

Book Reviews

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The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance. By Bertil Lintner. Chiang Mai: Silkworm Books, 2021. viii+272 pp.

To date, Myanmar is the only country in Southeast Asia that is far from achieving nationhood. Ethnicity, conflict and military are tightly linked in Myanmar, creating a vicious cycle of violence, military rule and coups. The Tatmadaw's *coup d'état* on 1 February 2021 demonstrates that Myanmar always has the ability to surprise the world. The coup has reshaped Myanmar's conflict landscape. The ethnic armed groups have adopted a wide range of responses in the battle between the regime and its political opponents.

Bertil Lintner's latest book, *The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Dominance*, focuses on the Wa and presents a worthwhile study of the most powerful ethnic armed group in Myanmar. The author displays a broad knowledge of Myanmar's history, geopolitics and ethnic minorities.

As Lintner illustrates, contemporary Wa history was shaped by some critical historical events, such as Myanmar's independence, the Communist Party of Burma's (CPB) rise and fall, changes in China's attitude towards the CPB, ethnic ceasefires and open-door economic policies. Facing these major turning points, the important players in Myanmar politics made different choices that steered the country in new directions. In 1988, the CPB was indifferent to "the biggest popular uprising in modern Burmese history" (pp. 104–5), and even the vast majority of the CPB's hilltribe rank-and-file initially had no idea about the uprising. On the contrary, the new military government grasped the opportunity offered by the CPB's collapse and succeeded in preventing the CPB mutineers and other ethnic armed groups from forming alliances or coalitions (pp. 111–16).

The book is a mix of chronological and thematic chapters. Chapters 1 to 4 are structured chronologically, relying extensively on secondary sources. However, focusing on the history of the CPB from its founding to the end of the 1970s, chapter 2 fails to constitute a logical bridge between chapters 1 and 3. Chapters 2 and 3 could have been more coherent. And with a fragmented and uneven narrative, chapter 6 fails to address the central argument of how the Wa or Myanmar fit into ‘China’s quest for global dominance’. Consequently, the book’s title seems crafted only to attract attention.

The Golden Triangle has been the main source of illegal drugs in China since the 1970s. Chapter 5 discusses the drug issue in Wa State and its effect on China but it does not cover the latest situation: because of the Covid-19 pandemic and strict border control, large amounts of drugs from the Golden Triangle are being hoarded in the border area of northern Myanmar. Delivery of drugs through express courier services and the online drug trade have been gaining ground in the past ten years. As a result, drug issues in Wa State are now posing a greater threat to China. In addition, the book gives no attention to the illegal gambling and telecom-fraud industry targeting Chinese nationals in Wa State. Such pervasive illicit activities on the border pose challenges to China’s national security and the Chinese Communist Party’s political legitimacy. To China, northern Myanmar has become a crime-ridden and lawless place and is notorious for defrauding Chinese nationals as well as kidnappings, torture and murders (disclosed by the victims and their families through TikTok and other social media platforms in China).

Throughout the book, the author shows a sympathetic understanding of the Wa position. The author argues that the Wa ethnic group’s distrust of the Chinese has deepened “with the promotion of ethnic theme parks, the hair-throwing dance and similar absurdities” (pp. 176–79) in China. This over-interpreted argument does not stand up to scrutiny. The restaurants owned by the Wa minority usually exploit their ethnicity and culture to attract diners in China. It is not unusual for the Wa to perform their folk dances and songs on social media platforms. Take, for example, Yi Che, a

Wa salesperson in Cangyuan county of Lincang, who has attracted 953,000 followers on TikTok and whose video of the Wa folk dance has received 13.78 million likes.

In general, this volume is not a serious academic work and remains a curate's egg. One cannot help but wish for something more substantial. The author maintains that "Chinese support for the Wa gives Beijing leverage inside Burma, it provides China the easiest and most convenient access to the Indian Ocean" (p. 3). But both the Wa's and Myanmar's strategic importance to China have been overstated. Scholars on Myanmar studies agree that the country has never trusted nor yielded to any foreign powers, including China, since its independence.

Lintner argues that Myanmar has played a key role in connecting China with the outside world and foreign trade since the 1990s. But China has increasingly attached importance to the maritime Southeast Asian countries in the post-Cold War era, particularly after China's accession to the World Trade Organization. Indeed, China-Myanmar bilateral trade volume hit US\$18.7 billion in 2019, making China Myanmar's biggest trading partner. The value was insignificant to China, however, accounting for merely 0.4 per cent of China's total foreign trade and 3 per cent of China-ASEAN trade in 2019.

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Home SOS: Gender, Violence, and Survival in Crisis Ordinary Cambodia. By Katherine Brickell. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley, 2020. xviii+262 pp.

Arguably the most conceptually innovative monograph on Cambodia to emerge in the last ten years, *Home SOS* brings together two critical themes in contemporary research on Cambodia—namely,