

***Echoes from the Sino-Burmese Borderlands: Untold Stories of Overland Chinese Migrants During the Cold War.* By Wen-Chin Chang. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Asia Center, 2025. Softcover: 385pp.**

Wen-Chin Chang's monograph on the long-overlooked Sino-Burmese borderlands is an empirically rich, historically grounded and theoretically rigorous contribution to Cold War studies, aligning closely with the grassroots turn in Cold War historiography, an alternative trend since the 1990s that focuses on ordinary people's lived experiences and memory. During the Cold War, three major actors operated in the Sino-Burmese borderlands. The first were the forces of the anti-communist Chinese nationalist Kuomintang (KMT), backed by Taiwan, the United States and Thailand. They operated in Shan State during the 1950s. The second were separatist movements among the Shan, Kachin and other ethnic groups, which became active from the late 1950s onwards. The third was the Communist Party of Burma (CPB), which maintained bases in the borderlands from 1968 until 1989.

Chang essentially frames the Cold War on the Sino-Burmese border as an extension of the Chinese Civil War: a protracted struggle between communist and anti-communist forces, which she calls "Two Chinas Meeting in Burma" (p. 4). The opening anecdote recounts reconciliation between several detained Chinese intelligence agents from both sides inside a Burmese prison, undermining the dominant tropes of irreversible hostility between the communists and anti-communists and complicating militarized accounts of the remnant KMT forces in Burma.

Beyond this reconceptualization, Chang makes two related but distinct departures from her earlier research. First, she moves away from her previously contentious framing of Burma as Yunnan's "back door", a sanctuary for political refugees and economic opportunists. Instead, she introduces the anthropological concept of "existential mobility" to rethink cross-border movements. Within her new framework, individual agency emerges as a fundamental imperative for survival and the pursuit of a better life, enabling individuals to overcome the harsh topography and repressive state rule, while prioritizing everyday lived experience, subjectivity and intersubjectivity. The frontier is characterized by the constant circulation of people, money, goods and information. Extending

Patterson Giersch's "middle ground" thesis (from *Asian Borderlands: The Transformation of Qing China's Yunnan Frontier*, 2006), Chang argues that the competitive, adaptive coexistence of diverse forces persisted along the Sino-Burmese borderlands throughout the Cold War, albeit in reconfigured forms distinct from those of the imperial era.

Second, Chang's earlier scholarship concentrated narrowly on the economic trajectories of Yunnanese refugees moving across Burma, Thailand and Taiwan, treating China's political movements largely as the backdrop for their exodus. However, in *Echoes from the Sino-Burmese Borderlands*, she focuses more explicitly on political aspects, specifically the stories of politically displaced migrants who remained border-bound or eventually returned to China, thereby responding to Yang Bin's call for greater scholarly attention to such overlooked groups. By writing individual "bare-life" stories (pp. 17–23) of marginalized communities, Chang shows how state-designated "outlaws" (namely rightists, landlords and other "class enemies") exercised constrained, reactive agency. They navigated precariously through clandestine border crossings, leveraging local knowledge of mule caravan routes and building adaptive networks. Throughout, Chang writes with nuanced empathy. Rather than reducing Yunnanese refugees to illegal migrants or contraband traders, she elevates them as descendants of historic caravan communities displaced by socialist transformation in both China and Burma, thereby recovering their complexity and dignity.

The book is structured into two parts. The first part (Chapters One to Five) unpacks the borderland's Cold War political dynamics, while the second part (Chapters Six to Nine) examines economic and socio-cultural developments. Chapters One to Three examine Taiwan's various espionage networks in Burma that targeted mainland China, featuring three agents motivated respectively by political loyalty, intergenerational familial trauma and economic necessity. The first two agents, Principal Yang and Chen Dage ("elder brother"), were both imprisoned in Yunnan but met very different fates. Yang died in Yunnan, without receiving posthumous recognition from his "political fatherland" (pp. 59–65), whereas Chen, who was officially commemorated as a martyr in Taiwan, survived political education in Yunnan, returned to Burma and, most importantly, appears to have shifted his political loyalty (pp. 94–102). The case of Ma Dage, a Yunnanese Muslim agent, further illustrates how Taiwan's intelligence unit navigated a small Shan

town's "motley throng" of forces: Luo Xinghan, Khun Sa and the Burmese Army (pp. 114–25).

Chapters Four and Five focus on two educated youths, Wang Dage and Pan Dajie ("elder sister"), who endured political stigma in China due to their families' prior affiliations with the KMT. Seeking to escape systemic discrimination, they enlisted in the CPB yet became disillusioned with both the party and its revolutionary ambitions. Wang's unexpected encounter with seized KMT books documenting its wartime contributions eased his doubts about his family's wartime deeds. Chapter Five, titled "Women Warriors", centres on Pan, a female CPB soldier, and presents both her unusual friendship with a prisoner and the resilience of three generations of women amid modern China's chronic political upheaval.

The second section (Chapters Six to Nine) turns to economic and socio-cultural affairs. Chapter Six highlights the understudied Yunnanese mule traders contracted by the Burmese military to supply frontier regions. Chapters Seven and Eight align more closely with Chang's previous academic focus, analysing underground contraband trade across key hubs along the Sino-Burmese borderlands. Chapter Nine comprises two stories about the pursuit of Chinese education that are also deeply political. The first follows Principal Huang, a man who fled Yunnan in 1966 and later taught Chinese to non-Han students in Burma. Huang held strong pro-KMT leanings and became caught in the competition between Taiwan and mainland China over choosing which textbooks to teach in a Wa school, yet his stance seemingly softened after a visit to Kunming, the capital of Yunnan Province. The second recounts the story of Bao Dajie, a Yunnanese refugee who returned to Yunnan to pursue schooling, lived through the Cultural Revolution, joined the CPB and eventually married a former KMT intelligence agent back in Burma. Collectively, these chapters reveal grassroots resistance to rigid Cold War binaries, foregrounding pragmatic economic practices and fluid political identities.

Methodologically, the work is interdisciplinary, drawing on long-term fieldwork conducted between 2011 and 2022 and archival research. The latter includes text housed in Taipei on Taiwan's espionage activities (Chapters One to Three) and British Library records documenting colonial-era mule transportation systems (Chapter Six). The referencing has minor shortcomings, including the absence of a separate archival bibliography, and some memoirs and gazetteers are listed as secondary sources, but these do not

detract from the book's scholarly value and may even reflect its field-led ethos. As essential reading for those interested in Chinese history, Burmese history, Cold War history and borderlands studies, *Echoes from the Sino-Burmese Borderlands* re-centres grassroots agency and frontier complexity, rewriting Cold War history from the interstices of the Sino-Burmese borderlands.

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