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New Gold Mountain

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FILM, TELEVISION, RADIO AND THEATRE REVIEW

Q1 **New Gold Mountain**

Paul Macgregor

Dragon Tails Association Inc, Australia

New Gold Mountain, Corrie Chen, director, Peter Cox, creator, 4 × 53–55min, Screen Australia and SBS, in association with Film Victoria and Screen NSW, Goalpost Television Production, 2021.

New Gold Mountain is a 'revisionist Western' drama series, aired on SBS TV in October 2021 and currently available via SBS On Demand. Set in 1857, in the Victorian goldfields town of Ballarat, it tells a story of Chinese mining endeavour and paints this community as a central part of the gold rushes. The body of a murdered European woman is discovered, suspicion falls on the Chinese community, and simmering racial tensions come to the fore. The lead character, Leung Wei Shing, the headman of the Chinese camp, navigates through the murder investigation, keeping the white authorities at bay, yet delving within the Chinese community to uncover the circumstances of the death.

Narrative counter-currents flow through the main story. Belle Roberts creates a bilingual newspaper and cajoles Leung into supporting it with advertising from the Chinese community. The Cantonese majority have their own communal tensions with a Hakka-speaking subset. A mysterious Brotherhood runs the Chinese mining, and Cheung Lei, daughter of a Brotherhood leader in China, is sent to investigate suspicions that Leung is under-representing the yields in his reports.

Good historical fiction seduces with suspension of disbelief, and paints big picture assessments of the past. *New Gold Mountain* does this well, and advances popular understanding of the cross-cultural nuances of 1850s Victoria.

Filmed principally in Ballarat's Sovereign Hill historical theme park, the series takes advantage of the period detail which is a Sovereign Hill hallmark. Intricate attention to costume as signifiers is deftly woven into the drama. Leung wears European clothes and an iconic Akubra hat. Handsome and charismatic, a long shot of him walking through the street makes for compelling viewing and lifts his character above being representative of any specific ethnic affinity. Cheung Lei arrives wearing traditional silk gowns, and leaves at the end of the series in a strikingly red European dress, indicative of both character development and cross-cultural adaptation.

Chinese miners were a major presence in the late 1850s in Victoria, peaking at about 30 per cent of the population in some towns. Too often this has been sidelined in both scholarship and historical fiction. Many a local history hardly mentions Chinese. Geoffrey Serle and Geoffrey Blainey, exemplars of gold rush history in their time, provided a chapter at

46 most.¹ The most egregious example of white washing was the 1970s ABC TV series *Rush*.
47 Series One, set in Victoria, completely left Chinese out. Series Two, set in New South
48 Wales, had just one Chinese episode, featuring an elderly Chinese man and his young
49 daughter. The white dramas of the Eureka Rebellion and bushranger escapades continue to
50 dominate the popular imagination.

51 *New Gold Mountain* is thus a marked shift in perspective, and the creatives behind the
52 show are to be applauded for refocusing our gaze on Australia's truly multicultural past.
53 Having writer Benjamin Law as co-writer and Corrie Chen as director helps considerably.
54 As Law has stated, Chinese Australians weren't just consulted in the show's development,
55 they were full creative directors.² The story is clearly a Chinese Australian perspective, not
56 a poor white impression of Chinese Australian history. Prominent historians of the Chinese
57 Australian story were consulted in script development. Translators and language coaches
58 were used to finesse both the pronunciations of Cantonese and Hakka by the actors, few of
59 whom are fluent Cantonese speakers.

60 Is it a realistic as well as vivid portrait of its times? Yes, and no. The project leaders have
61 promoted verisimilitude as a key goal, and much of the content is apt and refreshingly
62 nuanced. That said, the script is peppered with errors, elisions, and poetic diversions from
63 historical facts. The Akubra was not invented until the twentieth century. A Chinese
64 woman would not have been sent overseas by her father to investigate a business problem.
65 Traditional religion and Christian conversion were key features of Chinese goldfields life,
66 but these are absent. Europeans were indeed invited to Chinese festivals, but pigs would
67 have been pit-oven roasted (not by spit), and lion dances would not have featured at a
68 Mid-Autumn Festival. Many of these errors and omissions would have been corrected if
69 historians were collaborators throughout the project, not just consultants.

70 The use of Cantonese is streets ahead of the US series *Deadwood*, in which Chinese char-
71 acters speak Mandarin, which virtually no Chinese would have spoken in everyday conver-
72 sation then. Cantonese also appeals strongly to the large Cantonese-speaking Australian
73 audience and their descendants who grew up using Cantonese and English. Having Chinese
74 characters flipping between Cantonese and English is a Corrie Chen masterstroke drawn
75 from her own experience of multiple language family conversations. In reality, though, the
76 majority of Ballarat's Chinese spoke another Chinese language, See Yip (a.k.a. Toisanwa),
77 which is often incorrectly portrayed as a Cantonese dialect. Cantonese and Hakka, plus
78 Hokkien and Teochew, would also have been spoken in Ballarat, but See Yip would have
79 filled the air.³ Unfortunately relatively few in Australia now, or even in Hong Kong, can
80 speak See Yip. The logistics of finding See Yip translators and coaches would have been
81 very challenging. Nevertheless, signposts to the See Yip dominance could have been prom-
82 inently placed in the dialogue.

83 A central script element proposed that Chinese-won gold would have been melted and
84 cast into domed knobs, represented as being a form of Chinese currency. This coinage is a
85 key clue in Leung's solving of the murder, but is a false premise. Nick Guoth and I have

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87 ¹Geoffrey Serle, *The Golden Age: A History of the Colony of Victoria, 1851–1861* (Melbourne: Melbourne University
88 Press, 1963); Geoffrey Blainey, *The Rush That Never Ended: A History of Australian Mining* (Melbourne: Melbourne
89 University Press, 1993).

90 ²New Gold Mountain Conversation and Q&A, online webinar, 3 November 2021, <https://www.eventbrite.com.au/e/conversation-and-qa-with-the-makers-of-new-gold-mountain-tickets-194879228017#>.

³Letterbook of Mr. William Henry Foster, Chinese Protector, Ballarat page 113, <https://prov.vic.gov.au/archive/45A28104-F3F7-11E9-AE98-BB7244122FE0?image=113>.

91 demonstrated that Chinese miners either used ‘gold dust’ or British currency, not
92 Chinese coinage.⁴

93 There was an *English and Chinese Advertiser* in Ballarat, produced by Robert Bell.⁵ His
94 daughter married the headman of Eureka Chinese village, Chin Kitt. It is not believed that
95 she was involved in the newspaper, although women editors are known from the period. It
96 is a neat piece of poetic license, though, to invert Robert Bell’s name and make the fictional
97 ‘Belle Roberts’ the editor, conveniently allowing some cultural and sexual tension between
98 Belle and Leung to ripple through the script.

99 I enjoyed *New Gold Mountain*, as much for its engaging drama and effective attempts at
100 revisionist authenticity, as also for unpicking the historical missed targets. I look forward to
101 what I would recommend as a second series, set during the Chinese Residence Tax Revolt
102 of 1859, a democratic struggle on par with the Eureka Rebellion.
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132 ⁴Nick Guoth and Paul Macgregor, ‘Getting Chinese Gold off the Victorian Goldfields’, *Chinese Southern Diaspora*
133 *Studies* (8): 2019, <http://chl.anu.edu.au/chinese-southern-diaspora-studies/chinese-southern-diaspora-studies-volume-eight-2019>.

134 ⁵Ely Finch, *A Transcription and Translation of The Chinese Advertiser, and The English and Chinese Advertiser, Including Editions 7, 8, & 20 of The Chinese Advertiser, and Editions 3, 7, 23, 58, 60, 87, & 95 of The English and Chinese Advertiser, which represent all known extant editions*, <https://www.elyfinch.com/about>.
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