

These are some of the questions, and my original replies (with some slight modifications), that students in Professor Jill May's 2007 class at Purdue University emailed to me.

▪ **RESEARCH:**

- *What kind of research did you have to do? What kinds of sources/media did you use to depict the interactions of the characters? How did you do your research? (Online? Books? Interviews?)*
- *How long did it take you to complete your research?*

▪ **THE HISTORY:**

- *How historically accurate is the book and your portrayal of this event?*
- *Do you feel that the prejudices of Chinese immigrants in Australia were equivalent to that of the immigrants to America during the same time period?*
- *Also, it seemed as though the book captured the Chinese mythos very accurately (festivals, religious tradition, etc.). What did you do to create the authenticity and why did you write the novel in this way?*
- *What realism was used?*
- *Why was it important to use that realism?*

▪ **FAMILY:**

- *Did you have a relative that came during the gold rush or what is your personal relationship with Lambing Flat?*
- *Is there anything that you can tell me about your Chinese and Australian ancestry?*

▪ **THE TOPIC:**

- *What made you pick to write about a boy on the goldfields of Lambing Flat?*
- *Did you already know a lot about Lambing Flat and the riots?*
- *Have you written other similar books?*
- *Why did you choose this time period, and the events that took place?*
- *Why did you write a Chinese culture based book?*
- *Did you feel the need to write the story with a feel-good ending, or melting-pot optimism for children? Or did you want to write it as the real history was, difficult?*

▪ **SHU CHEONG:**

- *What was your inspiration for Shu and why did you decide to make him a child?*

- *When writing how important is the narrative style to you, and what helps you decide the style?*
- *In your novel, we, as the reader, view the story plot through Shu Cheong's eyes, so through a Chinese point of view. Considering the background of your mother and father, do you sympathize more with the Chinese is the situation of Lambing Flat and the gold miners, or more with the Europeans, or "big-noses", as Shu refers to them?*
- **ABOUT WRITING THE BOOK AND THE READERS:**
 - *Did you think/realize that you had personal bias when writing this book?*
 - *What bias did you think your 'real reader' would have when reading this?*
 - *Who did you aim for your 'implied reader' to be?*
 - *What would you say is the reader's responsibilities during the interpretation process?*
 - *How did you want to use voice and narrative in the book in order for the reader to perceive the story as probable or realistic?*
 - *Who did you feel was your audience and how did you expect diverse readers to react differently, and interpret the story?*
 - *While writing the book how did you decide to use imagery in the text?*
 - *Was it important for you to use metaphorical language?*
 - *What kind of impact did you want the reader to have?*
 - *Why did you choose to make the format of the book a diary?*
- **OTHERS:**
 - *What did you hope to accomplish by writing this book, what message did you hope to convey to your readers?*
 - *What idea did you have in mind while writing Shu Cheong's entries into his diary that would portray realism throughout out the book to readers?*
 - *What shaped thoughts and influences while writing the book?*
 - *Are Australian children were taught about the Chinese experience on Lambing Flat and other places in Australia during this time period?*
 - *What made you write it? Why did you go from writing various books on environment and animal life, to such a historical/ realistic novel?*

RESEARCH:

What kind of research did you have to do? What kinds of sources/media did you use to depict the interactions of the characters? How did you do your research? (Online? Books? Interviews?)

I did a HUGE amount of research. I spent three months researching the title buried in state library here in Sydney - the oldest library in Australia. I dug through files and files of papers, original government documents, and the letters and petitions written by the miners and other settlers.

I immersed myself in anything that was from the period. I also read the newspapers from that day printed in Sydney that reported the riots and also the local newspaper printed in towns nearby. I read lots of newspapers both English and Chinese (although I read the translated version of the Chinese paper) and local papers too from the era. I checked out some of our museums and talked to some Chinese history experts too. In the process I uncovered some facts about the riots that were misreported and are often quoted in books and articles. I guess that shows the importance of using primary sources.

I also made a trip down to the goldfield (6 hours away from my place) and stood exactly where the riots took place and where the Chinese miners were attacked. In the Lambing Flat Museum there I stood in front of the 'roll-up' banner ... it still has the blood marks where the Chinese miners' queues were hung. The town (Young) is now a cherry growing town. Gold soon petered out as it did over much of Australia after the discoveries were made and the gold mined.

I have archive boxes of researched material - photocopies and my notes.

How long did it take you to complete your research?

Probably 3 -4 months

THE HISTORY:

How historically accurate is the book and your portrayal of this event?

As for the history, this is historical fiction --- it is based on fact and it is extremely accurate. The name Shu Cheong is made up (as is the name Mr Woolman) but all the other names are from people who were actually on the goldfield. Of course this is fiction and the other made up fact is Shu Cheong himself - there were *no* boys on record at this goldfield ... Chinese boys did not travel to the goldfield - they were born here but did not travel from China (usually ... there may have been a few exceptions). Other than that ... the actual dates that the riots occur, the character names, the things they did, the description of the place and the various camps, the weather (I even have information of the weather on this goldfield for each day that I obtained from the newspapers and other incidental notes), the way the miners were treated, the reports that were written, the marching into camp from Sydney town of the army ... all of these things are real!!!! This book is as real as a fiction title can be.

Do you feel that the prejudices of Chinese immigrants in Australia were equivalent to that of the immigrants to America during the same time period?

ABSOLUTELY. What happened to the Chinese on the Australian goldfields also happened on the American goldfields (as far as I can ascertain). In fact the gold explosion on our fields was only a few years after those in America. Chinese people from the same region in China were on both fields so the same customs and practices would have been observed. And the Chinese on the American goldfields were victimised like ours. The treatment of the miners and what happened was very, very similar. That was one reason why I wrote an American character Mr Wilson, into the book too.

It seemed as though the book captured the Chinese mythos very accurately (like festivals, religious traditions). What did you do to create the authenticity and why did you write the novel this way?

As for the Chinese 'way of life' I guess that was just part of me, seeing as though I am half Chinese. I do know a lot about Chinese culture being a frequent visitor and having been taught the 'right' way - the Chinese ways of doing things, filial respect, duty etc, so I am sure that I have written the things that I know and the things that have been told to me. Chinese culture goes back thousands of years. Many things have barely changed. I wrote the novel in this way, the diary format, because this is an already existing series and so the way it was formatted. I would have liked to write this as a narrative – there is so much more of the 'story' to tell. And growing up as a western kid with a part Asian influence has been really interesting. Now I am more involved in my Asian roots and adore finding out so much about the culture and things that have happened to the Chinese people. Researching this book I uncovered information (some cultural some historical) that I did not know ... still learning!

What realism was used?

I hope the reader can picture the goldfields as I saw it ... not only when I was down there 150 years later but also as I saw it in my mind - as a fiction writer I have also taken the image of that goldfield as I remembered it today in the 21st century with the words that I have read about that goldfield ... and then interpreted it my way. Also I tried to include words and artefacts that would have been part of the existence down there.

Why was it important to use that realism?

Because they were all part of the life there and the reader needs to 'experience' that. Some of the Chinese words that I used I hope added to the 'chineseness' of the book. Hopefully too the cultural aspects of the Chinese that I wrote are envisaged by the reader. The ginger jars, Shu Cheong's queue, the layout of the tent, the cultural

practices, they are real. This is an Australian goldfield. It is VERY similar to what would have been experienced on the American goldfields, the same cultural practices and sayings were there.

FAMILY:

Did you have a relative that came during the gold rush or what is your personal relationship with Lambing Flat?

This book is a voice for our Australian Chinese kids too ... they are grabbing the book and saying that this is a book about them, even though many of them are new immigrants and like me never had relatives on the goldfields. Even though I am half Chinese I am very, very Anglo ...well at least half of me is anyway!

Is there anything that you can tell me about your Chinese and Australian ancestry?

My ancestry, I am half Chinese, my father came out from Hong Kong (which was then NOT a part of China but a British colony) to study here in Australia like most of his sisters, brothers and many of his cousins. He was the only one who did not return to Hong Kong. My mother was born here in Australia and is of European ancestry (British and German)

THE TOPIC:

What made you pick to write about a boy on the goldfields of Lambing Flat?

I was privileged to be asked by my publisher to write the book. The diary style format was already established. But it is interesting ... because of my Chinese heritage my publisher actually wondered whether I would be too close to the subject. "Not likely", I said to her. I would be the best person to write it. I had the culture that I could bring to the novel.

As for the event itself the riots were quite dramatic which I hope I have portrayed in the book. Most kids in Australia do not know about this event so that alone was well worth telling. I don't ever remember talking about it in lessons at school yet it is a pivotal role in Australia's development as a nation.

Did you already know a lot about Lambing Flat and the riots?

I knew very little about the riots themselves. I knew that the Chinese were treated shockingly but it is not something that we were taught growing up in the Australian school system. It is an incident that is pivotal to the development of Australia as a nation yet so little was written about it and certainly hardly anything at all in children's fiction.

Have you written other similar books?

I have just completed another title in the series - this time on the Immigration Restriction Act (a hideous piece of legislation that is thankfully now abolished) again with the focal characters being of Chinese heritage. And a very different title but again a Chinese boy in gold rush days.

Why did you choose this time period, and the events that took place?

Initially I was asked about one riot; my publishers did not know the extent of this historical incident. I expect that they thought it would be good to write about some Chinese history! In fact there were three mini riots that lead up to the final riot at the end of the book.

Why did you write a Chinese culture based book?

My father did not come out here during the gold rush but I do know a lot about that time and I certainly have always had more than a passing interest in Chinese culture. And the gold rush in Australia like elsewhere was filled with Chinese immigrants.

Did you feel the need to write the story with a feel-good ending, or melting-pot optimism for children? Or did you want to write it as the real history was, difficult?

New Gold Mountain is history as it happened on the Lambing Flats goldfield. The events and what happened to the characters actually happened ALTHOUGH Shu Cheong is a fictional character, there were no boys on this goldfield who came from China at the time but what happened on the field was certainly very real. And real history can be difficult ... there are some distressing times in our historical past.

SHU CHEONG:

What was your inspiration for Shu and why did you decide to make him a child?

The character is Shu Cheong. He is a fictional. He is my creation. He is a composite of what I imagine a Chinese boy would endure ... based on my cultural heritage (being half Chinese) and what I know happened to kids around that time. My knowledge of Chinese culture helped enormously ... I could have been the boy.

And I should say too that I write for me so I am glad that you were able to "know" Shu Cheong. I used my father's name (even though the character is not him) I needed a name that I could feel attached too and none is better than my fathers name ... except maybe mine.

When writing how important is the narrative style to you, and what helps you decide the style?

I have to know the character - and so the culture as well. I know a little how new immigrants are treated and behave, although I was born here and 100 years later than the setting of my novel. I have to be true to what I think the character would be like, how he would speak, how he would behave. I have to be that boy ... at least when I write fiction I try and *be* my characters so that I am then writing about me as I imagine I would be.

In your novel, we, as the reader, view the story plot through Shu Cheong's eyes, so through a Chinese point of view. Considering the background of your mother and father, do you sympathize more with the Chinese is the situation of Lambing Flat and the gold miners, or more with the Europeans, or "big-noses", as Shu refers to them?

Oh I definitely felt for the Chinese (and I hope that came out in the novel) ... maybe too it is because my mother's family were not involved in the goldmining, as far as we know, so that means that that side of my family couldn't have been part of these horrific events. As I researched further I felt more and more upset at what happened to the Chinese people. Many people in Australia do not know about this side of Australian history and how important the Chinese people were to establishing this country as a modern nation. They also don't know about the impact of immigration and the 'white' attitude and what that did to the Chinese people. Hopefully my new book "**the Melting Pot** ([link](#))" will shed some light on this!

ABOUT WRITING THE BOOK AND THE READERS:

Did you think/realize that you had personal bias when writing this book?

Personal bias, not really, ALTHOUGH, I did think that there would be no one better in Australia to write it as I have Chinese heritage - of course as I got into the book I did think that my heritage might have influenced a little of what I was writing.

I did consider whilst I was writing the book that unless someone had more than just a passing level of exposure to the Chinese culture (that most western writers are exposed to) they would not have understood the thinking and the reasonings behind some of the occasions and the happenings that I wrote in to the title. People certainly could have researched (as I did) and found out the facts but it is the culture and the particular nuances that the Chinese experience that I hope I added, even though I was brought up in a very western family, we did not even speak Chinese at home, but the culture was there.

What bias did you think your 'real reader' would have when reading this?

The real readers of my book, that is surprising me. Here in Australia I am having stacks of Chinese kids coming up to me when I visits schools who have read my book and saying that I am writing about them ... not them in the 1860s but as a Chinese character

... I am writing a book for them that is at least about their culture, that they can identify with. That has surprised me the most. And that is great.

And bias for the 'real reader'. Our kids know OF the gold rush time and what happened during the gold rush here and that there were Chinese here in Australia but they do not know how integral the Chinese people were to the establishment of the successful industry ... and I know that the kids today don't know of the hatred that was shown towards the Chinese. So the kids reading it will know of the gold rush and yes there were Chinese here and yes they mined gold and yes there were squabbles, but I expect that their realisations of the fights were not of the intensity that they really were. Nor in fact that the Chinese were involved in any of the fights as a race fight rather than a squabble over the gold.

Who did you aim for your 'implied reader' to be?

Every reader in Australia (and elsewhere too) should see how the Chinese people were so vital to the establishment of the gold industry. But I guess also me ... I write the books I want to read too (at least in the fiction side of things). I never thought that this book would be one that the Chinese kids would identify with specifically.

What would you say is the reader's responsibilities during the interpretation process?

To place themselves in the central characters shoes ... as if they are the character.

How did you want to use voice and narrative in the book in order for the reader to perceive the story as probable or realistic?

I hope you see this as probable or realistic. That is why the character's voice is interspersed with the specific languages styles that would have been part of the day. It is vitally important for the reader to hear Shu Cheong speaking in that way ... although to write exactly what he would speak may be incomprehensible to readers today so as a writer I had to create that balance.

Who did you feel was your audience and how did you expect diverse readers to react differently, and interpret the story?

I knew who my audience would be as the series is designated for a specific age range, similar to the series in America. I did not though expect Chinese children' here ... especially boys to react in such the positive way they have ... this is a book for them.

While writing the book how did you decide to use imagery in the text?

Was it important for you to use metaphorical language?

Imagery was vitally important in this book. I had to make you, the reader, see exactly what was in my head. I knew what the lambing flat goldfield looked like ... I had done

so much research and it was crystal clear in my head. I hope I made it that way for you too, seeing how the tents were laid out and what was inside them, say at the festival times etc. although there is a HUGE limitation in this style of writing - diary first person - it is not always possible for the writer to write what the focal character would be seeing when the focal character is writing a diary because some of that material just would be written - colour of the soil and the trees, there are some things that I diary form just are not written ... which would be different were it a complete narrative. And yes to the metaphorical language -- that would also have been part of the characters' life and communication.

What kind of impact did you want the reader to have?

That the reader (you) would want to know more about Shu Cheong and his life, and that life here at that time was difficult (similar to the time in the USA and the gold rush there), but that it had its own wonderful ways too, like the family relationships that Shu Cheong established with Uncle, and the cultural friendship that Shu Cheong developed too with Jeremy.

Why did you choose to make the format of the book a diary?

This was established by the publishers. There is so much more to tell of this story. The outline also stipulates the character's age and page length (although I stretched that).

OTHERS:

What did you hope to accomplish by writing this book, what message did you hope to convey to your readers?

Simply to write a really good story that people (kids and adults) can't put down and that they will say "Wow. Did that really happen? Could it be true?" And one of the side benefits that have come from this title is that the Chinese kids in schools here have a title that they can identify with. They love it!

As for the message ... I don't deliberately set out to write a message but I hope that in a book like this (and in my picture book *One child* [\(link\)](#) published a few years earlier) that it will cause people to stop and think about themselves and what their impact is on those around them.

What idea did you have in mind while writing Shu Cheong's entries into his diary that would portray realism throughout the book to readers?

For me it was placing the very particular Chinese cultural aspects that I know through my family, like the words that he spoke, the way of saying things and how the words are spoken. I have relatives with English language abilities that range from very broken

to absolutely Aussie like me, or my dad who even though he has been in Australia for most of his life sometimes still has some very particular Chinese sounds coming out.

Also the items that were with Shu Cheong; the games they played, the mining tools and writing implements he used, and the ginger jars, they were all part of life on the goldfields for some of the Chinese. Having seen the jars and other items I tried to make sure I was planting in the readers head exactly what I was seeing. And of course the queue was vitally important – I have one of sorts too (a little longer maybe).

And especially with the **Roll-Up** banner ([link to photo](#)) - that is something very special and when I went down to the sites of the riots (about 6 hours out of Sydney where I live) I spent ages at the museum standing in front of the banner. It is mounted in a display case behind Perspex. I just stood there and looked. I looked for all that I could find, especially the blood marks and the cuts in the banner where queues were attached. Had I NOT been writing a children's book I expect that the descriptions would have been even more detailed, but I hope the reader grabbed the idea of the trauma and hatred associated with what I saw.

While I was down at Young (which is now the name of the town that was the Lambing Flat) I stood on the place where the **Riot Act** ([link](#)) was read. I stood actually on the ground where the riots took place, where the Chinese miners were, and hopefully my descriptions of the landscape demonstrate that. Of course being a diary in first person, description is limited and so had the narrative been in another form it would have been more detailed I expect. I also had the weather details for the days from the wether bureau, I read the papers that were printed at the time, basically I tried to immerse myself in the time!

I guess the essential thing that probably any writer would do is – I was trying to place the reader right there at the time.

What shaped thoughts and influences while writing the book?

I guess that my heritage, I am half Chinese, has a lot to do with the book. Of course I wasn't around during the riots, nor were any of my relos, but I do know about the incident and I know a LOT about the Chinese culture and the treatment of Chinese in Australia.

And I guess as an author there are little bits of me in the novel (I think many of us write a little of ourselves into every fiction work). Certainly I can reflect on some of the happenings to Shu Cheong and even though they might not have happened to me the feelings of a similar incident that happened to me at school could very well be present. I don't consciously try to include me in the novels I write, but I do think that is what I do. I don't set out to write about being isolated in a community but it has happened.

Of course I wasn't around during this period of the novel's setting (it was 100 years too early) but I do know much about the time period and what happened, research is a wonderful thing. But some things are not possible to research, personalities and feelings

and culture. They might be there in written word but the internal feelings and emotions and the cultural identity are part of the writer, well at least for me with this one.

Of course I knew a lot about the Chinese culture and that is what I could especially bring to the book, that maybe other writers could not.

Are Australian children were taught about the Chinese experience on Lambing Flat and other places in Australia during this time period?

Alas, not as much as I would like. There is mention to the goldfields and the riots (there were riots on other goldfields too that were directed towards the Chinese). Thankfully that is changing. There is a new push in Australia to reinvigorate Australian history.

What made you write it? Why did you go from writing various books on environment and animal life, to such a historical/ realistic novel?

It is just great to be able to write across many different genres. Up to now I only had published animal/environmental titles ... even though I have been writing other material.