Aiiieeeee!

An Anthology of Asian American Writers

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A MENTOR BOOK

Preface

ASIAN AMERICANS are not one people but several—Chinese Americans, Japanese Americans, and Filipino Americans. Chinese and Japanese Americans have been separated by geography, culture, and history from China and Japan for seven and four generations respectively. They have evolved cultures and sensibilities distinctly not Chinese or Japanese and distinctly not white American. Even the Asian languages as they exist today in America have been adjusted and developed to express a sensitivity created by a new experience. In America, Chinese and Japanese American culture and history have been inextricably linked by confusion, the popularization of their hatred for each other, and World War II.

Filipino America differs greatly from Chinese and Japanese America in its history, the continuity of culture between the Philippines and America, and the influence of western European and American culture on the Philippines. The difference is definable only in its own terms, and therefore must be discussed separately.

Our anthology is exclusively Asian American. That means Filipino, Chinese, and Japanese Americans, American born and raised, who got their

China and Japan from the radio, off the silver screen, from television, out of comic books, from the pushers of white American culture that pictured the yellow man as something that when wounded, sad, or angry, or swearing, or wondering whined, shouted, or screamed "aiiieeeee!" Asian America, so long ignored and forcibly excluded from creative participation in American culture, is wounded, sad, angry, swearing, and wondering, and this is his AIIIEEEEE!!! It is more than a whine, shout, or scream. It is fifty years of our whole voice.

Seven generations of suppression under legislative racism and euphemized white racist love have left today's Asian Americans in a state of self-contempt, self-rejection, and disintegration. We have been encouraged to believe that we have no cultural integrity as Chinese or Japanese Americans, that we are either Asian (Chinese or Japanese) or American (white), or are measurably both. This myth of being either/or and the equally goofy concept of the dual personality haunted our lobes while our rejection by both Asia and white America proved we were neither one nor the other. Nor were we half and half or more one than the other. Neither Asian culture nor American culture was equipped to define us except in the most superficial terms. However, American culture, equipped to deny us the legitimacy of our uniqueness as American minorities, did so, and in the process contributed to the effect of stunting self-contempt on the development and expression of our sensibility that in turn has contributed to a mass rejection of Chinese and Japanese America by Chinese and Japanese Americans. The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) weekly, the *Pacific Citizen*, in February, 1972, reported that more than 50 percent of Japanese American women were marrying outside

their race and that the figure was rising annually. Available statistics indicate a similar trend among Chinese American women, though the 50 percent mark may not have been topped yet. These figures say something about our sensibility, our concept of Chinese America and Japanese America, our self-esteem, as does our partly real and partly mythical silence in American culture.

The age, variety, depth, and quality of the writing collected here proves the existence of Asian American sensibilities and cultures that might be related to but are distinct from Asia and white America. American culture, protecting the sanctity of its whiteness, still patronizes us as foreigners and refuses to recognize Asian American literature as "American" literature. America does not recognize Asian America as a presence, though Asian-Americans have been here seven generations. For seven generations we have been aware of that refusal, and internalized it, with disastrous effects.

Asian American sensibility is so delicate at this point that the fact of Chinese or Japanese birth is enough to distinguish you from being American-born, in spite of the fact that you may have no actual memories of life in Asia. However, between the writer's actual birth and birth of the sensibility, we have used the birth of the sensibility as the measure of being an Asian American. Victor Nee was born in China and came to the United States when he was five. Novelist Louis Chu came when he was nine. For both, Chinese culture and China are not so much matters of experience as they are of hearsay and study. Victor and his wife Brett have written the first Chinese American history of Chinese America, *Longtime Californ': A Documentary Study of an American Chinatown* (1973). Louis Chu's *Eat a Bowl of Tea* (1961) is the first Chinese American novel set in Chinese America. Here we

get sticky, however, for the first novel published by an American-born Chinese American is *The Frontiers of Love* (1956), by Diana Chang, a Eurasian. She was born in America but moved to China before her first birthday, to be raised in the "European Compound" of Shanghai as an American in China. She writes of that experience, while Chu writes of Chinatown, New York. Between them so many questions are raised as to what is or is not Chinese American that to save, and in another sense encourage, confusion (our criterion of Asian American literature and identity is not a matter of dogma or party line), we have included them both. Chu's book honestly and accurately dramatizes the Chinese American experience from a Chinese American point of view, and not from an exclusively "Chinese or Chinese-according-to-white" point of view. Diana Chang in her protagonists of mixed blood and their single-blooded parents provides us with a logical dramatic metaphor for the conflict of cultures. Her protagonist, Sylvia, cannot choose between her parents or identify her blood as one thing or the other. The question of choice is shown to be a phony one imposed on her by outside forces.

Sensibility and the ability to choose differentiate the Asian American writers in this collection from the Americanized Chinese writers Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee. They were intimate with and secure in their Chinese cultural identity in an experiential sense, in a way we American-born can never be. Again, unlike us, they are American by choice. They consciously set out to become American, in the white sense of the word, and succeeded in becoming "Chinese American" in the stereotypical sense of the good, loyal, obedient, passive, law-abiding, cultured sense of the word. It is no surprise that their writing is from whiteness, not from Chinese America. Becoming white supremacist was part of their consciously and voluntarily becoming "American." Lin Yutang's *A Chinatown Family* (1948) and C. Y. Lee's *Flower Drum Song* affected our sensibility but did not express it. They come from a white tradition of Chinese novelty literature, would-be Chinese writing about America for the entertainment of Americans in books like *As a Chinaman Sees Us*, *Chinaman's Chance*, and *A Chinaman Looks at America*. These travel books were in the tradition not so much of de Tocqueville as of *Gulliver's Travels*. Their attraction was comic. The humor derived from the Chinese mangling of the English language and from their comic explanations of American customs and psychology. These books appeared in the early twentieth century after almost fifty years of travel books on China written by Christian missionaries and "world travelers" who cited missionaries as authorities on China. The reversal of the form, books of American adventures by Chinese travelers, was a comic inevitability. During this period the exploitation of the comic potential of Asian dialect became, forever, a part of popular American culture, giving rise to Earl Derr Biggers' series of Charlie Chan novels and Wallace Irwin's Hashimura Togo stories. The Hashimura Togo stories were featured in *Good Housekeeping* Magazine and described the adventures of a Japanese house servant who is both unintelligible and indispensable in an American household. A sample of the wit and wisdom of Hashimura Togo, from "Togo Assists in a Great Diamond Robbery" (*Good Housekeeping*, March, 1917):

> With occasional oftenness she approached up to me and report with frogged voice, "Togo where did you put my diamond broach and Mother Hubbard chamois ring when you stole it?"

The substance and imagery of these books and stories were reinforced by the whining, apologetic tone of books done by Chinese government officials giving the official explanations of Chinese culture and the nonthreatening, beneficial, humble motivations of the Chinese presence and immigration to America. Books were written such as *The Real Chinese in America* (1923) by J. S. Tow, secretary of the Chinese Consulate at New York, with the rank of Consul-Eleven. The subservient character of the Chinese and the inferiority of China were major themes in works by Chinese converts to white supremacy and Christianity. Yung Wing's *My Life in China and America* (1909) is the outstanding example of early yellow white supremacy.

In 1925 Earl Derr Biggers, a distinctly non-Chinese, non-Chinese American, and subtly racist writer, created the modern Chinese American: Charlie Chan, the Chinese detective, who first appears in "The House Without a Key" walking with "the light dainty step of a woman." The travel format, going from one nation to another, became in Biggers' immensely popular Charlie Chan novels, an interior journey from one culture to another. Thus, the form evolved into the Chinatown book itself reinforced, and clearly articulated today's popular notion of being an Asian American. The concept of the dual personality, of going from one culture to another, emerged.

Eleven years after the appearance of the fat, inscrutable, flowery but flub-tongued effeminate little detective, the first book by a Chinese American about Chinese America was published. Leong Gor Yun's *Chinatown Inside Out* (1938) was a direct descendant of the Charlie Chan novels and became the prototype of what was to become the "Chinatown Book." The essence of the formula was, I'm an American because I eat spaghetti and Chinese because I eat chow mein." The Charlie Chan model of Chinese Americans was developed in books like Pardee Lowe's *Father And Glorious Descendant*, Lin Yutang's novel *A Chinatown Family*, Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, *Inside Chinatown* by Garding Lui, and two books titled *Chinatown, U.S.A.*, one by Calvin Lee and the other by a white, Elizabeth Coleman.

Chinatown Inside Out was obviously a fraud. The author's name, "Leong Gor Yun," means "two men" in Cantonese. The book consists of items cribbed and translated from the Chinese-language newspapers of Chinatowns in San Francisco and New York tied together with Charlie Chan/Fu Manchu imaginings and the precise logic of a paranoid schizophrenic. Part exposé, part cookbook, the book was supremacist in its overlooking of the effect of racism on our psychology and its never missing a chance to brown-nose the white man with Charlie Chan-like observations, i.e.:

> Like chop-suey, this [unofficial Chinatown] government is an American product. It uses racketeer methods and ingenuity but it depends for its continued and prosperous existence on Chinese psychology, in this connection more precisely called passivity.

Far from giving America a big yuk, and celebrated as a classic of American humor, *Chinatown Inside Out* was accepted by everyone as the first book about Chinese America by a Chinese American. No one, not even the scholars of Chinese America, noticed the awkward changes of voice and style, the differences between the outright lies and the rare facts. The clue of the author's pen name "two men" escaped all. *Chinatown Inside Out* was the source of Lin Yutang's 1948 novel *A Chinatown*

Family. In 1962 S. W. Kung from China published *Chinese in American Life* and cited the work of another foreigner to Chinese America, Lin Yutang's *A Chinatown Family*. In 1965 Calvin Lee, a former assistant dean at Columbia University and the author of Chinese cookbooks, saw the light and testified to his successful conversion to utter white supremacy in *Chinatown U.S.A.* in which he cited Leong Gor Yun and S. W. Kung. Betty Lee Sung loosed *Mountain of Gold* in 1967. She praised the "Chinese in America" for never being "overly bitter about prejudice." In this book, she told us, "If you make yourself obnoxious . . . that is a hindrance to acceptance." *Mountain of Gold* cited the gospel according to S. W. Kung, Lin Yutang, and Calvin Lee. In 1971 the gospel of Leong Gor Yun became hilarious self-parody in Francis L. K. Hsu's *The Challenge of the American Dream*:

> The Chinese in America, in common with other minority groups, will have a continuing problem of double identity. But the effective way of dealing with it is not to deny its existence but to face it squarely. The first step is to realize that the double identity of a minority group is not dissimilar to that of the professional woman. She is a woman and a professional. Some American professional women have tended to forget their sex identity but most have kept some sort of balance between it and their profession. In the latter case, their sex identity sometimes becomes an advantage rather than a disability.

Hsu's work may or may not give us insight into the mind of the first-generation upper-middle-class Chinese immigrant scholar, but in terms of the native Chinese American sensibilty, we can only note that, in the great tradition of Charlie Chan and Leong Gor Yun, his vision of Chinese America

reinforces white racist stereotypes and falls short of the vision Malcolm X and other blacks had for their "minority."

The period from the late twenties through the thirties that spawned Charlie Chan, Fu Manchu, and Leong Gor Yun also produced a rash of popular songs, Charlestons, and fox trots about "China boys" being stranded in America without their women. Such a song was "So Long Oolong (How Long You Gonna Be Gone)," that tells of a girl, "Ming Toy," pining for her sweetheart, "Oolong," stranded in America. Songs with titles like "Little Chinky Butterfly," "Hong Kong Dream Girl," and dozens of others appeared to be Tin Pan Alley's way of celebrating America's closing of the last loopholes in the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1923 by finding ways to exclude entry to Chinese women into the country. Also, a series of popular novels and movies involving passive Chinese men, worshiping white women and being afraid to touch them, appeared in *Son of the Gods, East is West,* and the Fu Manchu and Charlie Chan series.

In the meantime Japanese Americans cranked up an underground press and literary movement in English, publishing their own poetry magazines, literary quarterlies, and newspapers that featured, as they still do, creative writing supplements in their holiday issues.

The "Inside Chinatown" books were done by American-born Chinese for the most part, but Chinese from China capitalized on the formula, and played it for bucks and popularity. Secure in their Chinese identities and Chinese cultural values—both of which were respectable in America, in the Mandarin versions—these books were not as significant or personally affecting to them as they were to the American-born, for whom these books represented manifestoes of Chinese American

identity and assimilation. The Chinese (not Chinese American) writers Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee refined the "spaghetti–chow-mein" form. In Arthur T. S. Chu's *We Are Going to Make the Lousiest Chop Suey in Town* (1966), the form takes its most ridiculous shape.

During World War II the inside books became more personal and more manipulated. Patriotic Chinese Americans wrote anti-Japanese propaganda disguised as autobiography. Pardee Lowe's *Father and Glorious Descendant* was the first. Though *Fifth Chinese Daughter* was published in 1950, it fits the propaganda-as-autobiography mold perfectly. There is reason to believe work on it actually began during the war. Chapters of it appeared in magazines in 1947. America's "anti-Jap" prejudice, as indicated by the release of new anti-Japanese war movies, continued strong until the mid-fifties, when the first sign of a change in white attitude was an announcement disclaiming prejudice against loyal Japanese Americans before the airing of World War II "anti-Jap" movies on television.

In travel books and in music, Japanese America was indiscriminately linked in confusion with Chinese America. In America's pop mind, Japan and China, as well as Japanese America and Chinese America, were one in exotica. China and Japan and Japanese America became distinguished from each other by hatred. That hatred was not explained in the terms of culture and politics, but in the terms of the Hatfields and McCoys—we were all some kind of silly, but civilized hillbillies feuding in the hills of jade. Chinese Americans became America's pets, were kept and groomed in kennels, while Japanese Americans were the mad dogs who had to be locked up in pounds. The editors and writers of the Japanese American community papers were thrown ever closer to Japanese American artists,

poets, and storytellers. The Japanese American writing in English that had been an activity was now welded into a movement.

The tradition of Japanese American verse as being quaint and foreign in English, established by Yone Noguchi and Sadakichi Hartman, momentarily influenced American writing with the quaintness of the Orient but said nothing about Asian America, because, in fact, these writers weren't Asian Americans but Americanized Asians like Lin Yutang and C. Y. Lee.

The first serious creative writing by an Asian American to hit the streets was Miné Okubo's *Citizen 13660*, an autobiographical narrative in drawings and words, describing the relocation and camp experience from an artist's point of view. It was a remarkable book given the time of its appearance, 1946, when anti-Japanese sentiment was still high. Toshio Mori's collection of stories, *Yokohama, California*, appeared in 1949. It had been scheduled for release in 1941, but World War II "anti-Jap" prejudice worked against Japanese Americans appearing in print; however, it also spared their being shaped, used, and manipulated as were Chinese Americans.

After the war, the best way to rehabilitate Japanese America, from the white point of view, was to link it up and get it inextricably confused with Chinese America again, so from *Fifth Chinese Daughter* came son of *Fifth Chinese Daughter*, Monica Sone's *Nisei Daughter*, a book remarkable for maintaining its Japanese American integrity in spite of its being, in the publisher's eyes, blatantly modeled on Wong's snow job.

None of the Chinese, Japanese, and Filipino American works in this volume are snow jobs pushing Asian Americans as the miracle synthetic white people that America's proprietors of white liberal

pop, like Tom Wolfe, ABC television ("If Tomorrow Comes," "Kung Fu," "Madame Sin") and such racist henchmen passing for scholars as Gunther Barth and Stuart Miller, make us out to be.

The Asian American writers here are elegant or repulsive, angry and bitter, militantly anti-white or not, not out of any sense of perversity or revenge but of honesty. America's dishonesty—its racist white supremacy passed off as love and acceptance—has kept seven generations of Asian American voices off the air, off the streets, and praised us for being Asiatically no-show. A lot is lost forever. But from the few decades of writing we have recovered from seven generations, it is clear that we have a lot of elegant, angry, and bitter life to show. We know how to show it. We are showing off. If the reader is shocked, it is due to his own ignorance of Asian America. We're not new here. Aiiieeeee!!

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Aiiieeeee! Revisited: Preface to the Mentor Edition

One measure of a healthy and thriving literature is the health of its critics. Asian American literature, as yet, has no critics. No gardeners digging for the roots. No sailor tracing the main currents of Asian America. Asian America has suffered every charlatan, every failure in every school of American hobnob, from beat to revolutionary, stooping into Asian American literature to messiah the writers and begin our history.

We are not critics. Our critical anatomy of Chinese American and Japanese American writing is woefully uninhabited by critics, critical theories of Asian American writing, schools, postures, and movements. Instead, we are infested with sociologists and holy Joes, picking at the bones of our poetry and tearing the lids off our prose, looking for a mastodon frozen stiff in a block of ice.

The scholarship we muscled into the first anatomy of Asian American writing in the 1973 introduction to *Aiiieeeee!* was haphazard, serendipitous, and incomplete. We were writers at play, pausing to sniff out the spoor of our heroic literary past and, like good scouts, share a whiff of the riches of a sensibility beyond the pound and kennels where visionary victims are oppressed and