In January 1948, Burma became independent, after more than sixty years under complete British colonial domination. Yet the early independence period in Burma was far from peaceful: soon after the transfer of power, a civil war broke out in the country. Several political groups with various political agendas launched armed rebellions against Prime Minister U Nu’s democratically elected government. In particular, the Karen National Defence Organisation, a military organisation formed within the Karen ethnic group, demanded independence from the Union of Burma, while the Burmese Communist Party contested the terms of independence that the Anti-Fascist People’s Freedom League (AFPFL), the main Burmese nationalist party, had negotiated with Britain. Among those different movements of rebellion threatening the central government with collapse, another insurgent group came to represent “one of the most serious problems facing Burma” (62), although it remains relatively less well-known than the others: the Chinese Nationalist Party or Kuomintang (KMT) troops who were stationed in northern Burma. The first KMT incursions occurred in 1949, in the context of the Chinese Civil War fought between the Chinese Communist Party (PRC) and the Chinese Nationalist forces. About 1,500 KMT soldiers fled China into Burma and occupied the area around Kengtung: with the support of Taiwan and the United States, they grew in number and organised a series of attacks against the PRC. It is estimated that, at their peak in 1953, there were around 12,500 KMT troops in Burma (62). It took the Burmese government more than a decade to effectively take care of what was commonly referred to as “the KMT issue.”

It is in this tumultuous post-independence context that Chow Bing Ngeow’s article, which deals with this little-known and understudied Burma-China border conflict, is set. In “Dragon in the Golden Triangle,” the author focuses on one of the latest developments of the KMT issue in Burma, namely the secret joint military campaign between the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) and the Tatmadaw (Burmese army) against the KMT in 1960–1961, known as Operation Mekong on the Burmese side and the Sino-Burmese Border Surveying and Security Operation on the Chinese side. As the author shows in the first part of the article, the nature of this event is quite unique for several reasons. First, it came as the result of a decade-long failure, on the part of both Rangoon and Beijing, to remove the KMT troops from northern Burma. On the Burmese side, although both diplomatic and military means had been deployed, for instance when the Burmese government had requested United Nations mediation in the matter, these “irregulars,” as they were often referred to in Burma,

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1 The first Burmese general election took place in April 1947, a few months before independence. The AFPFL obtained a large majority.

had only been partially removed (62). On the Chinese side, before coordinating a joint military operation with the Tatmadaw in the early 1960s, Beijing had resorted to different military, political and diplomatic strategies, without any success: the PRC attempted to strengthen border defence, used propaganda to try and get KMT troops to defect, and did not hesitate to bring up the matter on every major diplomatic occasion involving Chinese and Burmese officials in the course of the 1950s (67-68). The author indeed highlights the fact that the KMT issue was recurring in high-level diplomatic exchanges and involved all top Burmese and Chinese leaders, in particular U Nu, Ne Win, Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai, which reveals how important it was to Sino-Burmese relations (73).

Second, this cross-border military operation was difficult to carry out, not only because of fierce KMT resistance, but also because it involved an important diplomatic constraint: PLA troops were under very strict orders from Mao Zedong himself not to cross the border on the Burmese side (76). The author explains that the Kunming Agreement, the operational agreement reached by the two sides of the joint campaign in November 1960, defined a “red-line” inside Burma that the PLA could not cross under any pretext, to respect Burmese territorial integrity. This was a way of assuaging the Burmese government’s fears that the PRC would use the KMT issue as a pretext to occupy northern Burma. The Sino-Burmese border dispute had participated in straining the two countries’ diplomatic relations: the PRC contested the “1941 Line,” which had been negotiated between Britain and the Republic of China during the Second World War, although the matter was in the process of being settled in 1960. Nevertheless, the prospect of a joint military operation with the PRC re-ignited Burma’s suspicion towards the PRC’s motives, and the red-line aimed to ensure peaceful diplomatic relations between the two neighbours. According to Chow Bing Ngeow, the military aspect of the operation was in fact secondary to its overall political and diplomatic implications (76), which explains why it is examined against the backdrop of the strengthening of diplomatic and economic relations between Burma and the PRC in that period. There was even, interestingly, a cultural side to this Sino-Burmese military cooperation: the author portrays how, in the mid-1950s, the PRC coordinated an important propaganda effort (through various media such as leaflets, audio recordings and radio broadcasts) that targeted local people in the border towns3 (68) or how, from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, there were numerous PLA-Tatmadaw friendly exchange activities organised on each side of the border to enhance the two countries’ diplomatic efforts (71).

Third, the author argues that this event not only provides some insight into Sino-Burmese diplomatic relations, but that it also had much larger diplomatic repercussions. This joint military operation, although it was rather small in scale, is analysed in the article in the broader context of the Cold War in Asia. According to the author, this campaign raised for Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai a number of diplomatic concerns linked with how the PRC was perceived on the international stage, which may explain why the operation was kept secret for a long time: “would the campaign increase the fear towards the PRC by other Southeast Asian countries? Would it be misconstrued by ‘anti-China’ forces to portray the PRC as an aggressive power?” (75). The whole KMT issue is in fact a little-known yet intricate Cold War battlefield that involved two of the main Cold War powers, the PRC and the United States. Chow Bing Ngeow underlines the connection between the Central Intelligence Agency’s-backed military assistance to the KMT troops in Burma and US strategic concerns at the beginning of the Korean War: the plan of the US government and the CIA was to use KMT forces in Burma in order to divert the PRC’s attention away from Korea (63); of course, this had quite a

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3 On that topic, see also Gregg A. Brazinsky, Winning the Third World: Sino-American Rivalry during the Cold War (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 162.
damaging long-term impact on Burma-US relations. In the end, the KMT issue became “a major foreign policy conundrum for Burma” (62): while the Burmese government was trying at the time to affirm and maintain a position of neutrality in international affairs, the KMT’s presence in the north of the country led both the PRC and the US to get involved, therefore threatening Burma’s neutrality.

In the second part of the article, the author adopts a military historical perspective on the Sino-Burmese 1960-1961 campaign. He describes the step-by-step developments of what was supposed to be an “annihilation campaign”, i.e. the full destruction of enemy troops. He details the composition of military units and their areas of operation, the order of command, tactical instructions, the unfolding of combats, the withdrawal of PRC troops from Burma after the end of the campaign (74–79), and the PRC’s assessment of the successes and limits of the operation afterwards (79–81). Interestingly, the PRC viewed the operation as a diplomatic and strategic success, as it put an end to the KMT threat in northern Burma without damaging Sino-Burmese diplomatic relations, but a limited military one, in particular because the enemy was not “annihilated” completely (79–80). In any case, the author sheds light on the impact of this military operation, carried out in a difficult tropical terrain, on the subsequent reorganisation of the PLA’s training to include intensive tropical jungle warfare, which proved very useful for future operations in Vietnam (81).

One invaluable strength of this article is, without a doubt, the original and rich sources on which it is based. Indeed, Chow Bing Ngeow has employed to a wide array of different primary sources, such as official documents, but also the memoirs and autobiographies of diplomats, national leaders or PLA officers, to reconstruct this little-known aspect of PRC-Burma relations in the 1960s. Among the numerous official documents from PRC archives that he employs, some have only recently been released or declassified. Also, as the author underlines, PRC sources have only rarely been used by historians working on Burma, in comparison with British and American archives that are more easily available, or KMT and Burmese sources that have been used in previous historical analyses of the KMT issue in Burma (65), although confronting sources from these different countries seems essential to get the complete picture of a border conflict involving several foreign powers. Thanks to PRC sources, the author was able to fill certain gaps in this complex story, and to highlight some inconsistencies in the existing historical accounts: for example, when he discusses the origins of the Sino-Burmese joint campaign, he points out that, according to American sources, the PLA was ready to launch an attack against KMT troops in Burma as early as 1953, while according to the PRC archives, the joint mission was first suggested by the Burmese side, in 1957 (71). However, although this article fills many gaps in the history of the KMT issue, the author suggests that some unanswered questions remain, such as the reason why the Tatmadaw waited until the second half of December 1960 to launch its military operation, that is to say after the PLA had already completed its part of the mission (78).

In any case, this article represents a major contribution to the existing scholarship on the thorny KMT issue in Burma, which has, up until now, mostly dealt with the early years of the conflict and focused on the United

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5 Similarly, Mary Callahan explains in her book that the KMT threat was a “catalyst for reform” for the Tatmadaw, helping it to reorganise for more efficiency; Mary Callahan, *War and State Building in Burma* (Singapore: Singapore University Press, 2004), 154–155.

6 For instance, Chow Bing Ngeow employs the memoirs of various senior officers within the PLA, such as Qin Jiwei’s (67) or Yang Chengwu’s (73). He also refers on several occasions to the invaluable work of Chin Yee-hua, a KMT veteran turned scholar; Chin Yee-hua, *A History of the KMT Army in the Golden Triangle, 1950-81* (Taipei: Zhonyang yanjiyuan, Lianjing chuban gongsi, 2009).
States’ catastrophic involvement in the affair.\textsuperscript{7} It also contributes to documenting Burma-PRC diplomatic relations\textsuperscript{8} prior to the 1962 military coup in Burma, which led to its long period of isolationism on the international stage, as well as to writing the history of Burma during the Cold War, a period of Burmese history which has received less academic attention than the colonial period or the period of military dictatorship from 1962 onwards.\textsuperscript{9} Finally, this article is also a welcome addition to the historiography of the global Cold War. The author connects this rather unique military operation with Burmese, Chinese, and US broader strategy during the Cold War and demonstrates that the \textit{Sino-Burmese Border Operation} had just have local, but also global, diplomatic repercussions. It helped strengthen the diplomatic relations between Beijing and Rangoon (while American assistance to KMT troops in Burma on the contrary damaged diplomatic ties between Washington and Rangoon), and challenged Burma’s position of neutrality in the Cold War conflict.

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\textsuperscript{7} Chow Bing Ngeow mentions, among others, Robert H. Taylor, \textit{Foreign and Domestic Consequences of the KMT Involvement in Burma} (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1973) and Gibson, \textit{The Secret Army}. The KMT issue is also analysed in several studies of American and British policy in the Cold War context, such as Peter Lowe, \textit{Contending with Nationalism and Communism: British Policy towards Southeast Asia, 1945-65} (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009) and Foley, \textit{The Cold War and National Assertion}.

\textsuperscript{8} Modern and contemporary China-Burma/Myanmar relations have only been the subject of one monograph. See David I. Steinberg and Hongwei Fan, \textit{Modern China-Myanmar Relations, Dilemmas of Mutual Dependence} (Copenhagen: Nias Press, 2012).

\textsuperscript{9} To the notable exception of Matthew Foley’s \textit{The Cold War and National Assertion}.