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Ta'ang

Wang Bing

Producer Wang Yang, Mao Hui. **Production company** Chinese Shadows (Hong Kong), Wil Productions (France). **Director** Wang Bing. **Director of photography** Shan Xiaohui, Wang Bing. **Editor** Adam Kerby, Wang Bing.

DCP, colour. 148 min. Ta'ang, Mandarin.

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A civil war has been smouldering for decades in Myanmar's Kokang region, which is home to the Ta'ang people (also known as the Palaung). When their lives are once again in danger in spring 2015, it's mostly the women and children who flee over the border to China. Wang Bing accompanies a few of these communities thrown together by fate, at once modern and almost mythical and archaic. They wander the remote mountains with few possessions, camp in makeshift compounds and can sometimes earn a few yuan during the sugarcane harvest. Or they move on to the next place – which is never any better. Sometimes, around the evening campfire, they talk about what they've experienced – until someone says that it'd be better not to talk at all, it's too painful. Wang Bing's film doesn't try to analyse this forgotten war, but rather shows great sensitivity in bringing us closer to a people in need forgotten by the world. By the end, we feel huge respect for them – if only for the dignity with which they erect their shacks for yet another night for themselves and their children, reassuring their own mothers via mobile phone that everything's OK: they have each other, they're thus not afraid.

Dorothee Wenner

The refugees' life

This film was shot in China's Yunnan Province near the border with the Kokang region of neighbouring Myanmar.

Following civil war in Kokang province, around 100,000 ethnic Ta'ang (or Palaung), Han, Dai and Burmese took refuge in the small river valleys of the Sino-Myanmar border region.

These refugees have been surviving on the meagre food supplies they brought with them, gifts from civil society groups, or food bought from local Chinese merchants with whatever cash they still have.

We filmed life in the two refugee camps of Maidihe and Chachang, which were sheltering around 4,000 and 2,000 refugees respectively. Living conditions and camp locations are constantly changing due to overcrowding, with many people camping by the roadside. Many refugees are staying with relatives or friends in the small villages along the border. Most of them are doing odd jobs for local Chinese farmers, to make enough money to get by, usually helping with the sugar-cane harvest. We filmed several Ta'ang and Dai women living in Chachang camp, including Jin Xiaoman and Jin Xiaoda, who had come across the border into China with their children and elderly residents from their villages.

The refugees in the camp are constantly being moved from one place to another, so the women push further into Chinese territory to the village of Baiyan, provisionally making camp on the outskirts. During the day they go into the village to look for work. At night there is not enough room in the tent, so they pass the time talking by the fire while the children sleep inside.

One day, those refugees described in extended fireside conversations what many ordinary citizens went through in the Kokang conflict; their own experience of the terrors of the war, their escape, how they witnessed fellow villagers or relatives being beaten up, massacred, or forcibly enrolled as combatants.

For Xiaoman, this life as a refugee with her two children is one of constant fear and stress. She despairs for her future and thinks about suicide, but keeps going regardless, looking after her own two children and the other young and old people with her, while constantly thinking about her husband and their friends, who have stayed behind.

She wants to make life better for her children, but can't earn enough to give them regular square meals. Some of the women's husbands are in the army back in Burma, others have to stay to take care of the old people who can't travel, and to guard the family's home and property. But many families have been robbed of all they had, and their livestock have died from lack of care.

Chaheba is the area nearest to the Sino-Burmese border where around 700 refugees are now living scattered among different villages only about two kilometres from the war zone. Between 20 – 23 April 2015, fighting was particularly fierce. The sound of guns and explosions coming steadily closer to Chaheba caused growing anxiety among the refugees, who began to move deeper into the mountains, carrying their children and a few belongings. Now night is falling. The women and children have found a recently built shelter. They make a fire and stop for the night.

Wang Bing

Conflict in the Kokang Region in Myanmar

The renewed violence in the Kokang region of the northern Shan state in February 2015 has had serious repercussions for efforts to solve ethnic conflict in Burma/Myanmar¹ and end the decades-old civil war. The fighting started when troops led by the veteran Kokang leader Pheung Kya-shin (Peng Jiasheng) resurfaced in the Kokang region and attacked government and army positions after an interval of nearly six years. Pheung Kya-shin's Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army (MNDAA), a former ceasefire group and government ally, was ousted from the Kokang region in 2009 by a rival Kokang leader with the help of the Tatmadaw (national armed forces). This coup happened after Pheung's MNDAA had refused to accept the demand of the previous military government to transform into a Border Guard Force (BGF).²

The outbreak of renewed conflict in the Kokang region has, in turn, clouded the prospects of achieving a nationwide ceasefire agreement (NCA) in Myanmar. Battles broke out while negotiations were ongoing in Yangon. For while other ethnic armed organisations have called for peace talks and a halt to the renewed fighting, the quasi-civilian government under President Thein Sein has so far refused to address the Kokang crisis by political means. The Tatmadaw has responded with a large military offensive, supported by air strikes, in an all-out effort to drive out the MNDAA from the Kokang region. Although the MNDAA declared a unilateral ceasefire in June, the conflict continues and the MNDAA is still holding ground, with the Tatmadaw making rare public admissions of taking casualties.³

Fighting has also spilled across the border into China, killing five Chinese citizens in a mistargeted airstrike by the Myanmar air force. Such loss of life has put a severe strain on relations with China, Myanmar's largest foreign investor, which has stepped up security, calling on the government of President Thein Sein to solve the crisis through negotiations.⁴ The Kokang are ethnic Chinese and enjoy good relations with their cross-border cousins. In response, the Thein Sein government has publicly apologised. But amidst rising Buddhist nationalism in Myanmar, there are concerns that government officials are seeking to capitalise on anti-Chinese sentiment among the general population. The Tatmadaw has portrayed the fighting as a defence against foreign intruders and mercenaries in the protection of national soil,⁵ even though the Kokang are officially recognised as one of Myanmar's '135 national races'.⁶

More than 200,000 expelled civilians

The resumption of fighting has already had grave humanitarian consequences. More than 80,000 people have been displaced by the Kokang conflict, most of whom fled across the border to China. Equally serious, the renewed combat in the Kokang region has caused fighting to escalate in adjoining Kachin, Shan and Ta'ang (Palaung) areas of the northern Shan state where other ethnic armed organisations are in conflict with the central government. For reasons never properly explained by authorities in the capital Nay Pyi Taw, fighting has reignited across northeast Myanmar since President Thein Sein assumed office in March 2011. In contrast to peace initiatives in other parts of the country,⁷ the Tatmadaw has broken old and violated new ceasefires in both the Kachin and northern Shan states. Military security rather than political dialogue appears to be the Tatmadaw's default strategy in Myanmar's resource-rich northeast.

As a result, some 200,000 civilians have now been displaced from their homes in the China borderlands during the four years since President Thein Sein assumed office.⁸ At a time of much-hoped for reform in the country, such suffering is furthering mistrust about the government's intentions and its willingness to settle Myanmar's long-standing ethnic challenges through political negotiations rather than battlefield means.

During the past four years, the quasi-civilian government under President Thein Sein has introduced the most significant period of reform and national transition in many decades. By this process, the initiative to promote ethnic peace and end decades of civil war has become a key element, and the government has concluded new ceasefires with a majority of ethnic armed organisations in the country. However, for reasons never adequately explained by the government, armed conflict has resumed again in the northeast of the country, where Tatmadaw offensives are continuing and long-standing peace agreements have broken down, bringing serious loss of life and great suffering to many inhabitants in the Kachin and northern Shan states.

A spread of conflict

The resumption of fighting in the Kokang region is only the latest evidence of the spread of conflict in the new political era, and there are now local fears that the Tatmadaw has an undeclared strategy to expand its military operations into the Wa and Mongla regions in the near future. Not only are these conflicts threatening to jeopardise the government's efforts to achieve a nationwide ceasefire, but they have now caused China to publicly step in as a concerned international actor seeking to support peace. In their reporting of the Kokang conflict, the government and the Tatmadaw have blamed the fighting on the MNDAA.⁹ However, such an analysis fails to take into account earlier events in recent Kokang history, and the long-standing policy of shifting alliances by the Tatmadaw, which has been practising 'conflict management' rather than 'conflict resolution' strategies for many decades. The aim of this strategy is not to eliminate armed opposition groups and resolve conflict, but instead to contain and divide these groups, both internally (by creating or stimulating conflict within groups) or between them (by preventing strategic alliances and pursuing different policies with different groups). Given the scale of political and ethnic opposition to Tatmadaw rule during the past five decades, government strategists have preferred to take on groups one by one, and by focusing on weakening them, not only by military means but also by political and economic pressures. As a result, since a new ceasefire policy was introduced in 1989 by the former SLORC-SPDC [State Law and Order Restoration Council/State Peace and Development Council; the military regime -ed.] government, although a 'nationwide ceasefire' has always been the declared aim, the government has persistently concluded ceasefires with some groups while conducting military operations against others. Not only has this caused instability and considerable civilian displacement, this has also resulted in the fragmentation of nationality movements, making socio-political and economic dialogue very difficult on equal terms. In summary, the return of the MNDAA to the Kokang region is a result of the failed policies of the past and set in motion a series of unprecedented events.

Tom Kramer, Transnational Institute, Amsterdam, January 2016

- 1 In 1989 the then-military government changed the official name from Burma to Myanmar. They are alternative forms in the Burmese language, but their use has become a politicised issue. Myanmar is mostly used within the country and in international diplomacy, but it is not always used in the English language abroad. For consistency, Myanmar will be used in this report. For a discussion of the difficulties in using 'ethnic' or 'nationality' terms in the country, see, 'Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context: The 2014 Census, Identity and Citizenship in Burma/Myanmar', Transnational Institute (TNI)-Burma Centrum Nederland (BCN), Burma Policy Briefing Nr 13, February 2014.
- 2 See e.g., Tom Kramer, 'Burma's Ceasefires at Risk: Consequences of the Kokang Crisis for Peace and Democracy', TNI Peace & Security Briefing, September 2009.
- 3 'Fierce fighting continues near strategic hills in Kokang SAZ', Myawaddy News, 10 March 2015.
- 4 See e.g., Yun Sun, 'After Border Bombing, What's Next for Burma and China?', Irrawaddy, 18 March 2015; Lun Min Maung and Ye Mon, 'Myanmar apologises to China over cross-border bombing', Myanmar Times, 3 April 2015; Ankit Panda, 'After Myanmar Bombing, China Deploys Jets, Warns of "Resolute Measures"', The Diplomat, 15 March 2015.
- 5 'Tatmadaw never tolerates attempts to encroach upon Myanmar's sovereignty: Army holds press conference', Global New Light of Myanmar, 21 February 2015; and 'President U Thein Sein vows not to lose an inch of Myanmar's territory, honours military personnel who fight against Kokang renegades', Global New Light of Myanmar, 16 February 2015.
- 6 TNI, 'Ethnicity without Meaning, Data without Context'.
- 7 TNI, 'Ending Burma's Conflict Cycle? Prospects for Ethnic Peace', Burma Policy Briefing Nr. 8, February 2012.
- 8 After the breakdown of the Kachin ceasefire in June 2011, over 100,000 civilians were displaced: UNHCR, '2015 UNHCR country operations profile - Myanmar', <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/49e4877d6.html>. Following the outbreak of fighting in the Kokang region in February 2015, some 13,000 people fled to Lashio in northern Shan State, and some 60,000 people sought refuge in China. UNOCHA, 'Humanitarian Bulletin Myanmar', Issue 2, 1-28 February 2015. WFP estimates that 70,000 people from the Kokang region fled to China. WFP Myanmar, 'Situation Report: Kokang Response', 7 April 2015.
- 9 See e.g., 'Fighting breaks out between Tatmadaw, Kokang renegade troops', Global New Light of Myanmar, 9 February 2015.



Wang Bing was born in Xi'an (Shaanxi Province, China) in 1967. He studied photography at the Lu Xun Academy of Fine Art and cinematography at the Beijing Film Academy. He began his career as an independent filmmaker in 1999. Wang Bing came to the attention of an international audience with his three-part epic documentary *Tiexi qu/West of the Tracks*. In addition to making

films, he also created *Yuanyou/Crude Oil*, a 14-hour video installation. Wang Bing also works as a photographer.

Films

2002: *Tiexi qu/Tiexi District* (300 min., Berlinale Forum 2002).
 2003: *Tiexi qu/West of the Tracks* (554 min., Part 1: Rust, 244 min.; Part 2: Remnants, 178 min.; Part 3: Rails, 132 min.), *Yan fen jie/West of Tracks - Part II: Remnants* (176 min., Berlinale Forum 2003).
 2007: *Baoli gongchang/Brutality Factory* (14 min.), *He fengming/Fengming, a Chinese Memoir* (184 min.).
 2008: *Yuanyou/Crude Oil* (840 min.), *Tongdao/Coal Money* (52 min.).
 2009: *Wumingzhe/Man With No Name* (97 min.).
 2010: *Jiabianguo/The Ditch* (113 min.).
 2012: *San zimei/Three Sisters* (153 min.), *Gudu/Alone* (89 min.).
 2013: *Feng ai/'til Madness Do Us Part* (227 min.).
 2014: *Fu yu zi/Father and Son* (40 min.), *Yizhi/Traces* (25 min.).
 2016: *Ta'ang*.