

The Border of Restlessness

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Phil Thornton

Restless Souls: Rebels, Refugees, Medics And Misfits On The Thai-Burma Border
Asia Books, 2006.
220 Pages
ISBN: 9748303918

In this light, you can't even see the border', the young monk told me as we hunched in the late afternoon, stealing another quiet conversation. The sun had almost finished its descent and the night—crisp and clear in the dry season—announced its arrival. An old man, one of the monk's friends, interrupted our chat and we became a trio, stooped over, lazily drawing patterns in the dust. The old man was quick to make his point. He was not joining us for idle conversation.

He spent little time explaining his personal background. Sixty-three years old with close cropped grey hair and a big toothy grin, he was a former officer in the local resistance army and wanted me to know that he never came to the border to admire the sunset. He told me he came to reflect on the thin line of national demarcation between Thailand and Burma that protects him from his enemies. 'This side,' he emphasised by stamping his foot on Thai soil, 'is like heaven. Even if you have no religion, you will understand that the other side, over there, that is hell.'

To reinforce this point, the old man reminded me of some of the widely publicised atrocities committed by the *other side*. For almost his whole life, he said, he had been confronting his opponents and grinding away at their will to fight. He said his army fought for 'self-rule and an independent homeland.' When I asked him what he wanted to see happen on the other side of the border he waved his fist. 'Sending in the UN would be a good start, with American planes and helicopters,' he asserted, as though he was about to mark out a plan of attack. As abruptly as he arrived, he just shook his head and wandered away.

Day in and day out as the years have rolled by, the old man, and many like him, have been fighting against the military dictatorships that have ruled Burma since 1962. Seizing control from the civilian government, the military have prioritised above all else the assertion of 'unity' between the country's Burmese majority and the ethnic minorities who populate the national fringe. Living in a Thai border town, the retired officer, a major, no longer plans attacks against Burmese patrols or plots out routes to supply those who have taken the fight to enemy strongholds. But, even today, the war he fought continues.

Staring across in to the Burmese night, from a vantage point near a border crossing, my friend, the monk, then began to heckle me about our vastly different lives. My friend, whose name is Phra Chaem, considered that it might be karma that I was born 'so lucky' in a peaceful country with no wars to fight. Before being ordained, he served as a soldier in the Major's rebel army and expects—after a stint in dark-red robes which keep him back from the frontline of insurgent life—to return to his vocation as a fighter. The fight against the Burmese military is Phra Chaem's life, and has been the end of many of his friends.

Many have died, or fled to Thailand. Others are living in the United States, Malaysia, Australia or Europe. To leave Burma, and the misery of life as a despised minority under military dictatorship, they must cross the border to



Thailand. This can be perilous, as they have no passports, little money and, in many cases, few useful language skills. At the border there is some safety and respite. 'Crossing in to Heaven,' as Phra Chaem now joked, 'is all that we can do. It is better than dying.'

The Burmese government allows two major border crossings that link significant Thai towns to their Burmese 'sibling cities' across the border. Along with many smaller villages that provide illicit opportunities for border crossing, these towns connect Burma to Thailand's newly industrialising smorgasbord of global tourism and immense social upheaval. In the far north of Thailand, Mae Sai is linked by a short 'friendship' bridge to Tachilek in Burma's Shan State. Phra Chaem makes much fun of the bridge and the 'friendship' it symbolises. His life is part of the irony. Maybe that is why he finds it so funny.

Jokes aside, Phra Chaem and his friends have left Burma with serious cause. The wars along Burma's eastern border—which have continued in some areas almost non-stop since World War II—are based on overlapping ethnic and ideological cleavages. Over the decades, democratic, communist, Christian, Buddhist and ethnically based separatist groups have all raised armies to fight the Burmese government and fight each other. These resistance forces seek to topple the military regime, or gain territorial independence for their own ethnic or political community. It is in areas of the country where the Burmese are a minority—like the Karen, Karenni, Mon and Shan States—that the fighting has been most intense. After decades of conflict, most of the remaining rebel groups are now wedged against the border where Thailand's openness (and the presence of supportive outsiders) provides some oxygen for continuing their struggles.

Recounting the experiences of ordinary people in this conflict is the goal of a new book by Australian journalist and long-term Thai-Burma border town resident, Phil Thornton. Before shifting his professional gaze to Southeast Asia, Thornton's previous book-length writings included a sympathetic portrayal of Australia's working class and a co-authored handbook for activists titled *I Protest!* Back in 2000, he first wrote about the Thai-Burma border at the request of Burmese democracy activists keen to chronicle

atrocities and human rights abuses committed by the *other side*. That he has since learned so much is testament to his persistence, guile and courage. For a man who reputedly has few regional language skills, his account is remarkably thorough.

In my academic hours I make small efforts to study Burma and the Burmese. The country remains in an academic scotoma, where analysis is formed by conjecture, stolen glances and the idle gossip that oozes from the country's wounds. Academic books are rarely read beyond a small circle of Burma-watchers, professional voyeurs and technocrats who have made the country their 'topic.' *Restless Souls* fills a notable gap as a conscientious and informed account of the human stories from Burma's border war-zone.

Most of Thornton's material comes from Mae Sot, a town in Thailand's far western Tak province. Bangkok is only about 500 kilometres away. Thornton describes the town's 'restless edge' and the way the border pulls its residents, both locals and foreigners, towards Burma and the nightmare of military rule. Mae Sot, which Thornton estimates has a population approaching 250,000, is now *de facto* headquarters for most groups with an interest in the fighting in Karen State. This war—which is fought by the Karen National Liberation Army against the Burmese military and its allies—continues with involvement from diverse medical, diplomatic, military, humanitarian and religious organisations. The Burmese military's 1994 alliance with a rival Karen faction, the Democratic Karen Buddhist Army, has made recent fighting some of the bloodiest and most dramatic in Burma's recent history.

The intractability and impenetrability of this conflict mean that its details are, largely, unknown. It plays out far from the orbit of CNN or the major broadsheets. Who has, for example, heard of the *Sa Sa Sa* or knows the names of Burmese field commanders? How does one become a mercenary in this day and age? Who funds a famous border health clinic and pays for its supplies? What kind of exploitation can you expect as an illegal immigrant in a factory in Thailand? What is it like to carry an injured civilian on a stretcher for days on end with potential ambushes over every ridge and around every corner? In Burma, how do you hunt a deserter or execute suspected spies?

In delving behind these and dozens of other important questions, Thornton recounts conversations in detail and describes the sounds, smells and sights of the border and the Karen State. In his introduction, Thornton writes that 'some publishers warned me that the story is too unknown and too remote for their readers.' But Thornton brings the story to life. True to his pedigree as an activist author, he focuses on the lives of the lowly and ignored. Throughout the book he pursues his mission with dogged persistence avoiding 'big-picture scenarios pushed by politicians and the like. I was more interested in the cracks between their words where I'd find the so-called ordinary people.'

The quality of Thornton's book comes from probing the lives of the border's incredible cast of 'ordinary people.' It ranges from a committed American military 'advisor' running a secret training base to bare-foot doctors and student/insurgent/philosophers, to a girl who dies from a back-alley abortion and guys making money from the mess. The characters are all given a chance to tell their stories. By giving voice to the people who actually live and work on the border, Thornton explains their lives beyond common journalistic caricatures of rebellion and illegality.

To better understand the border region, Thornton did not just sit around and wait for gossip in Mae Sot. He travels

to both Karen National Liberation Army and Democratic Karen Buddhist Army bases and does his own interviews with the rival commanders and their troops. The material from such encounters often must be read to be believed. In an interview with Major General Maung Chit Htoo, the notorious commander of a Democratic Karen Buddhist Army special operations battalion, Thornton asks to see a picture of Saw Ba U Gyi, father of the united Karen revolutionary movement before the schism. Thornton asks because the General claims that the picture in his bedroom is bigger than the one owned by the opposition Karen National Liberation Army commander, General Bo Mya. Thornton is led in to ‘the bedroom and there, hanging above the bed, with its stuffed toys and frilly pink bedcovers, [is] a large framed picture of the revered...leader.’ Phra Chaem would find this scene very funny. It is part of a very long story of resistance and oppression.

That story has always attracted foreign observers. Thornton is scathing toward the foreigners who float in to Mae Sot for observation and reconnaissance. One of the few who escape pillory is Desmond Ball, an Australian professor who travelled with Thornton on trips to areas outside Mae Sot. Ball is not known for exaggeration or nonsense. By contrast, Thornton relates that many other foreigners ‘whisper and brag about decapitation, stolen camp funds, spies, extortion, gambling, guns, drugs, sex, corruption.’ For Thornton, this is ‘like kids trying to out-scare each other.’ As he knows, the real horrors of the border are usually outside the experience of itinerant do-gooders and storytellers.

He also skewers the packs of roaming reporters who use the Karen struggle for stories:

As soon as the Asian monsoon ends,
photojournalists invade Mae Sot to seek
out Karen freedom fighters. The light is
right, andthere’s no more damp mould,
mud, or dengue fever. By mid-February
the dust and heat is intolerable, and the
journalists making promises to tell the
world and keep in touch, melt away.

Restless Souls is a reaction to this style of coverage. Thornton describes how some film crews offer to pay 30,000 baht (about US\$700) for ‘the Karen to use live ammunition and splatter blood plasma’ in fake ‘ambushes.’ Journalists struggle, according to Thornton, with ‘trying to adjust their already mentally written stories to the complex reality confronting them.’ Thornton sets himself the task of writing more thorough analysis of the border, its people and politics. *Restless Souls* is a salvo in his battle against journalistic fakery and fleeting interest and compassion. With an eye for personal stories, and lots of time, Thornton makes it his mission to better their inadequate and insincere coverage. Part of Thornton’s sincerity shows in his regular descriptions of different shades of danger. He travels in the Karen State, to the bases of armed factions and even accompanies a medical rescue mission deep in to Burma. On Thornton’s first foray in to Burma his armed companion quipped, ‘Welcome to the Karen State. Unfortunately, we can no longer guarantee your safety.’ He then bursts into laughter.

It is Thornton’s trips into Burma that make this book special. Thornton knows what it is like to walk through a place, like the Karen State, that is ‘a nightmare of unmapped mines and booby traps.’ Thornton acknowledges the hyperactive imaginations of those distant from the frontlines, ‘distorting fears and twisting realities.’ He has few kind words for foreigners, ‘remote from the guns, land-mines, smuggling, drug manufacture, or crime have a tendency to crave exotic or dangerous stories.’

Along the Thai-Burma border there are many examples of exotic and dangerous stories strewn between the ordinariness of daily struggles and laughter, even if the jokes are often black. Thornton describes one U.S. visa applicant’s commitment to honesty. Not wanting to ‘lie,’ this Mae Sot local openly acknowledged to the U.S. Embassy that he was once a ‘bomb maker’ and that he was also a devout ‘Muslim.’ Unsurprisingly, the application was rejected. Thornton concludes that this ‘story was a bad joke but captured the madness of Mae Sot and the Burmese conflict. It was tragic, sad, ironic, pathetic, insane, and funny all at the same time.’

Phra Chaem would find the story funny too. At the edge of heaven and hell, there are restless people, who can enjoy the gallows humour of purgatory and its pain. At its heart, *Restless Souls* is a story about global moralities and realities, illustrated by Thornton’s own epiphany. ‘Many more Karen will die,’ he writes, ‘or be condemned to a life of misery before the world and its media considers their plight more newsworthy than that of a footballer’s groin strain, a soap star’s sex life, a celebrity’s plastic surgery, or the banality of reality TV.’

In re-telling stories that remove the blinkers, Thornton marks out his argumentative high-ground. In places, the book overdoes its moralistic tone, particularly when Thornton points the finger at the preoccupations of ‘ordinary people’ in the West. It is, however, worth forgiving any perceived lapses. I am sure Thornton is just trying to provoke a broader debate about what *really* matters. His colourful descriptions and popular touch will ensure, I hope, that this book continues to gather an audience in the years to come.

Unfortunately, Phra Chaem will probably never read *Restless Souls*. He would, I am sure, recognise his own life in some of the bad jokes and appreciate the way that Thornton has tried to give a voice to a largely forgotten conflict and its ordinary victims. Staring at the border day after day, Phra Chaem knows heaven and hell but learned about them outside his monastic lessons. He has also learned to laugh at the darkness. Restless souls do like to joke, even on the darkest nights at the border.

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The State of the Union

by Gerald Ng

Standing in Chiapas
amidst the trees by a bend
in the Usumacinta River,
at the foot of Structure 33,
that sits atop a hill,
denuded perhaps of a dome
but not of mildew,
you can almost hear the voices
seeping through the walls
and the carved reliefs
of the game being played.
You can almost hear them say:
‘We couldn’t see it,
what the King could see.
But we believe it.
We were told.
We were told of the string
that ran through a hole
which was pierced in the Lady’s tongue,
how the blood dripped thick
from the Lady’s tongue,
how the blood dripped thick
onto paper,
how the paper was burned,

and how it yielded smoke
from which the Vision Serpent came.
The Vision Serpent
counselled war.
The Vision Serpent said,
“Be merciless.”
And when the Vision Serpent
disappeared, the King
had decided on war.’

They may have called Yaxchilán
the Place of the Split Sky.
You wonder who did the splitting
and when. Was it
in the beginning
or closer to the end?
The voices you almost hear say:
‘We have won now many victories.
We have taken many prisoners.
We keep them in cells beneath our pyramids.
We have sacrificed all year.
From Chichén Itzá to Copán,
from Palenque to Tikal,
the state of the union is strong.

We have sowed the seeds
that will yield us plenty.
We have tamed the wilful jungle.
Our smoke will billow
from the apex of a thousand pyramids,
a smoke made pungent
by the blood of our prisoners,
and our sons will play the ballgame,
though they’ll never know Xibalba.
The King has promised this.
And the state of the union is strong.’
Then the voices fade.
You think you hear them say,
‘We have had to sacrifice our children.
We have executed minors,’
but you’re not quite sure –
you don’t understand their tongue –
and at any rate,
you’ve heard enough
to curl your lips
into a smile.

Because, after all,
the state of the Union is strong.