n.p.). Here, the Chinese language used in the family home is figured as a bulwark against cultural as well as linguistic assimilation, a spatially as well as metaphysically configured means by which to construct an ethnic and linguistic identity distinct and separate from the dominant Pākehā culture. In this sense, within Liang’s poem the houses and walls built by the children have a wider cultural significance, pointing towards their divided loyalties between the linguistic and cultural universe of their first-generation migrant parents on one hand, and their desire to be accepted and “at home” within the New Zealand host culture on the other.

Martin Heidegger's theories on building, dwelling and ontology offer a useful context within which to consider these modalities. I am well aware of the ostensible ethical incongruity of invoking Heidegger's phenomenological theory with reference to the experience of stigmatised ethnic "minorities", given the controversy surrounding his membership of the German National Socialist Party; his failure to publicly condemn the Holocaust; and the fact that some of his work (on which I draw here) promotes vernacular architecture as a means by which to rebuild an implicitly monoethnic national identity in post-war Germany. While acknowledging these problems, I am also interested, along with poststructuralist critics such as Jacques Derrida and Homi Bhabha, in exploring the ways in which Heidegger's post-war phenomenological writing moves away from some of the more ethnocentric and metaphysical aspects of his earlier work, towards an acknowledgement and accommodation of heterogeneity and otherness (see Bevir 2000; Bhabha 1994; Derrida 1989, 1990).

In his 1954 lecture "Building Dwelling Thinking", Heidegger explores "dwelling" both as a noun and verb, in other words, a physical space in which to live, but also an ontological condition of being in the world or feeling at home. He probes this ontological sense of dwelling by exploring the etymology of the German word *Bauen*:

1. What then does *Bauen*, building, mean? The Old English and High German word for building, *buan*, means to dwell. This signifies: to remain, to stay in a place. The real meaning of the verb *bauen*, namely, to dwell, has been lost to us. But a covert trace of it has been preserved in the German word *Nachbar*, neighbour. The neighbour is in Old English the *neahgebur*; *neah*, near, and

gebur, dweller. The Nackbar is the *Nachgebur*, the *Nachgebauer*, the near-dweller, he who dwells nearby [...]. Where the word *bauen* still speaks in its original sense it also says *how far* the nature of dwelling reaches. That is, *bauen*, *buan*, *bhu*, *beo* are our word *bin* in the versions: *ich bin*, I am, *du bist*, you are, the imperative form *bis*, be. What then does *ich bin* mean? The old word *bauen*, to which the *bin* belongs, answers: *ich bin*, *du bist* mean: I dwell, you dwell. The way in which you are and I am, the manner in which we humans *are* on the earth, is *Buan*, dwelling. To be a human being means to be on the earth as a mortal. It means to dwell. (1971, 146-147)

Through this etymology Heidegger therefore makes a fundamental connection between ontology and the physical or built environment: building structures reinforces and bespeaks an individual's or group's way of "being-in-the-world" (and here Heidegger uses the German word "*dasein*", which literally means "being there", to refer to this modality). As he elaborates:

To say that mortals *are* is to say that *in dwelling* they persist through spaces by virtue of their stay among things and locations [...]. Man's relation to locations, and through locations to spaces, inheres in his dwelling. The relationship between man and space is none other than dwelling, strictly thought and spoken. (157)

With Heidegger's arguments in mind, it is significant that in Liang's poem, the building the children construct from the Chinese character blocks is arguably represented as a bastion of cultural conservatism, as a means of "not dwelling" or not participating fully in the host culture, but rather preserving links with the parents'

home culture. Here, the private linguistic and familial space of the home appears to exist outside or in parallel to the host culture, enforced by the mother's repeated instructions: "No talking English at home!" Within this context, dwelling and being are, at least initially, associated with the linguistic domain of the ancestral diasporic homeland.

Given Liang's blending of spatial and linguistic metaphors in the poem, it is worth noting that many (though by no means all) Chinese characters are not merely signs but ideograms: graphic representations of physical objects and spaces (see Lefebvre 1991, 152; Liu 1962). In this sense, the references to language and construction in Liang's poem point not only towards the significance of Chinese characters as foundations of classical Chinese poetry, but also to the process by which Liang is contributing to (or "building") a new poetic tradition within New Zealand's contemporary Chinese diaspora culture.

Yet this latter ambition is attenuated by the young Liang's desire to be "at home" in the host culture, a process that involves putting aside her ancestral language and adopting English in order not to appear "too Chinese" to Pākehā New Zealanders. In order to dwell alongside other New Zealanders as a "neighbour" (to invoke Heidegger's term), she points out that "English was my camouflage./As long as I wore it [...] I couldn't be too Chinese, could I?" (2007, n.p.). Such a formulation points towards the "model minority" status Chinese New Zealanders occupied through much of the 20th century.

However, the central irony of the poem is that Liang ultimately finds that her linguistic adaptability results in alienation from both Pākehā and Chinese communities: she also discovers when visiting Hong Kong, for example, that her idiosyncratically accented Cantonese immediately identifies her as an outsider: echoing the Pākehā “shop lady” at the beginning of the poem, Chinese vendors “crinkle their eyes/in a let’s-be-nice-to-aliens way” and tell her ““Your Chinese is good [...] for a foreigner”” (2007, n.p.).

As noted above, the poem therefore explores the condition of ontological instability commonly associated with the experience of postcolonial diasporic subjects (see Bhabha 1994; Clifford 1994), but it is important to recognise that the more disturbing aspects of this experience are mediated by a prevailing humour, something which also characterises other Liang poems – such as “Banana” – which similarly explore experiences of cultural alienation. This humour serves to temper the feelings of homelessness in the poem, perhaps suggesting that, conversely, the poet works from a position of relative strength by inhabiting what Homi Bhabha terms the discursive “third space” that bespeaks the hybridity of postcolonial or multicultural societies such as New Zealand’s (see Bhabha 1994).

There is, as I have suggested, another process of building at work in the poem, in which language itself constructs or creates a cultural experience that legitimises the poet’s experience as a Chinese New Zealander and therefore asserts a status and right of “being at home” in New Zealand culture, counteracting the cultural insiderism that prompts the Pākehā retailer to identify Liang as other. As Heidegger puts it: “[As] soon as man *gives thought* to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly

considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that *calls* mortals into their dwelling” (1971, 161).

In this context, the “wall” that Liang recalls constructing from the Chinese character blocks is not a barrier between cultures but rather a permeable boundary from which, as Bhabha (paraphrasing Heidegger) points out, “something begins its presencing” (1994, 5). In keeping with Bhabha’s arguments, Liang’s composition builds a new poetics of national identity, challenging the politics of polarity that motivate exclusionary models of Pākehā, or even bicultural, New Zealand national identity, instead drawing attention to the legitimate claim that multiple diasporic groups can make to the status of “New Zealander”. Liang observes in a moment of wry humour that “Maybe I should have / I AM KIWI / tattooed on my forehead”, but in the end the poem offers a more subtle contribution to the process by which, as Bhabha puts it, the “disruptive temporality of enunciation displaces the narrative of the Western nation” (1994, 54). One of Heidegger’s central points in “Language” (1959), another of his later philosophical works, is that it is language, and particularly poetic language, that allows us to construct and understand the means by which we dwell (both physically and ontologically) in the world. In other words, poetic language does not merely denote or label objects and concepts, but instead calls things into being; creative expression is therefore imaginative creation. Indeed, in his 1951 lecture on the work of German poet Friedrich Hölderlin (entitled “...Poetically Man Dwells...”), Heidegger argues that poetry is “the primal form of building” and “the authentic gauging of the dimension of dwelling” (1971, 227).

Alison Wong: unearthing the “buried” history of Chinese settlers

I want to advance these arguments on the relationship between language, being and dwelling further by exploring the work of Alison Wong (2006), a fourth-generation Chinese New Zealand poet. In particular, I consider below the ways in which Wong uses poetic language to rebuild or reconstruct cultural history or memory with specific reference to the 19th-century mining community, to which she traces her origins as a diasporic Chinese New Zealander.

I focus in particular on three poems that explore the histories of 19th-century Chinese migrants to New Zealand from an intensely personal perspective, interweaving historical and contemporary, public and private realms. All three poems appear in Wong's debut poetry collection *Cup* (2006), lamenting what Chinese New Zealand playwright and poet Lynda Chanwai-Earle has termed the "buried history" of New Zealand's Chinese community (2003, 5).⁵

Wong's poem "One hundred pounds", for example, excavates family history, reflecting on the death of Wong's great-grandfather Wong Wei Jung, who arrived in New Zealand in 1896 – the year in which the poll tax was raised to 100 pounds – and was later brutally murdered in the fruit and vegetable shop that he established in Newtown, Wellington (2006, 57, 63). The government was persuaded by the Chinese community and Consulate to offer a £100 reward for information leading to the arrest and conviction of his murderer, but the case was never solved. Though these factual details, and the history of the poll tax and other discriminatory measures taken against the Chinese, are provided in an endnote, the poem itself meditates upon the lack of tangible historical memory surrounding the dead man: the poet notes that even

amongst the family archives, there are no photographs of Wong Wei Jung, and tries to imagine what he might have looked like, but concludes that there “is nothing to see, only brazen black / letters on aged white paper: / a notice of murder / from the Minister of Justice / the reward as great / as the poll tax” (57).

The choice of the phrase “brazen black letters” is significant here, perhaps suggesting that the notice screams out the injustice of the homicide, or conversely, that the document’s stark clarity serves to dehumanise its subject, or to sidestep the fact that the murder was probably the result of racial prejudice itself fomented by the political establishment of the period. But again, as with the Chinese character building blocks in Liang’s poem, this attention to the materiality of language points towards the restorative potential of creative expression: Alison Wong’s words, too, can be considered as “brazen black letters” that reconstruct and reassert a buried history and cultural heritage. The murder of Wong’s great-grandfather took place in 1914, at a time when racist attitudes towards Chinese in New Zealand were particularly virulent, and the endnote she provides to contextualise the poem is uncompromising in itemising the various official injustices visited upon the Chinese during this period of New Zealand history. The poem underscores the bitter irony that the amount of the reward exactly matches that of the punitive poll tax (and, one might add, the ideal earnings target for many 19th-century Chinese miners), foregrounding its oppositional politics from the outset.

Two other of Wong’s poems explore the “buried history” of New Zealand’s Chinese settlers in a much more literal fashion, meditating on the landscapes of two former Chinese gold mining settlements in the South Island. As is the case with “One

hundred pounds”, these two poems also reflect on the relative effacement of Chinese migrants from official New Zealand history, as the poet’s experience of these sites is mediated through tour-guide patter and the partial traces of habitation, including ruined buildings and broken food and drinking receptacles (2006, 55-56).

The first of the poems, “Round Hill”, focuses on a Southland mining site where some 500 Chinese miners lived and worked during the 1880s in a settlement dubbed “Canton” (reflecting the origin of the majority of the miners). This was the largest of New Zealand’s Chinese mining settlements, but the poet’s experience of the history of the site is fragmentary and elliptical: traces of habitation are evident in the “broken / brandy bottles and celadon bowls” scattered around old campsites, but the poet’s identification of “stones arranged like a memorial or a grave” implies some kind of potential order within the site, as if it were possible to reconstruct a history or read a meaning into these artefacts. Again, however, the choice of the word “arranged” is significant, pointing towards the role of the poet, and the language of the poem itself, in reconstructing this buried history. The artefacts the poet sees show evidence of habitation, of dwelling, but it is the rediscovery of the site by the poet that writes the Chinese miners back into New Zealand history and transforms an ostensibly “dead” archaeological site (“a grave”) into social space (a “memorial”) and bears testament to the process of “dwelling” that Heidegger describes. (A teleology is established here, from the 19th-century Chinese settlers and sojourners to present-day Chinese New Zealanders as an established diasporic community.)

The link between dwelling and being that Heidegger outlines is explored perhaps most intensely in the final poem I want to discuss: “Chinese settlement, Arrowtown”.

The poem is dated 2002, significantly the same year in which the official government apology for the poll tax was offered, and the date is pivotal in other ways which I will outline below.

This poem explores the site of an open-air museum that documents the presence of Chinese miners who lived on the periphery of Arrowtown (in the Otago region) between the 1860s and the 1920s. The first miners arrived in the mid-1860s on the invitation of the New Zealand government, and by 1885, the settlement comprised around ten huts, a large social hall and at least two stores, incorporating a range of construction techniques including mud brick, mortared stone, wood, corrugated iron, and canvas. As Neville A. Ritchie (1993) notes, Chinese miners in New Zealand typically used construction materials obtained from the local environment, which in Arrowtown comprised mud, stone and timber (355, 367).

A focal point of the settlement was Ah Lum's store, which appears to have become the centre of social activity from 1900 after the collapse or demolition of a large social hall on the site. Title and ratebook evidence suggest the building was constructed around 1883 for a Chinese immigrant named Wong Hop, and its size, "shaped schist masonry and relative grandeur" distinguishes it from the dwellings of most 19th-century Chinese miners, and has ensured its longevity in contrast to the exclusively timber structures at Round Hill – a damp, forested environment (Ritchie 1993, 340, 355).

After Ah Lum's death in 1927, the store, an outhouse (adjoining a store owned by Ah Wak), and surrounding land at the Arrowtown settlement came into private

ownership. In 1982 the site was then purchased by the New Zealand Government's Lands and Survey Department, and designated as a "Conservation Reserve" administered by the Department of Conservation as part of the Otago Goldfields Park. During 1983-4 the Department of Conservation began restoring the site, reconstructing and renovating some of the buildings with reference to historic photographs of the area and adding noticeboards with details about the individual buildings and their inhabitants (Department of Conservation 2016).

Significantly, in the immediate aftermath of the 2002 government apology for the poll tax (see Clark 2002), dedicated government funding was used to further renovate the site, and to add new signage that included more visually arresting combinations of graphics, photos, Chinese calligraphy and text. The objective was to provide much more contextual information than was evident in the earlier signage, revealing the origins of the miners, their reasons for migration, the material conditions under which they lived, and the discrimination they suffered. The site was officially reopened by Prime Minister Helen Clark in 2004.

Alison Wong's visit to the site in 2002 seems therefore to have occurred immediately before the second phase of renovation of the area, and immediately after the official government apology for the poll tax in February 2002. Wong's poem offers an agonistic interpretation of the experience of the Arrowtown miners, focusing on the violent deaths of several members of the settlement in terms that render the agent of these events ambiguous. The speaker in the poem enigmatically reveals that three men from the settlement were "found" dead: one (Ah Gee) was "hanging"; another (Old Tom) was "burned black" and "pitched forward" in his fireplace; and the cook Kong

Kai was found drowned in a local creek – oddly, with £70 in his pocket (making both murder and suicide dubious causes for his demise). Although the local stone available to the Arrowtown miners ensured that there are more tangible signs of habitation evident on the site to this day, still Wong notes there are only “relics” of the original settlement evident here (including ruined chimneys, and depressions in the earth marking sites of original foundations), with extant buildings showing clear signs of the restoration process. Wong’s exploration of the site and its inhabitants can be analysed with reference to another point Heidegger makes in his essay about the nature of dwelling as “being-in-the-world”:

But in what does the nature of dwelling consist? Let us listen once more to what language says to us. The Old Saxon *wuon*, the Gothic *wunian* like the old word *bauen*, mean to remain, to stay in a place. But the Gothic *wunian* says more distinctly how this remaining is experienced. *Wunian* means: to be at peace, to be brought to peace, to remain in peace. The word for peace, *Friede*, means the free, *das Frye*, and *fry* means: preserved from harm and danger, preserved from something, safeguarded. (Heidegger 1971, 149)

Heidegger’s arguments here have a certain irony when considered alongside Wong’s poem. The Chinese miners were invited to the Otago Goldfields by a government keen to exploit their dogged determination to work sites abandoned by less patient miners (primarily of European origin or ancestry), but their designation as “sojourners”, and the prohibitive poll tax, sought to deny them the right to “remain” in peace and safety, to deny them a permanent diasporic “home” in New Zealand. The precariousness of this existence is accentuated by Wong’s reference to the violent

deaths suffered by several of the Arrowtown miners, and her allusion to an indeterminate human agent (or agents) experiencing “dreams” of a “foreign” white Christmas deepens the atmosphere of displacement, evoking both the “sojourner” status of the Chinese migrants within the New Zealand landscape, but also – and somewhat ironically – the European origins of New Zealand’s white settler culture. The predominantly white “host” culture is itself a former “guest” of the indigenous – and subsequently also displaced – Māori people.

The poem, as mentioned above, does not make explicit the causes of the miners’ violent deaths, but the juxtaposition of an ostensibly picturesque natural environment with the catastrophes that beset the miners creates an atmosphere of menace that “haunts” the site. The river may have claimed the body of Kong Kai, but there are other unnamed forces at work that have brought about the demise of these men – and others.

Yet as with “Round Hill”, this poem also draws attention to a living history within the site: although only “relics” remain of the original settlement, nevertheless a process of restoration and reconstruction has taken place, not just on the part of a government anxious to atone for decades of neglect and discrimination, but also on the part of the poet, who, like the unnamed woman (mentioned at the end of the poem) who has left roses in the doorways of each remaining dwelling, leaves her poem as a memorial to the miners. Unlike the roses, which will fade and die, the poem (to use a Shakespearian conceit)⁶ “breathes life” into the site and its inhabitants, revealing and retelling a “buried history” with each iteration. Enough remains, or has been restored, within the site to bear testament to the miners’ being-in-the-world in spite of the

hardships they faced. In particular, the huts and rock shelters Wong identifies are material evidence of the miners' dwelling: as French phenomenologist Gaston Bachelard points out, "all really inhabited space bears the essence of the notion of home" (1976, 5).

Bachelard also argues that "poetry puts language in a state of emergence, in which life becomes manifest" (1976, xxiii), and the poems I have discussed in this article substantiate this claim in their manifestation of a new literary consciousness attuned to the histories, origins and futures of New Zealand's Chinese community. To come back to the theme of this special issue, the Chinese diasporic poetry I have analysed explores a local history that belongs to a wider, globalised "diasporic trajectory" in which Chinese labourers, traders and farmers from the Southern coastal provinces migrated in search of gold and other economic opportunities in the 19th and early 20th centuries, forming the nucleus of diasporic communities across southeast Asia and the white settler colonies of Australasia, South Africa, and North America. Many of these "first-wave" migrants were galvanised by wars, famine and poverty in mainland China, seeking paid work in order to support their families back at home, only to encounter exploitative working conditions (including indentured labour) and racial discrimination abroad. Nevertheless, in New Zealand, as in various other "secondary cores" of Chinese migration, some of these so-called "sojourners" remained to form fledgling diasporic communities that evolved from labouring-class roots into urban "model minorities" marked by upward class mobility (Ma 2003, 8; Ip 2003, 342). Liang's and Wong's poetry laments the resurgence of anti-Asian xenophobia that followed the arrival of what Carolyn Cartier terms the "second wave" diasporans of the last quarter of the 20th century (2003, 73), but their writing is also

part of a burgeoning literary corpus documenting and celebrating the longevity and resilience of New Zealand's Chinese diasporic peoples, contributing to a critical mass of scholarship by ethnic Chinese New Zealanders that looks set to generate its own new and vibrant discursive trajectories in the future.

Notes on contributor

Michelle Keown is Professor of Pacific and Postcolonial Literature at the University of Edinburgh. She has published widely on Indigenous Pacific and Postcolonial Literature and is the author of *Postcolonial Pacific Writing* (2005) and *Pacific Islands Writing* (2007) and the co-editor of *Comparing Postcolonial Diasporas* (2010) and *Anglo-American Imperialism and the Pacific* (2018). She has recently led a UK-funded research project on arts education and the nuclear legacy in the Republic of the Marshall Islands, outputs from which include a volume of Marshallese children's poetry (*The Marshallese Arts Project*, 2018); a graphic adaptation of an antinuclear poem by Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner (*History Project: A Marshall Islands Story*, 2018), and a graphic novel (*Jerakiaarlap: A Marshall Islands Epic*, 2019).

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Notes

¹ Mainland China has never been colonised by an outside power, but following the first Opium War (1839—1842), Britain compelled China to sign the 1842 Treaty of Nanking, thereby opening the ports of Canton and Shanghai to western trade, and allowing Britain to colonise Hong Kong.

² See Fresno-Calleja (2017), Kennedy (2013), Rhoden (2012) and Yu-Ting (2019) for analyses of Wong's 2009 novel *As the Earth Turns Silver*.

³ As Ravi Palat points out, "isolated individuals" from India and China arrived in Aotearoa/New Zealand from the early 19th century, but the beginning of "large-scale" immigration from Asia dates back to the arrival of the Chinese miners (1996, 37; see also Johnson and Moloughney 2006, 3).

⁴ In addition to the poll tax, other discriminatory legislation directed only at Chinese migrants included an English-language reading test introduced in 1907; the denial of citizenship in 1908 (with the right to vote withheld until 1952); and exclusion from social welfare benefits (Ip 2003).

⁵ It is worth noting as an aside that Wong has also published a novel, *As the Earth Turns Silver* (2009), also focused on the Chinese diasporic community in New Zealand. This narrative explores the lives of two Chinese immigrants (brothers) who establish a greengrocery in Wellington in the early 1900s, thereby extending Wong's exploration of Chinese cultural history into the urbanised communities established by the early 20th century. Add novel to References

⁶ See *All's Well That Ends Well*, where Lord Lafew claims 'I have seen a medicine / That's able to breathe life into a stone' (2.i. lines 71-72). Add Shakespeare to References