

NEW GOLD MOUNTAIN

Cheng, Christopher. *New Gold Mountain: The Diary of Shu Cheong*.
Australia: Scholastic Press, 2005.

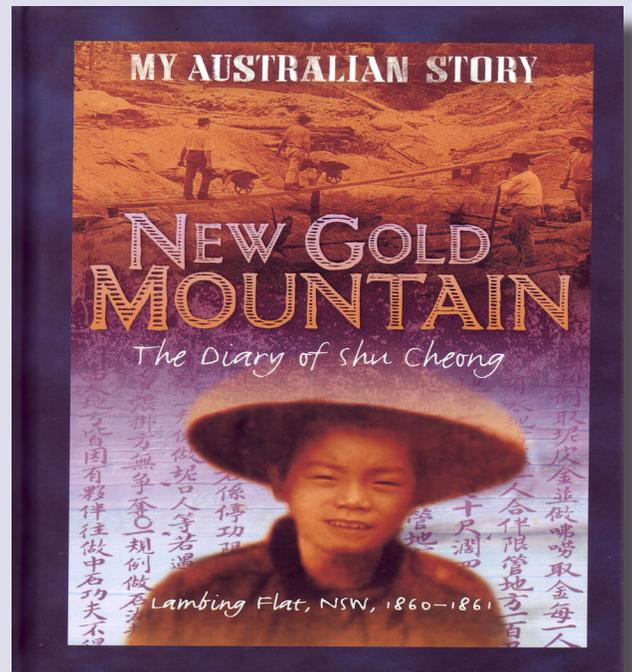
FIRST OPINION

International Perspectives in *New Gold Mountain*

Jiening Ruan, University of Oklahoma

New Gold Mountain brings to mind other literature written about the Chinese experience in America during the Gold Rush era. Finding international literature on similar experiences is valuable because it helps the reader examine, understand, and value the human experience in other lands. This allows us to compare and contrast what we know about ourselves and others, and, as a result, broaden our perspectives. While there is abundant literature about the experiences of Chinese gold miners in California in the nineteenth-century Gold Rush era, I had never seen a book on the Australian gold rush prior to reading Christopher Cheng's *New Gold Mountain*. I was not aware that many Chinese also traveled to Australia in search of gold, bearing similar hopes and dreams of prosperity. The events described in *New Gold Mountain*, though set in Australia, shockingly parallel episodes that happened in the United States in the nineteenth century. Cheng voices similar emotions and historical events in an authentic historical fiction narrative.

It is important to understand the background of Chinese migration to foreign countries in the nineteenth century. At that time, China was a weak and poor country, heavily influenced by continuous foreign invasions, colonization, and natural disasters. Many people left China and risked their lives in pursuit of prosperity, believing one day they would return home to share their newfound prosperity with their family and kinsmen. It is also necessary that Cheng's readers understand the concept of filial responsibility within Chinese culture. Respecting parents and worshipping ancestors is a highly regarded virtue among the Chinese, as is repeatedly emphasized by Uncle in his conversations with Shu Cheong. Therefore, bringing his Baba's bones,



which symbolized his Baba's spirit, back to his homeland and reuniting him with his ancestors would be considered Shu Cheong's most important filial responsibility.

A major strength of Cheng's narrative style is his ability to effectively entwine background historical information and daily events into a child's diary. Through the eyes of Shu Cheong, a young Chinese boy, readers see many of the horrific events of hatred and persecution faced by the Chinese miners. The diary entries construct a vivid picture of the experiences of the Chinese, their fears, hopes, and determination to overcome all obstacles in order to thrive. It also contains the message that friendship can triumph over bigotry, intolerance, and hatred despite people's cultural and racial differences. The friendship depicted between Shu Cheong and Jeremy, a white miner's son, gives readers hope that people from different cultural backgrounds can learn to accept and appreciate one another's differences and live in peace. Still, Cheng's style can be a weakness for some readers because the plot is implied through a boy's candid observations and continual questions within a diary format.

Most readers will find the theme of friendship and the stark portrayal of historical events compelling. Teachers could use this historical fiction narrative in social studies topics when covering ideas about universal racism and the persecution of those who are different in their religious and cultural beliefs.

SECOND REACTION

Middle School Learners' Response

*Lois M. Campbell, Teacher, St. James Lutheran Church
and School, Lafayette, IN*

Set in Lambing Flat, New South Wales in the early 1860s, this historical fiction story provides readers with a view of Australia not often considered by students, particularly in the United States. Though U.S. students may have an understanding of the treatment of the Asian people in the United States during the Gold Rush in California, few may realize the extent of the similar treatment of the Chinese immigrants in Australia during the same time period.

Writing in diary format, similar to other texts in the American Scholastic historical diary series, Cheng talks to his reader through the thoughts of a young boy—separated from his family in China—who has recently lost his father and uncle to death in the Australian mining camps. Cheng creates a vivid picture of the cultural traditions found in both the Chinese and White encampments. Readers “hear the voices” of the elders as they encourage and direct the diarist Shu Cheong through his struggles with what it means to be Chinese in this land far from his native homeland.

When shared with students of a similar age as a read aloud and in support of a theme on the Silk Road, middle school students expressed their surprise at how the Chinese workers were

treated during this time period. Familiar with the treatment of African Americans and Asian peoples in the history of the United States, they were struck by similarities with Shu Cheong's family and coworkers' experiences. These youngsters' understanding of universal social struggles had mostly been limited to their understandings of U.S. history and had not been translated to unfamiliar cultures and time periods.

Of special interest in Cheng's presentation is Shu Cheong's development as a writer—through his use of a journal provided by his “uncle”—and his growing understanding of linguistics as he struggles with English-Chinese translations. The Chinese language utilizes characters for text, so Shu Cheong is challenged to use “many English words” when he knows a simple Chinese character that conveys the meaning so well. Young authors will perhaps face similar challenges as they attempt to translate their thoughts into written expression, particularly at the middle school level. As a practitioner, I see using this text in a cross-curricular context for social studies, current events and writing, meaningful for the middle school learner and providing a stark historical view of past racial injustices beyond American boundaries while exposing the universal struggles of a fledgling author.