In Li-Young Lee’s writing of the Chinese diasporic experience, migration to the United States is not represented as the defining experience that brings respite after discrimination on the basis of race, political persecution, and forced transnational crossings. Consciousness of race has been forced on Lee as a subject of Chinese descent born in Indonesia, an experience encountered at uncomfortably close range by Lee in the political persecution of his father by the Indonesian government. For Lee, the father who is the patriarch of the family is not only its provider and protector but also a victim of persecution, not only the repository of values but also an estranging figure of authority. A controlling presence in Lee’s diasporic experience, this father epitomizes the emotional and psychological dislocations of exile, facilitating remembrance of Indonesia at the same time that he creates space for the possibilities of a new life in America.

Li-Young Lee’s *The Winged Seed* (1995) is an elegiac “remembrance” of the author’s late father framed by a (postmodernist) writing of his family’s dis- and relocation from Southeast Asia to the United States. Remembrance, the controlling motive in elegy, entails the adjustment of perspectives with the emotive reactions to the ways of the patriarch mitigated by a more objective and sympathetic apprehension. Lee’s search for identity comes from not only the immediate circumstances of family life but also the larger matrix of national and international history from which family life derives its transnational and diasporic significance. If for Lee, psychically and emotionally recuperating the past entails, in the first instance, recalling the history of
family circumstances, it also involves engagement with the controlling the- matics of nationhood and internationalism. If the controlling figure of the father Ba enables Lee the son to work out the terms of his filial and familial identity, it also facilitates the poet’s writing of the Southeast Asian exilic and diasporic experience.

**China and the Overseas Chinese**

Born in Indonesia, Li-Young Lee, a first-generation Chinese American poet, writes with a powerful sense of exile and the experience of radical cultural and existential dislocation. His was a life inexorably tied up with and defined by the restless sojourning of his family in such diverse geopolitical and cultural spaces as China, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Macao, Japan, and the United States, causing him to feel that he is “going to be disconnected forever”2 and declare that there is no place he can ever convincingly call home. Lee is a product of the twentieth century, which has been described by Bill Moyers as “the century of refugees.”3 As an exilic subject Lee’s poetic temper is informed by a preoccupation with the need to remember the past, a history very much shaped by the indelible presence of paternal authority, and also to find a literary language that can give adequate expression to this irresistible impulse to remember. Pursued to the point of obsession, Lee’s need to remember starts off with the family, for the life of the family is interwoven with the life of the nation(s) that cannot be ignored for any consideration of Asian American exilic subjectivity.

Li-Young Lee’s family history brings East and Southeast Asia into contact, for his great-grandfather was Yuan Shikai, the first president of the Republic of China, his mother was a member of the Chinese royal family, and his father was a one-time personal physician to Chairman Mao Zedong. After political circumstances forced Lee’s parents to flee China for Indonesia, his father found himself thrown into prison by President Sukarno because of his Western leanings. In *The Winged Seed*, Lee recalls the China from which his ancestors came, an ancient civilization that resonates with the grandeur of history and also with a haunting sense of loss. He affirms that “the age beginning with the Yellow Emperor continues through me, whose history is in my face, my undoubted lid and alien eye” (*WS* 95)—racial characteristics such as the color of one’s hair and skin as well as shape of one’s eyes are physical markers not only of culture but of historical continuity.