“Sure I can do it. Easy,” I said.

“No worries,” I said. These were my answers when my editor asked me if I would like to write a historical fiction novel in diary form on a poignant slice of Australian history. Little did I know that it would result in three books of historical fiction that focus on Chinese culture and gold mining in Australia. And I didn’t expect to become so completely engrossed and thrilled with the learning experience either. The biggest problem for me, at first, was that I hated history at school. Discovering dead Pharaohs in tombs, or trying to decide what caused the great World Wars or the colonial battles, or examining the lives and times of obscure monarchs from the other side of the world did not interest me. I did enjoy some bits and pieces about Australia, my birth country, but not enough to devote study time at high school to the subject. Of course, we studied Australian history when I was at primary school, but there we had textbooks that provided answers to the questions they posed—more like a comprehension test than an unraveling narrative of history. History to me was dead.

So why then would I want to write a historical fiction title? The reasons were, quite simply, I wanted to write a fiction piece (for years I had been successfully writing non-fiction) and it was about Chinese history—the culture of my father.

“Of course I am the person to write the story,” I told my editor. Not only did I know about the Chinese miners, but I also had an added insight about Chinese nuances and cultural mores that other Australian children’s writers without my cultural link might not have. So it was easy—or so I thought. I already knew much about the Chinese influence on the modern development of Australia from general reading at school and family interest, but after time spent on research, I discovered so much more.

To create my first title I spent three months living and breathing Chinese information. I spent many weeks living in the Sydney’s Mitchell Library uncovering documents and papers, private and official, that mentioned the Lambing Flat riots. I viewed pages and pages of microfiche of the newspapers of the day—both national and the locals. I read accounts that miners, both Big-noses and Chinese, had written to politicians, to newspapers, and to kinsmen far and wide, trying to convince them that their opinions were the ones that really mattered: that Chinamen with their strange ways were a blight on white culture, or that the Big-noses were violent and had no respect for anyone else. My wife
Writing Historical Fiction

and I drove down to Lambing Flat, now the city of Young, and I sat in the gold fields where the Chinese miners worked in the field that was allocated to them—the Blackguard Gully, where the riots really happened. I stood and imagined the tents and camps and gold pans and fights. I contacted museums and societies here and in Hong Kong—any organization that might have information about the Chinese miners and the riots. I read and read and read. My archive boxes are filled with bound books of information sourced from the Web and copied documents. My notebooks used to record notes when I was in the library are filled with notations from the sources. I learned more about the Chinese in Australia that I ever thought I would. And I kept a database of the books, websites, letters, petitions, and newspaper clippings I viewed, including over a thousand references. I came to love learning about history.

As a result, when it came time to write my historical fiction piece, the words simply flowed out. Three months of research not only brought me a wealth of information but it also developed my novel’s main character, Shu Cheong. I wrote far too much, but for me the story, the riots, the treatment of the Chinese—it was a story that had to be told. And it all seemed so very real to me.

Once I had finished the first novel, I advised my editor that my upcoming work would naturally flow into the end result of the riots, which was the implementation of the Immigration Restriction Act, commonly known as the White Australia Policy. This policy refused people entry into Australia—initially the Chinese—because of their nationality, an all too familiar story. It was actually the seventeenth act of the newly federated parliament of Australia, passed early last century.

So the next novel was created through a huge amount of research, much of it at the City of Sydney archives. I have a copy of a map of 1910 Sydney that shows every building, with the names of the resident traders, along George Street, the city’s main street. Currently it sits tacked to my wardrobe door. I have highlighted all the wonderful Chinese traders with little blobs of putty adhesive. I resist pulling it down because it is so real to me—I know those buildings and the traders there and I can visualize my character, Chek Chee, in his father’s store.

I also spent a week or more sifting though boxes and boxes of immigration documents at the National Archives Office in Sydney. Imagine being able to look at the very first immigration papers with original unfaded inks and stamps, with black and white photos on thick paper and all sorts of embellishments. I could never have imagined doing this. And these fascinating public records are accessible to anyone. There are names written in a very poor Chinese interpretation of English script; and some signified their names with handprints or thumbprints. There are the notes of identification and other comments written by officials. There are accession marks, and finally, there is the smell. I could smell the glue that attached those photos to the forms 100 years later.

I found my character buried there in one of the boxes: I felt she (who became a he)
jumped out and spoke to me, and I fleshed out my character with bits and pieces from all the other people that were processed through the centers. I gleaned information about sailing ships and the berthing at the stations, and about the clothes and the heights of people and what the inspectors thought of the Chinese—their comments were often unkind. I gathered details about the hand stamps, used for identification, of the children who were traveling to China and then returning. There seemed to be an expectation that the children’s hands would be the same size, or the children the same height, when they returned a year later. This type of information was uncovered in the archives and in some of the personal letters that I was able to read.

For all of this data, I am indebted to the librarians who found the books and the documents and the maps and who willingly helped me. Some of the librarians were so used to me arriving in the Mitchell at 10 in the morning that they even had books waiting for me to discover.

And then there were the sayings of the Chinese people. Many of the words have changed a great deal since that era, but I have heard versions of these words from my Chinese relatives. I learned how the Chinese people I have studied communicated and about their many traditions, ceremonies, beliefs, skills, and the “Chinese way” of doing things.

In 2006 came the request from the Australian National Museum: "Your books are powerful. We would like you to write about the Chinese on the gold field. Here are some thoughts...." I could never have imagined writing for the Museum—I thought writing for Sydney’s Taronga Zoo was an honor.

Imagine going to the Museum, not the public access area that the general population visit but the warehouse where more than 90% of its historical artifacts are stored. Imagine holding the actual basket (wearing blue latex gloves, of course) from a gold field that an unknown Chinese person used. What an experience. There were other artifacts that I could have written about—indenture certificates, coins, Chinese tablets, and scrolls—but it was the basket that called out to me. I left the warehouse knowing straight away what I would write: It felt so natural to write about a boy, sewing, and a basket.

Research was required to build a story around the artifact I saw. Who owned the basket? What task was this basket used for? Where did the person live? How old is the basket? Where were the tassels and coins and beads that adorn the basket from?—and many other questions that helped me create a plausible character. I chatted to curators. They are the principle sources for finding out about museum artifacts; they know the provenance and the specifics of time and place. They are wonderful people and fantastic historians with encyclopedic knowledge; and if they don’t have an answer for you they know where to find the information. They were wonderfully patient in answering question after question from me.

My biggest concerns through the creation of all of these titles were: How do I do the research? How do I find out the history? What is the way to go? Basically, how do you
research history? Of course, I didn’t wait for someone to tell me how to do research. I developed my own process with copious notes, using many references sourced from the Web, the books, the transcribed spoken records, and the official documents and then comparing what I had uncovered, in much the same way we teach the kids at school to do their research. I did lots of cross-referencing and checking and I even discovered some incorrect but well-published information.

Later on, when I told a friend, a highly respected American history professor, that I didn’t know how to undertake the research and was still wondering after publication whether I had done it correctly, he said that my process and developing my own methods was just right—I had done what a good historian does.

Are there are bits and pieces of me scattered through these books? Seeing that I have so much of the culture at hand, there has to be. The culture and the history has been so much a part of me.

What I write is historical fiction. The book is based on fact: The incident really happened or the object does exist; the clothes were worn, the language was spoken, the settings of the streets or the gullies or the carts or the visiting Chinese opera troupe—these were all real and part of the life of the Chinese people in Australia. Of course, it is also fiction, and it is my task as a fiction author to create a plausible and authentic story based on an amalgamation of the facts. If these weren’t fictionalized, I would be writing a narrative non-fiction title or simply an information book.

Will I write another historical fiction title? I hope so at some stage—there is so much to tell on the history of the Chinese in Australia. I have become a historian and I love history, at least the Chinese Australian side of history!

Historical fiction books by Christopher Cheng:

For a full list of Christopher Cheng’s published works and more information on the author, visit <www.chrischeng.com>.