



Melody of the Qeej

Written by *Mai Kou Xiong*

Illustrated by *Vang Lee*

About the Reading Together Project:

The Reading Together Project seeks to address the lack of children's books that speak to the experience of being an Asian Pacific Islander (API) child or youth in the United States. The project supports the development of English literacy skills while recognizing cultural heritage, and creating opportunities for children and families to learn about API cultural heritage together.

Written by Mai Kou Xiong

Illustrated by Vang Lee

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First Edition



Dedications

For my parents Vue and Samao Xiong,
my children Alyson and Timothy Hang,
my siblings, and all of the nieces and nephews.
I trust we will always remember our roots.

Mai Hou Xiong



To my nieces, Kelsey Yang, Kanah Vue, and Sophia
“Ci Ci” Xiong, who always asked to draw and paint
with me. I love all of your drawings and paintings.
I hope you will continue to draw and paint always.

Yang Lee



“Timmy, pass the ball this way!” yelled Phengxue, waving his arms. Timmy broke away from Tyrone and kicked the ball in the air. Phengxue headed the ball straight into the goal.

“Come inside before you catch a cold!” Phengxue’s mother yelled from the snow-covered deck.







The three boys raced inside. Phengxue's mother and older sisters were busy shredding papaya, cooking tapioca pearls, and stuffing Hmong sausages.



"Why is there so much food?" Timmy asked.

"They're selling these at the Hmong New Year celebration tomorrow," Phengxue said.



“Meng, where did you put my iPad?” Phengxue asked his older brother, who was sitting with their father at the kitchen table snacking on yellow mangos dipped in hot pepper. Meng had just returned from qeej (pronounced “keng”) lessons at the community center.

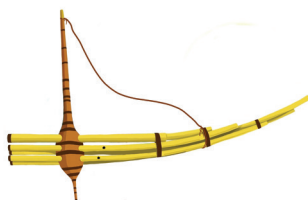
“It’s on my desk. Father, I got to watch qeej players from Laos and China today. They are awesome!” Meng said.

“Don’t touch anything in my room!” he yelled after the boys as they left the dining room.









After the three boys stepped into Meng's room, a shadow on the desk caught their attention. Looking up, they noticed a wooden object hanging on the wall. Timmy reached up and ran his fingers along the long bamboo pipes.

"What is this?" he asked.

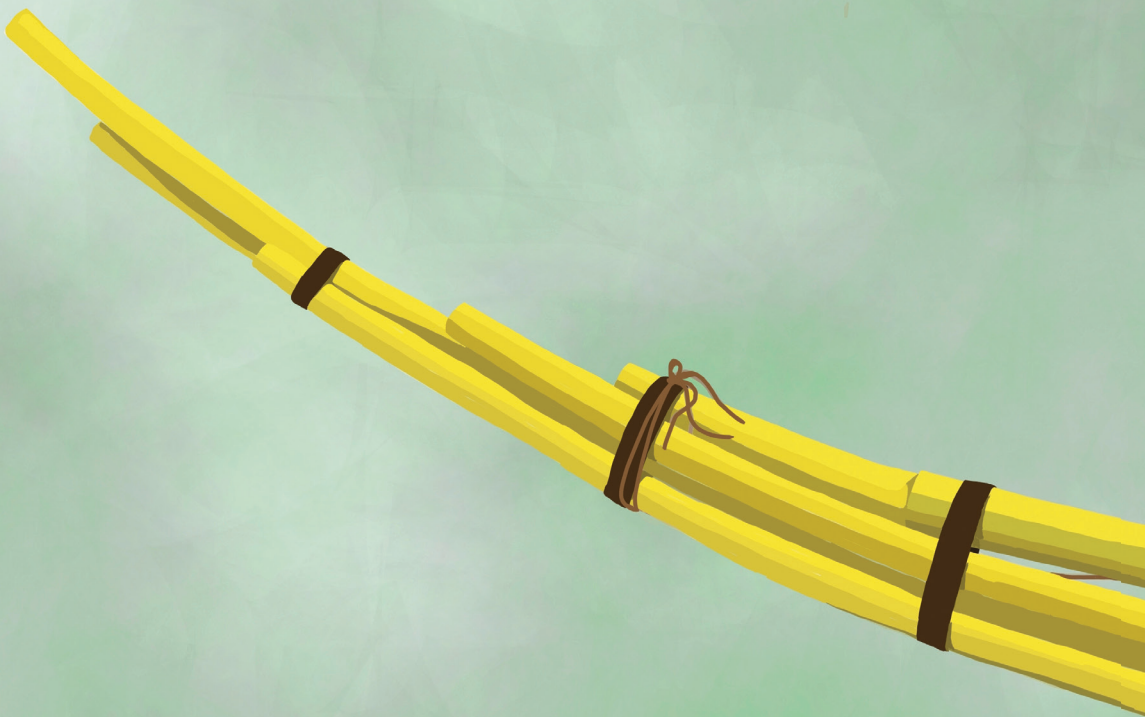
"Looks like an instrument to me! Can you play it, Phengxue?" Tyrone asked.

"It's called a qeej, and no, I don't know how to play it," Phengxue answered.

Phengxue was drawn toward the qeej, and he carefully took it down. He placed his fingers over the holes, put his mouth over the mouthpiece, and blew. A steady, low hum surrounded the boys.

"I've never heard such a sweet sound before," Tyrone said.

"It reminds me of bagpipes," Timmy said.





"Ahem!" Meng cleared his throat. The boys hadn't noticed him standing at the door, watching.

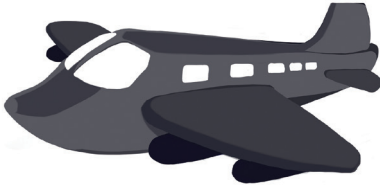
"Sorry. We just wanted to see it," Tyrone said, startled. "I've never seen an instrument like that before. It makes some pretty weird sounds."

"What's it made of? How do you play it?" Timmy asked.

"Go ask Grandfather. Phengxue, be careful with it!" Meng said.







The boys found Grandfather listening to the Hmong radio. A wooden cane rested on his lap. His right leg had been injured by a flying bullet while he rescued an American pilot who was shot down by Communist soldiers during the Secret War in Laos. On cold days like this one, Grandfather's leg hurt even more than usual.







"Koj kov Meej rab qeej ua dab tsi na (kaw koh Meng dah keng oua da chee na)?" Grandfather asked, wanting to know what Phengxue was doing with the qeej. *"Nws tsis yog khoom ua si na (noo chee yaw kong oua shee na)."*

"Yes, Grandfather, I know this is not a toy,"



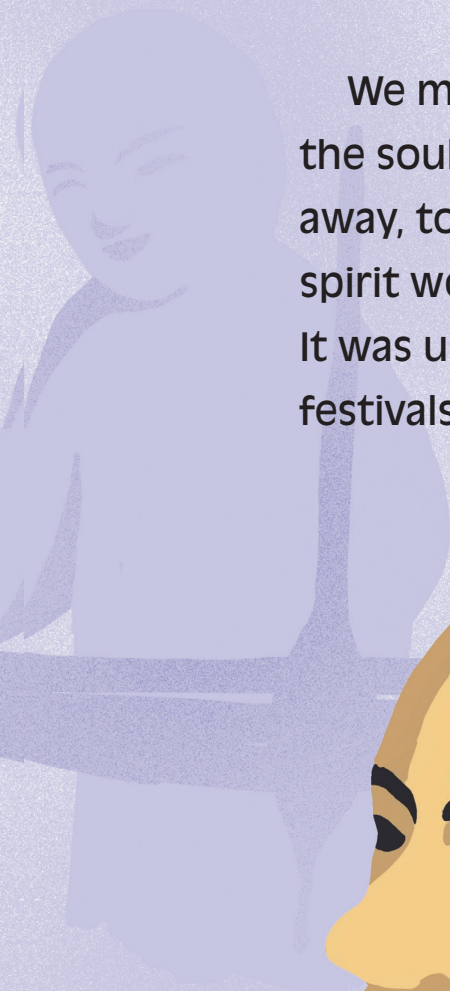
Phengxue answered in Hmong. "Please tell us about this." He handed the instrument to Grandfather.

"Zaum (zao)! Zaum! Zaum!" Grandfather said, telling the boys to sit. "You interpret for your friends."

Grandfather began:

“The qeej has been part of our culture for thousands of years. We are not sure about the origin of this instrument, but there are many tales about it. My grandfather told me that Shao, the great god in the sky, gave it to us.

We mostly use the qeej to speak to the souls of people who have passed away, to guide them to the ancestors' spirit world during funeral ceremonies. It was used for weddings and New Year festivals, too."





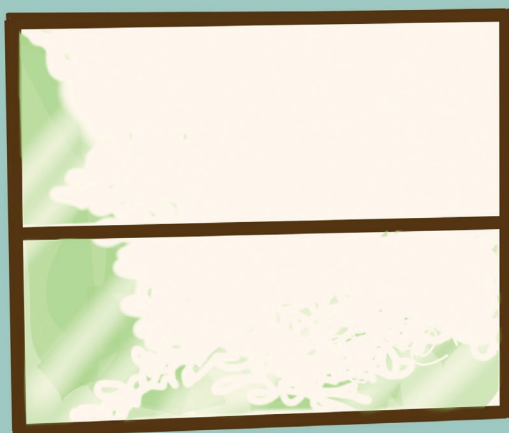
“Are you saying the qeej must be used to guide your soul one day, too, Grandfather?” Phengxue asked.

“Yes,” Grandfather answered.

Grandfather pointed to the different parts of the qeej and explained that it is made with six bamboo pipes that are carefully bent and inserted into a wooden chamber. “Will you play for us?” Meng asked excitedly.

Slowly and carefully, Grandfather stood and put the qeej to his mouth. A low melody echoed throughout the room. Phengxue closed his eyes, feeling the soft music calling out to him.





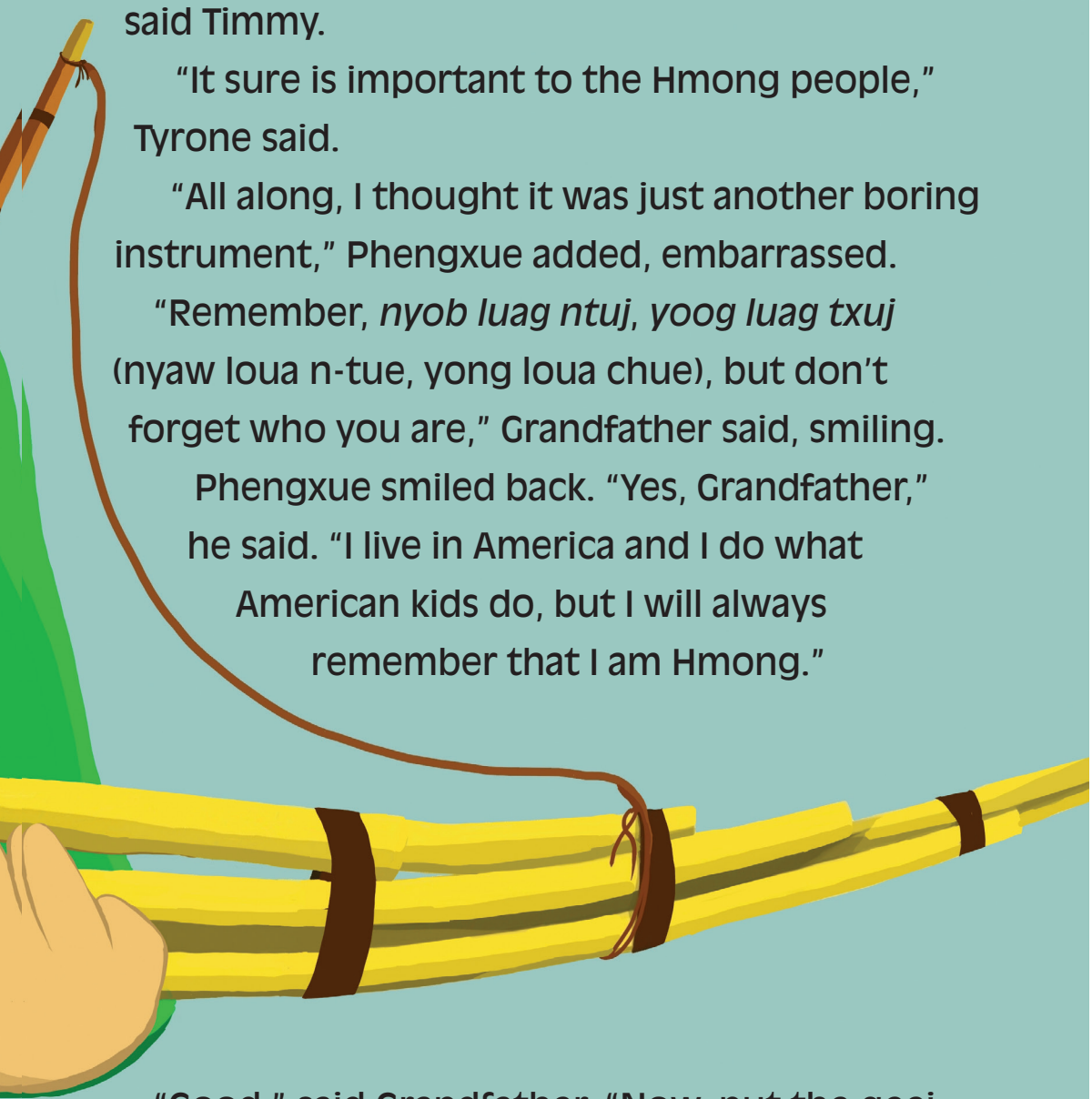
“Do you think I can learn to play it, Grandfather?” Phengxue asked, feeling uncertain.

“Yes, and when you are ready, you will know,” Grandfather assured him. “To be a great qeej player, you must learn all the finger movements because each sound is a spoken word. These words speak to the dead and comfort the hearts of the living.”







An illustration on the left side of the page shows a hand holding a yellow, multi-stranded instrument, possibly a qeej. A brown string is attached to the top of the instrument and loops around the text area. The background is a solid light blue color.

“What a cool instrument—and it talks, too!”
said Timmy.

“It sure is important to the Hmong people,”
Tyrone said.

“All along, I thought it was just another boring
instrument,” Phengxue added, embarrassed.

“Remember, *nyob luag ntuj, yoog luag txuj*
(nyaw loua n-tue, yong loua chue), but don’t
forget who you are,” Grandfather said, smiling.

Phengxue smiled back. “Yes, Grandfather,”
he said. “I live in America and I do what
American kids do, but I will always
remember that I am Hmong.”

“Good,” said Grandfather. “Now, put the qeej
back and take your friends to the New Year festival
tomorrow. You will see how Meng plays this.”



The next day at the New Year festival, the boys made their way past the big crowd of people, who were ball tossing, smiling, and laughing.

“C’mon, let’s get going before we miss Meng’s performance!” Phengxue said, rushing his friends to the front of the stage.

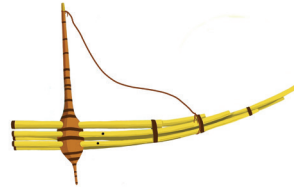


Meng started playing a joyful melody and spun like an acrobat. The silver coins on his qeej and vest jingled as he moved.

"I want to be a great qeej player," said Phengxue, mesmerized by the melody.

"Same here! He moves like a ninja," Tyrone said.





That night, Phengxue found Grandfather listening to the radio again. Taking Grandfather's hand, he said, "Grandfather, will you bless me with the wisdom and the knowledge to learn this ancient qeej of our people?"

Grandfather smiled and a tear ran down his face. "*Me tub* (may tou), you are now ready to learn the words of the qeej," he said. "When it is my time to return to the spirit world, you will help guide my soul back to our ancestors."

Phengxue smiled and gave Grandfather a hug. Now he understood the importance of the qeej to his people. Now he was ready to make the qeej speak.

About the Author



Mai Kou Xiong was born in Laos and settled with her family in Santa Barbara, California, when she was eight. She currently lives in Minnesota with her large family.

Mai Kou has a master of arts in education and has been an educator for seventeen years, teaching math and coordinating Hmong literacy and culture programs. Her teaching career has taken her to various parts of Southeast Asia. She is currently with the ELL/Immersion programs in St. Paul Public Schools as a TOSA (Teacher on Special Assignment).

Mai Kou stays active in the Hmong community by co-hosting a popular Hmong talk show called *Xav Paub Xav Pom* with 3HmoobTV and reports on critical issues and events that affect the Hmong community. She is also a staff writer for the *Hmong Times* newspaper. She was one of the authors for the children's book *Jouanah: A Hmong Cinderella*.

Mai Kou Xiong acknowledgments

A big thank-you to Dr. Jewell Reinhart Coburn for her inspiration, her love of the Hmong culture, and her professional input; to TCL for believing in me, for strengthening my wings so I could soar higher than I thought possible, and for being my biggest supporter; and to my colleagues in the St. Paul Public School's Hmong Dual Language Program for all the laughs (my best medicine).

About the Illustrator

Vang Lee graduated from Fresno State University. Mr. Lee facilitates Hmong men groups for a domestic abuse program in St. Paul, Minnesota. He enjoys camping, hiking, and drawing, and he lives with his wife in Woodbury.

