

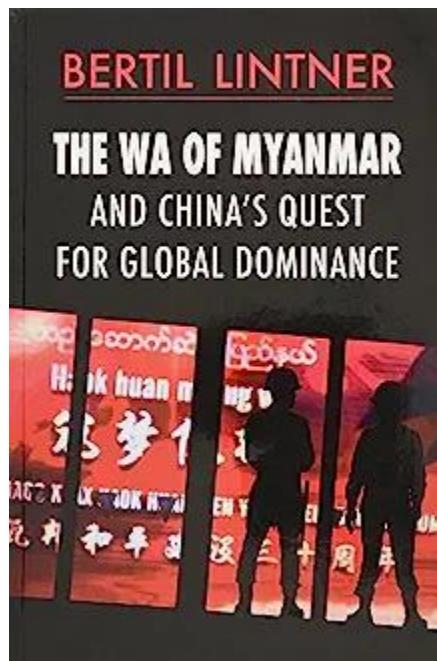
The Wa of Myanmar and China's Quest for Global Governance

Bertil Lintner

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VIII + 272 pp.



The Wa of northern Myanmar and southwestern China are almost the very definition of those groups of upland mainland Southeast Asia that Scott (2011) considered to have lived beyond the reach of any state. During the colonial period, they were scarcely administered at all and maintained their own cultural traditions, notably the headhunting that was considered their main characteristic. Even today, when their ways of life have been brought into the mainstream experience of a developmental state and their economy burnished by Chinese mobile telecommunications, consumer goods and transportation infrastructure, they still make few interventions in discussions of other people, even in discussions of Myanmar. There are reasons for this beyond a desire to mind their own business: the geographical and climatological conditions that can be challenging to outsiders, the importance of the drugs trade in the region and the use of Wa territory by the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) and its Chinese sponsors. Author and journalist Bertil Lintner is the only outsider to have been able to penetrate the region when the CPB was at its most active and the history of that time and its various protagonists represents one of the most important contributions of this book. However, this is not the only thing that the book attempts to achieve – the second part of the title reveals the additional goal of the work. This is a little unfortunate in since the modern history of the Wa people would have been sufficient contribution in its own right and, further, the title is misleading. There is no evidence presented that China is planning global dominance, although there is plenty of evidence that the country sees itself as playing an important role in keeping its southern neighbour in some kind of order. That this is required is apparent from the current situation, since the 2021 military coup has been followed by egregious attacks on civilians, including airstrikes, village eradication and widespread

murder. The Peace Research Institute Oslo reports that more than 6,000 civilians had been killed in the 20 months since the coup (PRIO, 2023).

The country is effectively in a state of civil war, with the military forces of the government (*Tatmadaw*) fighting against all those ethnic groups who had previously pursued armed struggles for autonomy, as well as everyone else standing up to the barbarity and injustice. The United Wa State Army (UWSA) is one of these groups. With a fighting strength of more than 30,000 people, the UWSA is the dominant force in the territory and able to conduct most roles of governance without external involvement (Xian, 2022).

Chinese capital has helped to revolutionise the lives of Wa people in Myanmar and strengthen their connections with their cousins across the border. Not all forms of capitalist development have been beneficial. Lintner describes the city of Mong La (p.128) as having grown into a centre for gambling, prostitution, Transvestite shows (a detail mentioned twice) and the sale of endangered animal parts for medicinal purposes. These urban areas have sprung up from lands which had been run as opium production centres as a means of generating the revenue necessary for mounting an armed struggle. Although the opium fields have mostly been replaced by legal cash crops, the legacy of mobile networks and cross-border transactions has persisted and facilitates avoidance of scrutiny. These advantages have been used by the Wa to create their own independent and unified state, possibly for the first time in history.

Lintner writes well and in detail – thankfully, there is a glossary of acronyms and abbreviations at the end of the text as well as brief details of the lives of prominent figures, many of whom use multiple names. He is a journalist and so can be relied upon to provide a framework of understanding. His sympathies are clearly with the Wa people and he is, finally, dismissive of the role of the CPB in seeking to promote their interests through political revolution, describing the CPB as using the Wa as ‘cannon fodder’ (p.141) and speaking a language not comprehensible to them. This brings to an end the central part of the book, which is the most successful. The third part, which follows the historical overview and then the CPB period, takes a look at the bigger picture of China’s possible domination of the region. I would be curious to know whose idea this was – author, editor or someone else? In any case, the subject is too large for Lintner’s method of careful accumulation of facts. He mentions the Belt and Road Initiative but only really to point out that calling the routes Silk Roads is inaccurate (which hardly matters) but ignores other manifestations of Chinese soft power such as Confucius Institutes and commercial investment in other countries. The analysis lacks sharpness and the focus on the Wa dissipates. The conclusion to the book is, therefore, disappointing, which is a pity because there is much to recommend the first two thirds.

There is much going on in contemporary Myanmar to keep Lintner occupied and his reporting and knowledge are of great value in helping to understand what is going on there, particularly in the northern region which is more difficult to access. Let us hope that he is able to report on better news in the future.

John Walsh, Kirk University

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