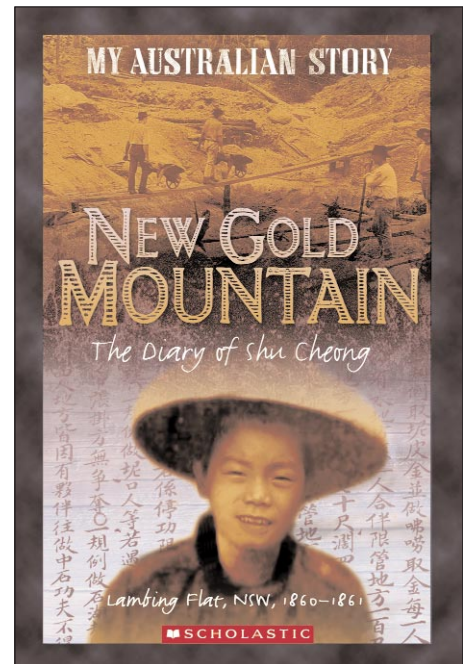


My Australian Story: New Gold Mountain

Written by Christopher W. Cheng



◀ The Back Story ▶ with Christopher W. Cheng

What drew you to write about the treatment of Chinese miners and the riots at Lambing Flat?

I've always been pretty passionate about the Chinese part of my heritage. The history of the Chinese people in Australia is badly neglected. There are lots of books about Eureka and Europeans on the goldfields, but very little on Chinese miners. The Lambing Flat riots are so interesting because there are a lot of misconceptions about them. A lot of people think that they were massacres. They weren't. The Chinese miners were treated dreadfully but the real significance of the riots was that they marked the beginning of the White Australia Policy, a policy that restricted who could come to this country until the 1970s. The history of the Chinese people in Australia, and in America, for that matter, is vitally important because they built so much of the country. They did the jobs that no-one else would, building roads and so on.

I notice that *New Gold Mountain* is the first book you have written that hasn't focused on animals. Was it difficult to make the switch to writing about human characters?

Not really. Humans are animals too. Most of the books I've had published so far have been non-fiction, but I found writing down facts and not writing stories was difficult at first. It felt natural to come back to writing fiction. I had sort of fallen into writing non-fiction books as a follow on from writing teaching resources for the zoo and later for Scholastic.

What sort of research did you have to undertake while you were writing *New Gold Mountain*?

Before I started writing the book I worked solidly on research for three months. I spent a lot of time in the State Library of NSW looking at records and references about Lambing Flat. I gathered about 400 photocopies of petitions, photos and other documents. The Bicentennial Database was especially useful. I was disappointed that although Mrs Reid's photos are mentioned several times in books and other references, none of her photos are available.

My wife and I went to Young and walked over the area where the goldfields were. A lot of it has been built over but the creek is still there. There are relics of the time still around. We went to the museum in the old school and looked at artefacts like toys that the Anglo kids made out of mud. It was good to go to Young to feel the landscape, see the vegetation, to hear the wind.

After I had completed the bulk of the research, I wrote a spreadsheet that covered two years to build up a picture of events to form the basis of the diary. As I wrote, I referred back to the folders of material I had collected. Now and then I had to stop work to do extra bits of research to fill in details.

BEHIND THE BOOK TEACHER'S NOTES

The interesting thing was that there are no Chinese children recorded at Lambing Flat and very few from this time in Australia at all. Most of the miners were indentured workers, working off debts. Their families were left at home in China. If they decided to stay they went back to get their families. I knew a lot about growing up in China, such as traditions and attitudes towards family, from my own family and my research, and I knew a lot about children in Australia at that time from my research. Shu Cheong is a sort of melding of those two experiences.

What elements of your writing style did you pay special attention to make Shu Cheong's voice seem like a Chinese boy living in the 1860s in Australia?

I didn't consciously pay attention to the way I used words as I wrote. I suppose I intuitively used the sort of language that I heard my cousins use when they were learning English. They were very precise. The sentences that Shu Cheong uses are maybe fuller and more formal than an Anglo child might have used. Uncle would have spoken and written in much the same way.

Did writing the story as a diary offer you any special challenges?

The hardest part of writing *New Gold Mountain* was the fact that it couldn't be a straight narrative: it had to be in diary form. This meant that it had to be in the first person, written in short spurts and only things that were important to the core character could be included. These factors place pretty strict limitations on plot and character. I've kept diaries on and off for years, so that helped me to write in diary-mode. The great thing about writing a diary was that I could get inside a kid's head, which was really fun.

Are many of the people who appear in the story real?

Yes, most of them are. Although there were not many literate Chinese at that time, and even fewer who could write in English, there was a handful. They wrote petitions to the government, and I took names from them. Mr McCulloch Henry and Mr Roberts were real. There isn't any information about why Mr Roberts gave the Chinese miners refuge. I like the fact that there were good people around who helped others in those times, as there are today.

Mr Woolman is a made-up character. I wanted to put him in to show the parallels to the situation in America. Having spent time working in America, I'm aware of the history of Chinese people there too. Jeremy and his family are fictitious as well.

Shu Cheong himself is named after my dad. There were virtually no Chinese boys in Australia at this time, so he is definitely made up.

What was the most enjoyable part of writing *New Gold Mountain*?

I enjoyed all of it – getting inside a kid's head, learning about history and writing a story. It gave me a much deeper understanding of being Chinese.

About the author: Christopher Cheng

My dad and his sisters and brothers were all sent out to Australia from Hong Kong to be educated. All my aunties and uncles went back. My dad returned to Australia to marry an Anglo Australian, my mum. Going to school in Australia, I was the only Asian in a big school, and I was hassled a bit. Sometimes I would go to the library – not so much

to read but to escape from troublesome kids.

I have been a primary and infants schoolteacher, and at Taronga Park Zoo I taught kids from Kindy to high school. I wrote lots of educational material for the zoo and then for an educational science CD-ROM project in America. That has led to me writing for kids generally. I love kids and kids books. When I read, it's usually a kids book.

Teaching Ideas ✓

Before Reading ✓

- Look at the cover of *New Gold Mountain*. Make a list of the different elements on the front cover, back cover and spine of the book. Beside each of them, write down what each element tells you about the story inside. Have students use this list to write a short prediction of what it will be about. Is the cover enticing? Does it make them want to find out what happens?
- Find out more about the Chinese people who came to work and settle in Australia in the nineteenth century. How many Chinese people lived in Australia at this time? Did families come out, or mostly men on their own? What sort of jobs did they do? How did they maintain their traditions? How did they get along with the other ethnic communities in Australia? Did many of them stay and establish new communities?
- Find out more about the Lambing Flat riots. What were the Lambing Flat goldfields like? Why did the European miners turn against the Chinese miners? What happened to the Chinese miners? What did the authorities do to try and stop them from being attacked? What was the result of the riots?
- Discuss why it might be interesting to see the goldfields from the point of view of a Chinese boy. How might the fact that the story is written as a diary affect the way the story unfolds?

Activity

Prepare a poster

Working in groups, have students prepare posters to display in the classroom about different aspects of the history of Chinese Australians in the nineteenth century.

During reading ✓

- Although students might prefer to read *New Gold Mountain* to themselves, they could take turns reading part of the book out loud in class. This will help them notice some of the stylistic elements of the writing.
- Discuss what features of the writing in *New Gold Mountain* stand out to the students. Which of these unusual features are because it is a diary? Which are because it is supposed to be written by a boy who is still learning English? Which are because of his cultural background? Which are because he is writing in the 1860s?
- What are the reasons that Shu Cheong gives for himself and the other miners coming to Australia?
- What reasons are given for the European miners' hostility towards the Chinese miners?
- What are some of the Chinese traditions that Shu Cheong writes about?
- What are some of the different jobs that are mentioned on the goldfields?
- How is Jeremy different to Shu Cheong? How is he similar?
- Shu Cheong is separated from his family, but they are very important to him. How do we know this?

Activities

Comparing lives

Ask students to divide a page into two columns. In one column, they can jot down things in Shu Cheong's life that are similar to their own, and in the other they can jot down the things that are different.

Timeline of a diary

New Gold Mountain covers almost a year. As they read, ask students to write down on a timeline two of the main events that occur each month. Using this timeline, students can then write a summary of the plot when they reach the end of the book.

Parallel diary

New Gold Mountain is set over one hundred and forty years ago. Life has changed a lot in that time. To help them understand just how much it has changed, students can write a diary entry for today. When they have finished writing their entry, have them look up the same date in Shu Cheong's diary and compare his life with their own.

After reading ✓

- Review the predictions students made about the story based on the cover of *New Gold Mountain*. Were their predictions accurate?
- The European miners attack the Chinese miners and try to drive them off the goldfields. Do the Commissioner and his men treat the two groups differently? Do they try to stop the attacks?
- What does Shu Cheong think of Big-Noses? What doesn't he understand about them and their ways? What do they do to make him mistrust and dislike them?
- Not all Europeans seem to hate Chinese. Note the names of those Europeans who do not hate Chinamen and how they behave towards each other.
- Talk about how everyday life is depicted on the goldfields. What jobs does Shu Cheong do that today's children do not have to do? How is Shu Cheong expected to behave towards adults? What discomforts does he have to put up with?
- Shu Cheong makes friends with Jeremy even though the two boys' communities don't approve of Chinese and Europeans mixing. Why might they feel compelled to make friends in spite of the dangers? What does their friendship give to each of them?
- In *New Gold Mountain*, there is a real sense that the miners live in a state of great uncertainty. In what ways is Shu Cheong's life unstable?
- Many people come and go on the goldfields. Have students note two people whom Shu Cheong meets who then leave. Write down what he knows about them. Does he know where they have come from, or where they are going to, or anything else about them? How is this sort of life different from the one Shu Cheong might have known in his village in China?

Activities

The miners' camp

Shu Cheong describes his tent home and the goldfields. Students could draw or paint what they think the Chinese miners' camp might have looked like.

Riot!

Write the word 'Riot!' in the centre of an A4 sheet. On long lines that radiate out from this word, have students write single words or short phrases that describes how Shu Cheong feels about each of these things: China, Baba, Uncle, gold, Big-Noses, Jeremy, his jobs.

What happens next?

In the last entry of his diary, Shu Cheong writes that he will be leaving the diary with Uncle and he has a new diary to write in. Have students write the first two entries in this new diary.

Pen friends

Many people come and go from Shu Cheong's life. Imagine that he meets Jeremy again on the road to Sydney, and Jeremy gives Shu Cheong an address. Write a letter from Shu Cheong explaining what their friendship means to him.

Literature study

The following ideas can be used to prompt class discussion about *New Gold Mountain*.

- What themes or messages do students think the author is trying to share with them? Are they relevant to any other situations that existed in Australia in the recent past? Why are these themes and messages important things to think about?
- Very few of the Chinese and European miners get along well with each other. What are the barriers in the story that stop them understanding each other?
- Why does Shu Cheong start to keep a diary? How does keeping a diary help him cope with the difficulties in his life? Do most people keep a diary for a purpose?
- Although Shu Cheong lives in a troubled time and place, his life is not all doom and gloom. What are some of the good things that he writes about? What would the story be like if the author had only focused on the bad things that were happening?
- What are some traditions and ways of referring to things and people that are uniquely Chinese in *New Gold Mountain*? How do they give the story a strong feeling of Shu Cheong's cultural background? What would the book be like if these elements had been left out?
- Shu Cheong writes about being in three places – the mining gully, the town and the bush on Mr Robert's land. Do you get a strong sense of each of these places? How has the writer given us a clear picture of each one? What difference would it make to the story if he had not paid attention to describing the locations where the story takes place, only to the people and the events?
- Does reading *New Gold Mountain* give you a strong sense of 'walking in someone else's shoes'? Why is it important for us to consider other people's experiences and points of view? How can fiction help us to understand the world we live in?
- Christopher Cheng points out that very few children came out to Australia with the Chinese miners. None are known to have been at Lambing Flat. Why do authors sometimes alter facts when they write historical fiction? Is it reasonable to change things for the purposes of storytelling?