

THE INVISIBLE CHINA

The Overseas Chinese
and the Politics of
Southeast Asia



Garth Alexander

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Southeast Asia



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INTRODUCTION

When I started writing this book four years ago I intended to describe the sufferings of a remarkable, persecuted minority, the Chinese of Southeast Asia. I had no idea then where these random observations – crammed into a few free moments in the overcrowded life of a correspondent who covered nine oriental countries – would lead. And it was not until about a year ago that I began to perceive a strange similarity in the fortunes of the Overseas Chinese and the fortunes of Southeast Asia as a whole. One anti-Sinitic incident after another began to convince me that the racial fear of these ‘Jews of the East’ was, in many Asian countries, integrally linked with the pathological fear of communism common to the region. I realized that here was a completely ignored aspect of Asian history and politics: the age-old Yellow Peril, which so terrified Australians and Americans in the last century, had imperceptibly developed into a Red Peril. And if it were the Chinese whom the other Asians feared, rather than their communist ideology, then it occurred to me that it was more likely to be racialism than communism which lay at the heart of one of the most pernicious myths of our time, the so-called Domino Theory, and it was more likely to be racialism than democracy which was the major, unseen factor guiding American strategists and the entire American people into the quagmire and disgrace of Vietnam. It is the purpose of this book to show that a racial fear of the Chinese has in fact played a predominant role in starting and keeping alive the Cold War in the Pacific.

In the wake of President Nixon’s visit to Peking and the signing of a peace treaty between America and North Vietnam, the nightmares of the Cold War may seem to have blown away like so much mist at dawn. The suddenness of

this unexpected rapprochement indicates how insubstantial were the grounds on which that enmity was based. But the fact that it could exist at all, and then for so long, must also suggest that it may return just as quickly and with equally little provocation. If we are to avoid this I believe we must understand why China came to be seen as a major threat to mankind. After five years in Southeast Asia, and after talking at length with many Asian communists and regional warlords, I believe that the anomalous Overseas Chinese provide the vital key to understanding our fear of China, our disastrous battles against fictional enemies and our continuing support for corrupt dictatorships in that region. In a sense I am trying to rewrite recent Southeast Asian history, in the hope that it may help us to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past.

In preparing a detailed book of this kind for the general reader I have endeavored to limit references and statistics to a minimum. But it has been necessary to delve briefly into the beginnings of Asian nationalism (Chapter 2) and into the business practices of the Overseas Chinese (Chapter 3), as well as to outline the origins of the Chinese expansionist myth (Chapter 4). The main thesis of the book begins with the politically motivated massacre of Malayan Chinese in Kuala Lumpur in 1969 (Chapter 5) and is developed through the subsequent chapters.

China's long-term, racial threat to the region is not denied. In 1931, long before the Chinese Communist Party was anywhere near victory, the historian Arnold Toynbee wrote in *A Journey to China, or Things Which Are Seen*:

I realized that British Malaya was destined by 'peaceful penetration' to become a new Chinese province and I fancy from what I have heard that the same destiny may be in store for Burma, Siam, French Indochina, Dutch Indonesia and the Philippines. In the end the current of Chinese expansion in the Tropics will meet the current of Hindu expansion over the submerged heads of the smaller and weaker and less efficient people in between who are already fast going under....

As Toynbee emphasized, the Chinese migrational diaspora

is likely to be a 'peaceful penetration' and to be spread over many hundreds of years. Yet Eastern and Western leaders have seen fit to claim that the threat of China is an imminent and belligerent one. This, as I hope to show, is in many cases a deliberate ploy to win local and foreign support. Time and again in Southeast Asian history the Overseas Chinese have become the scapegoats for failed government policies and national disasters. Their scapegoat role has in turn rebounded on communist China, which is accused of plotting and financing nearly every major insurrection in the region. Yet the seeds of revolt clearly lie much closer to home and to the feudal and oppressive rule which in most Asian countries has changed but little in the past few centuries.

The bogey of an expansionist China — with the Overseas Chinese as her outriders — has above all served the interests of the Nationalist Chinese. In a series of political and propaganda maneuvers which have deceived many Orientals and Occidentals over the past twenty-five years, the Nationalists have endeavored to keep alive the legend of both the Yellow Peril and the Red Threat. It is the Nationalists, more than anyone else, who have, I believe, deliberately divided the East between Chinese and non-Chinese and driven the West horribly close to a war which is not in fact directly against communist China but, ironically, against the entire Chinese race.

The past record of anti-Chinese movements in Asia and the all-too-easy way in which Western arms and troops have been thrown into the battles of Asia should make all of us stop, think and worry. Since the Pacific War there have been no less than four major communist-Western confrontations in the Far East: the Malayan Emergency, the French Vietnam War, the Korean War and the American Vietnam War. Despite all the available evidence to the contrary we have continued to believe that China was guilty of premeditated involvement in these conflicts (Chapter 4). In each case we have in fact allowed ourselves to be guided by the racial assessments of

Asia's anti-Sinitic rulers.

The new detente between China and the United States gives us a breathing space to review our past mistakes and misconceptions. But it will be next to useless, and all too transient, if we do not succeed in understanding how we blundered, how we managed to back so many pious and hypocritical causes and how we were forced, against our better judgment, to support Asia's feudal oligarchs. During the past two decades we have shored up the most reactionary forms of government in Asia and positively obstructed agrarian and economic reforms in the belief that we were protecting democracies and fighting the elusive threat of communism. In the end we have expended far more money in anti-communist wars than we could ever have lost in expropriated Western investments, and we have failed to stem the tide of communism or diminish its appeal. We have widened the gap of suspicion and misunderstanding between East and West as well as widening the economic gap between the world's rich and poor. We have not, in global terms, been good democrats or good economists.

This book is designed to show how our well-intentioned crusade for world democracy was deliberately turned, without our knowledge, into a racial battle against China, and to show how the Overseas Chinese were made to play the central role in this disastrous deception.

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CHAPTER ONE

YELLOW PERIL

Half an hour before dusk a strange dark cloud rises over the China Sea and sweeps towards the shores of Borneo. In the moments that follow millions of dog-size animals flock over the palmy beaches and plunge West Kalimantan (Indonesian West Borneo) into an eerie and unreal night. It is the beginning of one of nature's strangest invasions, and causes Borneo's Dyak natives to live in life-long fear. One night, the natives predict, the giant fruit-eating bats will drop out of the sky and annihilate the jungle-people, take over their land and extinguish the light of Borneo's day forever.

Borneo is a land of fearful legends, fetid swamps, fever, cannibals and ferocious animals. Yet there are people who come thousands of miles to settle in this, the third largest island in the world. They are members of a strange, outcast race — the Overseas Chinese. For hundreds of years their pioneering forefathers have emigrated across the China Sea to explore the unknown lands of the South Pacific. For hundreds of years, too, they have been subjected to persecution, disease and violent deaths. But however great their suffering more Chinese have always followed. They have settled, given birth to new generations of expatriates, and multiplied. Today they total more than a quarter of Borneo's population. It is a silent invasion which nothing seems to stop. And instinctively Borneo's aboriginal inhabitants associate it with the nightly onslaught of bats. They fear that if they do not protect themselves the strange people from the China Sea will kill them and take over their land.

On one hot November night in 1967 these fears finally exploded. The roar of Dyak drums tore the jungle from its

sleep. Warriors, drunk on a gruel of rice-wine and pig's blood, stumbled through the forest calling the natives to war. When the sun rose the following day columns of black smoke stood like giant grave-markers across the breathless land. The stench of burning bodies and homes filled the air. The Chinese who had barricaded themselves inside their homes had been burnt to death. Those who had run from their blazing buildings had been cut down by the Dyak fire-raisers and dismembered and eaten on the spot. At the small town of Senakin a Dutch missionary tried to help the Chinese by driving them in his jeep through jungle-paths to a nearby army garrison. He took the women and children first and left the men in the care of a government district-officer. But when he returned a few hours later he found only eight headless corpses. The district-officer had been besieged by the cannibals and forced to choose between giving up his own life or delivering the Chinese.

The massacre of 1967 in West Kalimantan claimed three or four hundred Chinese lives. But the pandemonium that followed claimed four or five thousand more. When the Indonesian army received news of the first killings it ordered all Chinese and Indonesians of Chinese descent to abandon the interior and make for the towns. The order, so the regional commander, Brigadier-General A. J. Witono, told me later, was made 'to protect the Chinese from the wrath of the Dyaks'. But the army undoubtedly had other motives too. For two years it had been fighting an exhausting and inconclusive campaign against a small band of communist guerrillas along the Kalimantan-Sarawak (Indonesian-Malaysian) border. The army believed, with good cause, that the Chinese farmers and shopkeepers of the interior were helping the communists with food and shelter. The Dyak massacre was consequently seen as a blessing in disguise; the subsequent Chinese exodus from the countryside, the army argued, would cut off the communists' essential supply-lines. To make sure the opportunity was not missed

the army made the exodus official.

'If we see slit-eyes in the jungle now,' one commander told me, 'we shoot first and ask questions later. The only Chinese who would dare to stay in the jungle with the Dyaks now are the communists.'

That, of course, was an oversimplification. Some of the Chinese subsequently caught and killed in the interior were presumably terrorists – definitely communist activities showed a decline after the Chinese exodus – but, by all accounts, numerous innocent Chinese were also shot and imprisoned. Some were lost in the jungle trying to find their way to safety when they were surprised by army patrols. Others were still living peacefully among the natives, oblivious of any order to move.

Forced in their tens of thousands into the densely populated ports of Pontianak and Singkawan the fugitive Chinese faced even greater hazards than those at the hands of the Dyaks and communist-hunting soldiers. Typhoid and cholera took an immediate toll; to qualify for a bed at one of the few emergency hospitals in the area most patients had to have three or four sicknesses concurrently – by which time they were invariably beyond help. Within ten weeks of the army's expulsion order approximately 4,000 Chinese had died in army-administered camps. Thousands more were dying or lying critically ill in makeshift hospitals set up in the jungles around the major towns. When I visited Pontianak shortly after the massacre had begun I found seven to eight hundred men, women and children living in a single wooden building in one refugee-camp. Five or six hundred more were packed into another warehouse close by. Most of them were sleeping on bare boards, huddled up against termite-infested walls, covered with sores and wounds.

Some sources boldly blamed Indonesia's military regime for increasing the sufferings of the Chinese. Others, including *The Times* of London, went a step further and suggested that the army had started the head-hunt itself. This unpleasant

theory gained wide currency when dozens of warpainted Dyaks marched in triumph to the Kalimantan military commander with the heads of their Chinese victims ceremoniously impaled on their spears – and then asked to be paid for ‘helping’ him fight the communists. Brigadier Witono told me he had been touring the province for several months before the massacre, warning the natives not to trust the Chinese. He had told the natives that the Chinese, who comprise twenty-six per cent of West Kalimantan’s population, were in league with the communists. The communists, he said, were plotting to take over the country and kill the natives. Inevitably, when thirteen Dyaks were murdered by communist guerrillas, just after one of these pep-talks, the head-hunters thought they knew whom to blame. Remembering the army’s warnings they turned to seek vicarious revenge on every Chinese in sight.

West Kalimantan’s governor, Chief Oevaang Oeray, told me the Chinese deserved worse than they got.

‘Everything is the fault of the Chinese,’ the Dyak governor exploded. ‘We are not head-hunters or savage people. Eighty per cent of us are Christians. But we must teach the Chinese to think and speak like Indonesians. Under the Dutch [colonial rulers] the Chinese were used to crush us. They controlled the shops and banks. The Indonesians and Dyaks were third-class citizens in their own land. The Chinese still think they are more important. They still control our shops and businesses. Until they change we are going to fight them.’

Chief Oevaang believed the Chinese were naturally dangerous. ‘They are subversive communists, hand in glove with Mao Tse-tung and a part of his plan to take over Asia.’ He wanted me to understand that this, and not the murder of the thirteen Dyaks, was the real reason for the massacre and for the heartless manner in which the army had herded the Chinese into warehouses and fed them on one cup of rice a day. The fact that the Chinese had brought trade and prosperity to many regions of Borneo, had built up Dyak

cottage-industries and found markets for the natives' produce, and, in many cases, had brought the cannibals for the first time into touch with the outside world was immaterial to Chief Oevaang.

It was not, however, immaterial to Kalimantan, as the natives quickly discovered. In the weeks that followed, the Dyaks struggled in vain to take over the running of deserted Chinese stores and businesses. The supply of rice and other staples came to a standstill. Prices soared and the market for the Dyaks' own goods dried up. Poverty and starvation suddenly returned to a people who had taken the services of the local Chinese for granted.

The Chinese of Kalimantan are mostly Indonesian citizens whose families have lived in Borneo for generations. But they are not considered Indonesians. One Indonesian district-officer in charge of the refugees in Singkawan candidly assured me that there was no need to trouble the central government in Jakarta (Java) for more food. 'Four ounces of rice every day is enough — particularly for Chinese,' he said.

Relief-workers at one of his camps were removing between fifteen and twenty bodies a day. They told me, during my tour of West Kalimantan in 1968, that the ultimate cause of death in almost all cases was chronic malnutrition.

The 1967 massacre of the Chinese of West Kalimantan and the semi-official discrimination to which the Chinese were subsequently subjected are not unique. Chief Oevaang may not be a typical Indonesian but his anti-Sinitic fears are to be found, to a greater or lesser extent, in every corner of Indonesia and in every country where the Overseas Chinese settle.

Over 10 million Chinese have poured out of China in the past century. The governor-general of Trinidad and Tobago, Sir Solomon Hochoy, and the president of Guyana, Arthur Chung, are two of their sons. The world's largest shipowner, C. Y. Tung, and the world's largest film-makers, the Shaw brothers, are expatriate Chinese from Shanghai, now living in

Hong Kong. The first Americans on the moon got there with the help of a little-known American Chinese scientist, Wong Chung-ming; two of his compatriots in the U.S., C. N. Yang and Tsung Dao Lee, won for America the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1957. Overseas Chinese sportsmen, like the longest-standing world badminton champion, Rudy Hartono of Indonesia, and Overseas Chinese artists, like London-based pianist, Fou Tsong, have become household names to millions of sports and music fans around the world. Nearly every town in the world has its Chinese laundry and Chinese restaurant and an increasingly large number have branches of Overseas Chinese trading empires operating from Hong Kong, Singapore, London or New York.

But Southeast Asia is the focal point of these expatriates and here over 96 per cent of them have settled. They control or handle over 60 per cent of the region's trade and commerce and have revolutionized its economies and societies.* Although they comprise barely 5 per cent of the region's population (approximately 15 million out of 300 million) they have completely changed Southeast Asia's customs, cultures and tastes; in the last century over 1,000 Chinese words have been absorbed by the Philippine national language and cheongsams and pantaloons have become part of the national dress of Indochina and Thailand. Mixed marriages between Chinese and Asians† have not only produced new faces for the region, widening the forehead and narrowing the eyes of Balinese and Dyaks alike, but also thrown up a vigorous new breed of mestizo leaders such as

* It is extremely difficult to arrive at any precise estimate of either the number of Overseas Chinese or the size of their wealth. The term Overseas Chinese is used here to describe those Chinese outside China and Taiwan who consider themselves culturally more Chinese than Asian; the 15 million Overseas Chinese excludes 4½ million Chinese in Hong Kong and Macao. For historical estimates of Overseas Chinese wealth see Chapter 3.

† The term 'Asians' is here used to distinguish Southeast Asians from Chinese.

the national hero of the Philippines, Dr Jose Rizal, and Burma's strongman, General Ne Win. But the greatest impact of the Overseas Chinese, and one which changed the whole course of Asian history, was not constructive at all. It was the ultimate creation of a worldwide fear of all things Chinese.

It was the European colonials of Southeast Asia who laid the basis for the modern racial crisis by importing millions of coolies from China to work their tropical plantations and tin-mines. Between 1920 and 1930 over two million coolies were shipped to the British-protected Malay states and settlements. Long before that, conquistadors, like the seventeenth century governor-general Jan Pieterse Coen of the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia), had been so taken by these choice colonials that they launched slave-raids along the coast of Fukien and Kwantung provinces to stock up their colonies. Others had waited for migrant Chinese traders to call at their ports and then ruthlessly pressed them into their services; when Governor Gomez Perez Dasmarinas of the Spanish Philippines needed men to row his fleet on an expedition to the Portuguese-held Spice Islands in the 1590s he seized every Chinese he could find in the Parian, the transient Chinese quarters of Manila, and had them thrown into the holds of his ships. In those days even the Church found ways of approving the Chinese slave traffic. A municipal magistrate in Macao trying to prohibit the export of kidnapped Chinese boys and girls from Canton to Manila found himself roundly censured by the Bishop of Macao, who protested in a letter to the Portuguese Viceroy in India on 2 March 1614 that the prohibition would prevent the Chinese being baptized as Christians. His Lordship's objection was upheld and kidnapped boys and girls continued to be exported to Christian colonies. But that was before the Yellow Peril – as the Overseas Chinese came to be called – had seized the imagination of Europe and Asia.

The first reported massacre of the Overseas Chinese by