

Book Reviews

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Stalemate: Autonomy and Insurgency on the China-Myanmar Border.
By Andrew Ong. Cornell University Press, 2023. xix+253 pp.

The experience of reading—or re-reading—Andrew Ong’s *Stalemate* two years after its publication can prove a revelation of sorts. The reader recalls all the past reasons why reading about how the United Wa State Army (UWSA) had entrenched its presence along Myanmar’s peripheries and engaged different external interlocutors was important beyond the research focus. At the same time, paying attention to Ong’s approach to his ethnographic research on the Wa people and their governance practices reveals an empathy—but not necessarily agreement—with the choices and decisions that UWSA leaders made for political and economic survival.

Ong describes the Wa leadership’s decision-making for such survival as “relational autonomy”, a concept that will remain consequential for scholars seeking to peer through Myanmar’s opaque glass of authority assertion. Relational autonomy, as defined by Ong, is “enacted through engaging with the ‘outside’ by intermittent, oscillating political relations and managing porosity” (p. 8). It is informed by how the Wa understand autonomy. Such an understanding has its incongruities and dissonances as it must navigate or confront the “imposed expectations of statehood, territorial sovereignty and governance of the modern world” (p. 8). This concept serves as the theme that flows through the book from the introduction to the epilogue, linking each of the five chapters, which delve into the different dimensions of relational autonomy. Though Ong is focused on discussing relational autonomy in the Wa context, he might well be describing how power and authority are asserted, received and responded to in Myanmar more generally.

In the first chapter, “Peripheral Cosmopolitanisms”, Ong dispels preconceived (and statist) notions that the Wa are essentially wild and ungovernable. This cosmopolitanism has its unique characteristics. Ong uses the term “frontier liberty” (p. 37) as an apt description of highland autonomy, in which relational autonomy requires the ability to compromise and adapt in navigating political relations. But such liberty—or autonomy—at the periphery also has its dissonances. Wa leaders’ narratives about the importance of development and of being connected (to the wider world) mask dark legacies of how past military regimes used such narratives in allowing shady businesses to operate in Wa territory.

The second chapter further navigates the terrain of Wa autonomy. Ong engages the term “topography” in analysing the power structure of the UWSA and delves deeper into the modes of relations where hospitality and visitations achieve better results than impersonal bureaucratic interactions (p. 94), bringing up James Scott’s description of the “face-to-face quality” of patron-client relations. Norms and interpersonal (including patron-client) relations thus fill the void of state relations. Strong or autonomous leaders negotiate or act from a position of being responsible only to themselves and their people (p. 68). Thus, relations, norms and patronage determine autonomy. Wa leaders may not be familiar with the term “hedging” in international relations theory, but they have long practised it in their engagements with different external actors.

There are dissonances and incongruities, however, which Ong discusses in the third chapter, using the Wa’s experience—or frustrations—of participating in the nationwide ceasefire agreement negotiations of the Thein Sein administration. The different visions of autonomy (p. 101) and development between the Wa and the Myanmar military led to them talking past each other and ultimately to deepening Wa distrust in the military-orchestrated ceasefire process. These dissonances and incongruities create a stalemate, which even external parties such as China are unable to help to resolve.

The fourth and fifth chapters deal with governance. Chapter 4 discusses the changing landscape of the Wa’s borderland economy,

in which Ong dissects the practice of relational autonomy through five overlapping modes of accumulation (p. 133) and revisits earlier suggestions regarding spaces created by and for illicit financial activities, which make Wa a “frontier staging ground for the economy of appearances” (pp. 160–61). How do the Wa then spend or manage the accumulations from such an economy? Ong details the outward gestures of administrative control to attract investors in order to highlight the “dual nature of relational autonomy” (p. 145), which provided a veneer of institutional respectability while staying beyond state control.

Chapter 5 exposes a degree of wistfulness in Ong for the missed opportunities to help the Wa develop their autonomous capacity. Ong, the inside-out observer immersed in the work of developmental agencies to assist the Wa with governance, had ideas and suggestions that his Wa interlocutors acknowledged as valid but were reluctant to accept. Ong points out that without appreciating the Wa’s relational autonomy, which accepted external overtures as part of building political relationships, development assistance was doomed to be viewed with scepticism by both sides. At the end of the chapter, Ong concludes with a succinct observation that “governance would remain at the level of gesture” (p. 195) despite internal critiques and awareness on the part of the Wa.

Reading *Stalemate* against Myanmar’s current political moment, Ong’s brief postscript in the epilogue may present a starting point to consider further what relational autonomy may mean for other political and ethnic stakeholders in Myanmar and, indeed, whether there might be more similarities than differences between the periphery and the centre. Meanwhile, *Stalemate* will serve as an important reference for anyone in policy, research and business seeking to understand Myanmar beyond the headlines.

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