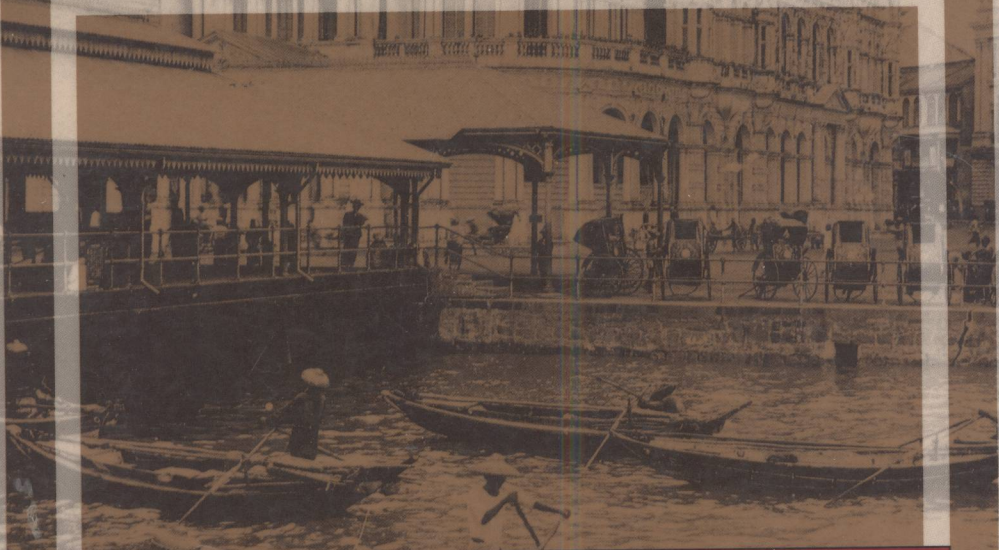


L Y N N P A N



# SONS OF THE YELLOW EMPEROR

*A History of the Chinese Diaspora*



**"ABSOLUTELY RIVETING—WIDE RANGING, WELL RESEARCHED, AND IMMENSELY VALUABLE."—PAUL THEROUX**

# SONS OF THE YELLOW EMPEROR

*A History of  
the Chinese Diaspora*

*Lynn Pan*

WITH A NEW AFTERWORD  
BY THE AUTHOR



KODANSHA INTERNATIONAL  
New York • Tokyo • London

Kodansha America, Inc.  
575 Lexington Avenue, New York, New York 10022, U.S.A.

Kodansha International Ltd.  
17-14 Otowa 1-chome, Bunkyo-ku, Tokyo 112, Japan

Published in 1994 by Kodansha America, Inc.  
by arrangement with the author.  
This is a Kodansha Globe book.

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Printed in the United States of America  
99 00 01 02 03 04 9 8 7 6 5 4 3

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Pan, Lynn.

Sons of the yellow emperor : a history of the Chinese  
diaspora / Lynn Pan.

p. cm. — (Kodansha globe)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-56836-032-0 :

1. Chinese—Foreign countries—History.
2. Immigrants—History.
3. China—Emigration and immigration—History. I. Title. II. Series.

DS732.P36 1994

909'.04951—dc20 94-14938 CIP

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YELLOW EMPEROR

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For Henry Sacker  
*with love and gratitude*

## *Illustrations*

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## Acknowledgements

A book of this kind draws heavily and gratefully on existing literature, both scholarly and journalistic. Many of my debts will be evident from the notes and the bibliography.

Friends and strangers who have helped me in one way or another with the research for this book are too numerous for me to mention all by name. But I wish particularly to thank the following for giving me their time and in many cases their generous hospitality.

*In Bangkok, Hat Yai, Pattani and Songkhla:* Paul Handley, Phuwaladol Songprasert, Ho Yun, Visit Mingwatanabul, Nopadon Aneckchai, Vichai Pipatananuglit and Liu Yong Chang.

*In Berkeley, Boston, Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco:* Ken Hom, Daniel Taurines, Darrell Corti, Alice and Henry Coolidge, Jay and Kent Wong, Russell Leong, Dolores Wong, Emma Louie, Him Mark Lai, Ruthanne Lum McCunn, Jack Tchen, 'Charlie' Chin, Charles Lai and Hu Ping.

*In Fukien, China:* Association of Returned Overseas Chinese in Ch'uan-chou.

*In Hong Kong:* Ip Kung Sau, Si Chung Mou, Vicwood Chong, Martin Cowley, Mike Horner, Robert Cheng, Jonathan Friedland, Margaret Scott and Dotty and Stan Shelton.

*In Kuala Lumpur, Malacca and Penang:* Andrew Sheng, Lim Suan Poh and Tan Siok Choo.

*In London and Manchester:* Jenny Lo, Simon Jones, Jamie Kenny, Catherine Stenzl, Hugh Baker, David Cesarani and Kimpton N'Dlovu.

*In Manila:* Lin Ch'uen Sheng, Fred Chua, Go Bun Juan, Betty S. Chua, Teresita Ang, James Ong Lepho and Ian Gill.

*In Paris:* Choi Hak Kin and Yau Shun-chiu.

*In Semarang:* Hoo Liong Tiauw.

*In Singapore:* Evelyn Chew, Pang Cheng Lian, Lim How Seng, Tan Sai Siong, Ho Lai Chan and Kealy Ho.

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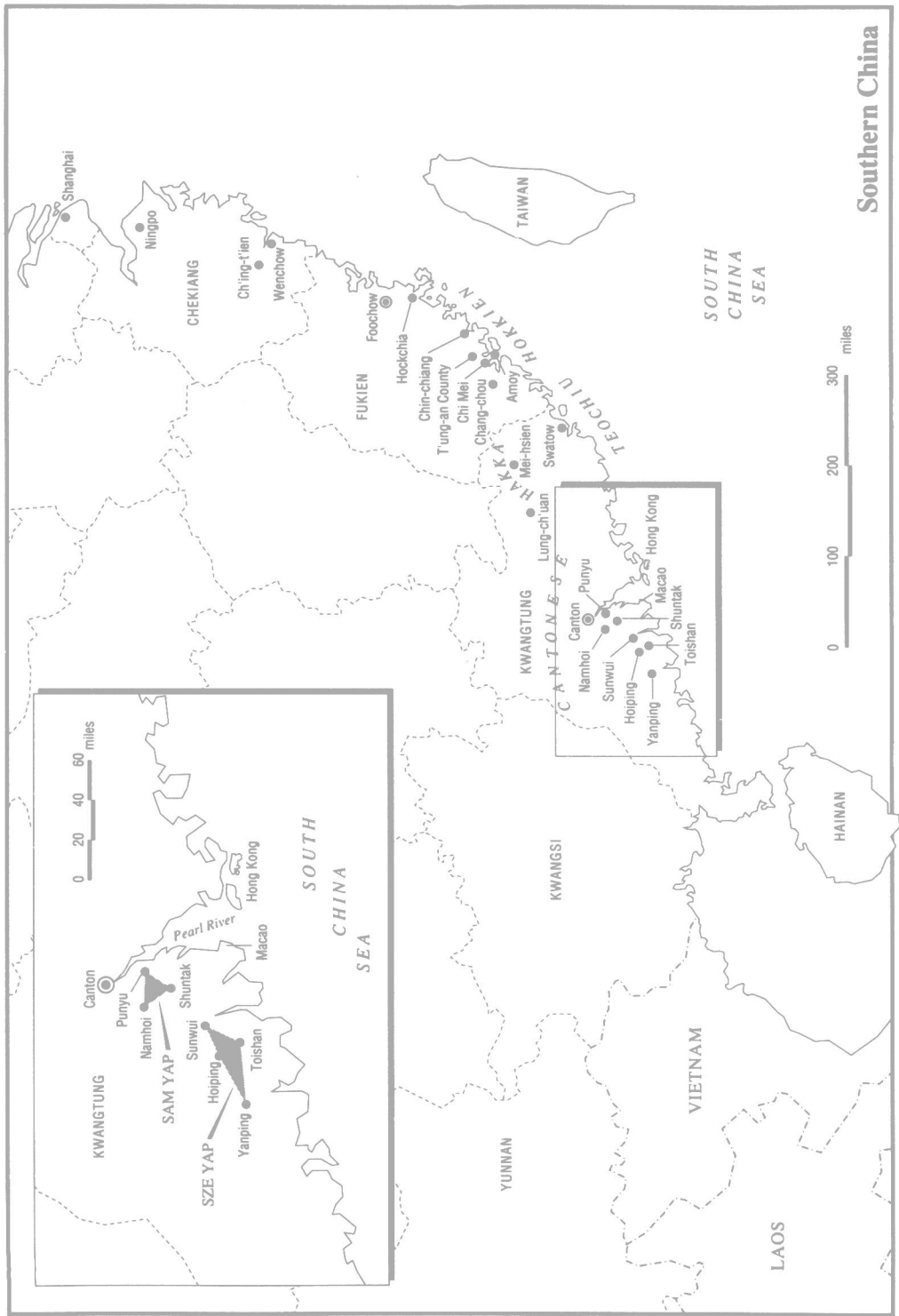
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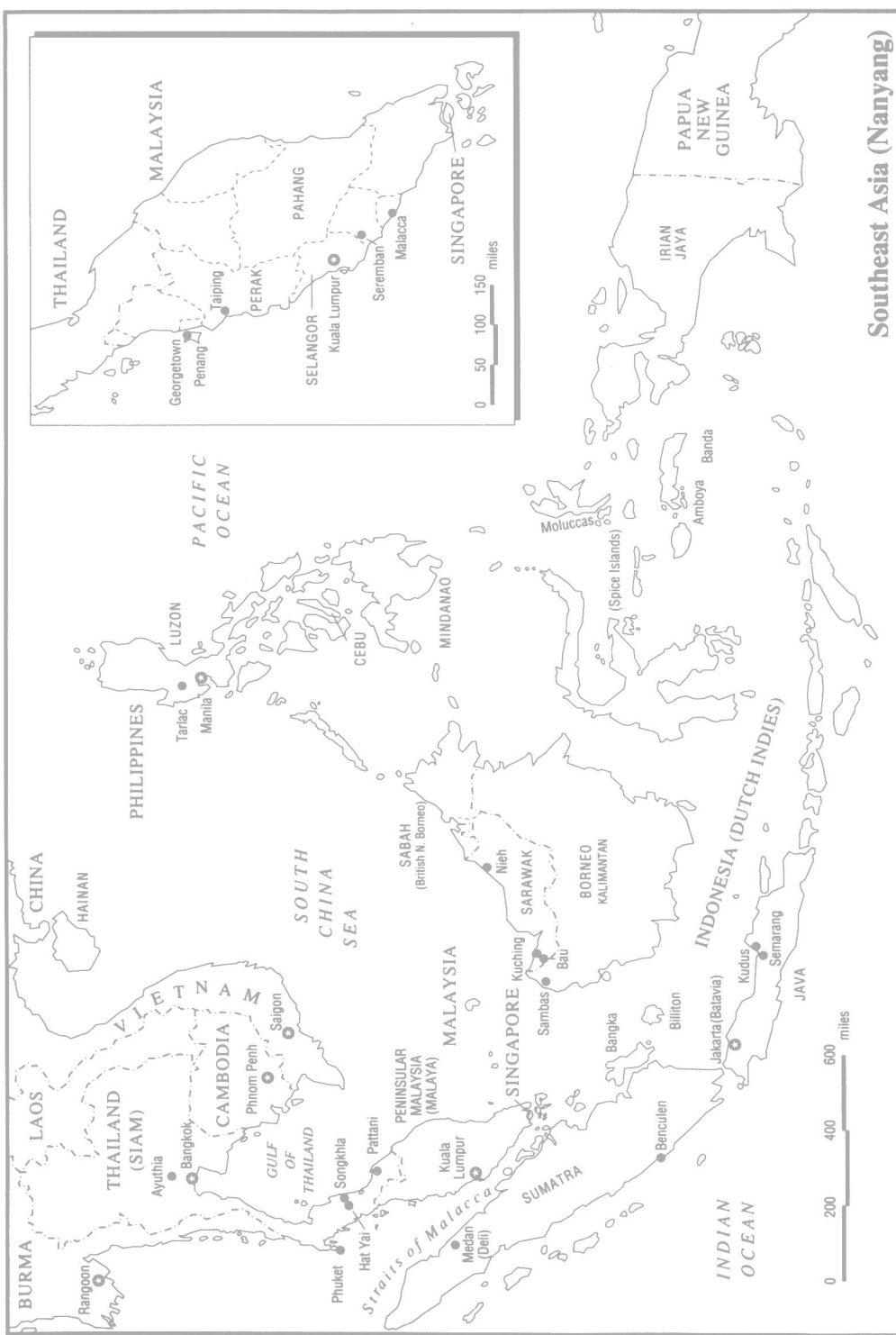


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Southeast Asia (Nanyang)

## *Preface*

I was asked in the course of writing this book if I had any ethnic axes to grind. I have not, but since race is necessarily a theme of the book, and no one can be entirely neutral when it comes to race, I had better say something about myself so that the reader may judge for himself where my bigotries might be expected to lie.

I am one of the thirty million people whose historical experience I try to evoke in this book; I am part of the Chinese diaspora. I was born in Shanghai, was made an émigré by the terror campaigns of the Chinese Communist Party, and was educated, in a manner of speaking, in Hong Kong, British North Borneo and England, where I eventually established a base. I was going to say 'made my home', but that would suggest I had put down roots, whereas I often get the feeling when I'm in England that my real life lies elsewhere, though exactly where it lies it is difficult to say.

Shortly before he died, my father built himself a log cabin in the wilds of British Columbia. My sister lives in Hong Kong, married to an Englishman. My brother, who lives in Sabah (as British North Borneo is now called), is married to a second-generation Chinese immigrant there and his children speak neither Shanghainese, their father's language, nor Teochiu, their mother's, but Cantonese, English and Malay. Another sister and brother, victims of their transplanting, died young, killed by tropical disease and Borneo's primitive medical facilities. I have first cousins in Shanghai, Nanking, Taipei, Brighton, Sydney, New York and Boston, and more distant relatives in Florida and Brazil. I should say we're fairly representative, in our pattern of expatriation and adaptation, of a large proportion of overseas Chinese families.

I visited my cousin in Boston when I went to America to research this book. She is an immigrant success story, a realization of the American Dream; she made her first million before her thirty-third birthday and lives in a very WASP and very posh part of Massachusetts. To say that she chewed gum is perhaps to subscribe to cultural stereotyping, but that was what she did and what distracted my attention all the time we

were talking, that and the fact that she said 'Is that right?' to everything I told her. She is warm and generous, and I like her immensely, but I find it hard to think of her as Chinese. An anthropologist of my acquaintance says that it's nonsense to talk of people as being more or less Chinese. Of course there is no norm of Chineseness, just as there is no norm of Frenchness or Englishness or Indianness, but what the anthropologist says is patently untrue on the level of subjective experience. Most Chinese Americans I met on that trip struck me as being far more exotically American than familiarly Chinese. If I were suddenly to find myself on the edge of nowhere, craving the company of the known and familiar, an Englishman appearing on the horizon would I think more nearly satisfy my need than a Chinese American.

That probably says something about my relationship to the English and to England, the country where I have lived longest. I have often been asked, though rarely by the British themselves, how I feel about Britain. I have a fairly long list of complaints, but if I were to be very brief my answer would be the same as the one I give to the question, also frequently put to me, of how I feel about China. I would say that it was summed up by the Chinese set phrase, *hen t'ie pu ch'eng kang*, 'O would that the iron would turn to steel'; it is a source of chagrin to me, in other words, that the country is not better and the people finer. This is not the answer of an indifferent immigrant, and it is true that while I am the world's most boring Brit basher, I hate England like a lover.

I have also been asked, again not by the British themselves, if I had ever run up against racial discrimination in England. Until I began this book, my answer was no; but writing this book has reminded me of an episode I thought I had put out of my mind, not for any discomfort it caused, but because of its insignificance to me at the time. I was at university, and a Canadian friend called Beverly asked me if I'd like to share a flat with her; she had seen one advertised that she thought would suit us. We went to see it together, and were shown round a lovely place by a very well-spoken, genteelly shabby widow who herself lived in the flat below. She said she would let us know, and the next day Beverly heard from her: the flat was hers, Beverly was told, if she found somebody white to share it with her.

Beverly was quite distraught – unnecessarily so, I told her; she should simply take the flat and not worry about me. I wasn't being heroic, because I truly did not feel the landlady to be particularly unjust, and I felt neither wounded nor angry. To be fair to the landlady, I myself had made it a point never to share a flat with anybody English,

because all the ones I'd lived with had wanted to buy their own milk, their own sugar, their own salt and so on instead of paying money into a kitty; I had put this down to English meanness, and had not contradicted a friend when he said that that was racist of me.

For a while I shared a flat with a Jamaican girl. When we were flat-hunting in London I was the one who made all the appointments to view, because she felt that landlords mentally crossed Chinese off their list less readily than they did West Indians – I was less 'coloured' than she. And yet it seemed incredible to me that those signs you saw, ROOM TO LET. REGRET NO COLOURED, should refer to me.

I know now that if I was little aware of 'racial prejudice', it was because I felt so utterly comfortable in my Chinese skin; the more fool you, I thought of those who would spurn me on account of my origin. I also know that by no means all immigrant Chinese feel this way, and that the reason I do and they don't is partly to be found in our pre-migration experience.

British North Borneo had a substantial Chinese community. It also had Malays, Indians, Kadazans, Burmese and other Asian communities – each connected to the other by nothing save physical proximity, by the haphazard fact of its having been washed up on the same shore in a distant outpost of the British empire. Of the Chinese in the town where my parents had settled, Hakka speakers were the most numerous but not, in the opinion of us newcomers from Shanghai (the New York of China), the most superior. In fact, we rather looked down on them. To consider ourselves a cut above Chinese from other parts of China is a Shanghainese habit. It seems rather reprehensible in retrospect but I am thankful for the sense of self-worth it gave me, for without it I would have been a less culturally confident immigrant in England.

Coming from a far-flung bit of the British empire, I am, like many another immigrant in England, an ex-colonial. The imperial connection is a motif in the story of Chinese migration; and it was the British empire, above all, which dispersed the Chinese across the world. If I confine myself fairly closely in this account to the English-speaking world, it is partly for demographic reasons (Chinese migration there has been greater) and partly because the scale of the subject is such that I have had to be very selective. I am conscious on completing the book that it could be written all over again with its contents made up of entirely other matter. There could have been a chapter on immigration law and nationality. There could have been one on immigrant literature, on the Chinese in Japan or South America. An entire book



has been written on immigrant Chinese farming in California, a subject that is barely mentioned in mine. It is not false modesty which makes me say that I am only too aware of my book's incompleteness as I reach the end.

Finally, a word about the spelling of Chinese names. No common system exists for rendering overseas Chinese names, the pronunciation of which varies considerably from dialect to dialect, and the romanization from one colonial setting to another. I have largely retained the commonly accepted local transliteration, rendering a name in its Cantonese dialect pronunciation, for instance, when its referent is Cantonese. For the rest I have fallen back on the Wade-Giles system of spelling, except for a handful of names with widely recognizable English forms, such as Canton, Peking, and Fukien; or which are more easily identifiable in their Pinyin romanization, such as Deng Xiaoping and Tiananmen. I know I can be thought old-fashioned for adopting Wade-Giles romanization, but its forms are less at odds with the local transliterations than those of Pinyin. I follow Chinese practice in placing surnames before given names, but make an exception of the names of Chinese in America, where the local convention is to reverse the order.