

## *Aiiiiiiiii! And I*

*By Bryan Thao Worra*

As I often write, when I grew up in 1980s America after the Laotian Secret War, I didn't have many books about a homeland I left as an infant. Adoption by an American pilot left me in an unusual position when it came to understanding my identity and experience. There were few Asian Americans in schools I attended, especially in Michigan in the shadow of the Motor City.

My family, well-intentioned as they were, kept placing me in small Christian schools, for all of the good that did later. They were at a loss to explain to me what happened with the murder of Vincent Chin, or indeed, many of the other incidents that came with Michigan trying to understand the success of Japan competing in the auto industry. People around me believed you could learn what you needed to know by reading *The Art of War* by the Chinese general Sun Tzu or Miyamoto Musashi's *Book of Five Rings*. We were flooded with any number of would-be experts like Michael "Jurassic Park" Crichton's thriller *Rising Sun* or James Clavell's *Shogun*. Amy Tan's literary journey was only just starting at the time, and everyone was raving about Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor*. Larry Hama's run on *G.I. Joe* and Stan Sakai's *Usagi Yojimbo* were some of the only examples of Asian American writing I honestly had regular access to as a teenager, and, at the time, I didn't really appreciate the significance of this.

Of course, the literary legacy of *Aiiiiiiiii!* is uncontestable, but as I reflect on its personal meaning to me, I think of it as one of those anthologies that has bobbed through my life a bit more peculiarly than most, being a collection almost as old as I am.

*Aiiiiiiiii! An Anthology of Asian American Writers* came out in 1974, and in Ann Arbor it wasn't a book that found its way into the used bookstores with any regularity or significant quantities. If someone bought it, apparently they kept it, parting with it only under the most extreme circumstances. In the age before the internet, it wasn't something most of the people around me even knew you could look for or request, even in the libraries.

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Still, the very first time I glimpsed it, with its classic Bruce Lee-esque cover, was in August, 1990 in Ann Arbor. This moment has always stuck with me. I spotted it in the now-closed second-floor used bookstore, David's Books, on State Street, around 6PM. This may seem like a tremendously precise time to recall, but it was memorable because I was a junior in high school hanging out with my friends, who were all white, at the end of summer vacation. Our habit was to hang out in the many bookstores, comic shops, and Pinball Pete's each day, returning home around 7, just in time to catch the endless *M.A.S.H.* reruns and various sitcoms of the '80s in that part of the Midwest. *Aiiiiiii!* caught my eye because it was being shelved in the Asian section of the bookstore, and I'd never seen a book like that. I was about to buy it on the spot with a meager student's budget, but my friends told me to put it down. "That looks so racist and full of stereotypes!" they warned me in their well-intentioned way, without even looking at the contents, and we had places to be. Today, the irony of it all does not escape me.

A few months later, I lost one of my only Southeast Asian classmates to depression and suicide, an incident that took me decades to understand and make peace with. In college, I was taken by a teacher with several other classmates to see the *Joy Luck Club* in the theater in 1993. This was back in the day in Columbus, Ohio and *A. Magazine* was in its heyday. Someone made mention of *Aiiiiiii!* as a classic and that it had a sequel, but Columbus, Ohio wasn't much better at stocking Asian American literature than Michigan was at the time. I remember being a little resentful that people had better ways of finding out about great books than I did.

I didn't actually get to hold a copy of *Aiiiiiii!* until 1998, approximately the same time I'd begun to work with Asian Media Access in Minnesota, which was trying to raise the bar on Asian representation and access to media production in the Midwest through film festivals, television, and media arts. And, at long last, I had a chance to look through *Aiiiiiii!* and see what was inside, to find, at least as far as a Lao experience went: Nothing. Not a single story from a Lao writer.

But I got it. I understood that back in 1974, this was a radical act to even be printed at all, and there were no Lao Americans we knew of who were old enough or who wrote well enough that they would have been likely to have been included in the anthology. Looking through *Charlie Chan is Dead*, or *The Big Aiiiiiii!* and every other anthology at the time I could find, even *On a Bed of Rice: an Asian American Erotic Feast*, our absence was consistent.

The friend showing it to me had lost too many books already loaning them out to others to read, so I didn't get a chance to spend more than a few minutes looking at *Aiiiiiii!* but I was at once disheartened and left with an understanding of what was possible. When New Rivers Press came out with their 2000 anthology, *Tilting the Continent: Southeast Asian American Writing*, even though I was not accepted, I looked

forward to seeing the Lao writers who were. While this collection had Hmong writers, at least, Lao were once again excluded. So it goes.

Eventually, I met Shawn Wong and Frank Chin in person. Shawn Wong I met in 2004 in New York with the release of Jessica Hagedorn's *Charlie Chan Is Dead 2: At Home in the World*, Frank Chin I met in 2006 at Macalester College, and surprisingly, we got along well enough. I'd learned of his work to try and help emerging Hmong and Lao to consider being writers, although I'm not sure how many of them went on to do so. Still, Frank Chin's blunt and opinionated ideas left an impression and gave me much to consider as I moved forward in my own journey as a writer and in my efforts to build a literary tradition with other Lao in diaspora. I deeply hope history remembers them kindly enough for taking the time with us in an era when so few other writers would.

In 2009, when I received the NEA Fellowship in Literature, I finally had a chance to get a copy of my very own of *Aiiieeeee!* and I grabbed it along with a copy of *Secret Identities: The Asian American Superhero Anthology* and a few other classics of Asian America. It was a long overdue moment.

Around this time, people were beginning to more seriously bring up the question of Southeast Asian American mental health even more as studies found the high rates of suicide our community faced. That resonated with me going back to 1991 and many incidents in between where I wondered: If we'd had media justice, if there had been more books, more stories of ours told and reflected in the books around us, might things have changed? How much difference would have been made? They tell me I can't process our community losses like that. What good would it do? But as I finally read through the stories in *Aiiieeeee!* it was clear more than ever that we still ought to try and make those spaces. We had nothing to lose, go for broke.

Ironically, 10 years later, my copy of *Aiiieeeee!* was among the books stolen from me in North Minneapolis during a break-in, so the new release of the 45<sup>th</sup> edition seems like extraordinarily good timing. I hope whoever has my copy gets some good use of it, though, and lets it change their life as much as it has changed mine.