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Kai Chen. *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer, 2024.

Southeast Asian Studies, 1-4 (in press).

How to Cite:

Plowright, William. Review of *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond* by Kai Chen. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2025, 1-4 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br25011.

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Kai Chen. *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond*. Singapore: Springer, 2024.

Reviewed by William Plowright*

Kai Chen's monograph *Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the Borderlands of Myanmar: 2021 and Beyond* adopts an empirical and policy approach to understanding the current status of children affected by armed conflict in the region.

Myanmar's history is deeply scarred by decades of internal conflict that have been raging—in one form or another—since the country's independence from the United Kingdom in 1948. These struggles have persisted since the nation's independence, with ongoing clashes between the military and an alphabet soup of armed groups representing many ethnic or political minorities (Kramer 2015; Cheesman and Farrelly 2016; Anwary 2020). This turmoil has had a devastating impact on Myanmar's children, especially among ethnic minorities living in the regions outside the *de facto* control of the Burman-dominated regime and its security services. Children are subjected to immense risks, including forced displacement, constant exposure to brutal violence, and the breakdown of essential services like education and health care. Tragically, many children are killed or suffer life-altering injuries from land mines and air strikes. Furthermore, the conflicts have led to a surge in child soldier recruitment and widespread malnutrition, leaving an entire generation traumatized and robbed of their fundamental rights.

This book seeks to shed light on recent trends in these conflicts. It looks at the case of the borderland regions of Myanmar, focusing specifically on changes since the February 2021 regime change. At that time, the Tatmadaw (Armed Forces of Myanmar) seized power, overthrowing the democratically elected government and reversing a period of democratic progress. The event plunged Myanmar into widespread civil unrest, armed conflict, and a severe humanitarian crisis, devastating the country's economy and displacing hundreds of thousands of people. As with any instance of political turmoil, the impacts were felt most deeply by the most vulnerable groups, of which children were no exception.

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While the literature on children and conflict has blossomed in the 2000s (see, for example, Singer 2005; Honwana 2011; Drumbl 2012), recent literature has taken more nuanced turns, analyzing more specific dynamics (see, for instance, Haer 2019; Plowright 2022) or containing empirical studies, such as Chen's previous work on child soldiers on the China-Myanmar border (2014) and children on the Thai side of the border (2021). This book fits well into the broader literature on child soldiers as well as studies specifically looking at the issue within Myanmar. It will be of great use to scholars and practitioners working on the political dynamics of Myanmar as well as those interested in border studies. Researchers on children and conflict will also gain from the empirical insight within the pages.

The book is divided into ten chapters. The introductory chapter provides background on recent events in Myanmar, especially the regime change in 2021. It also details the methodology used in this study: the primary methodological approach was document analysis, conducted externally to the region under study. This was due primarily to security concerns, and the risks that would fall on both interviewers and interviewees were such research to be conducted within the conflict areas or in the Tatmadaw-controlled parts of the country. It further provides discussion and definition of key concepts under analysis in the chapters to follow.

The following three chapters discuss three different regions in Myanmar, and the specific status of children and armed conflict within each of them. Chapter 2 looks at children in the western borderlands, paying particular attention to Rakhine and Chin States and Sagaing Region. Chapter 3 focuses on the situation on the Myanmar-Thai border, with special attention to Kayin State and Kayah State. The following chapter analyzes areas along the northern Chinese border, specifically Shan State and Kachin State.

Attention is then turned in the fifth chapter to the situation of children and insecurity in the remainder of Myanmar, including the Yangon capital region and other Burman-dominated regions, including Mandalay, Ayeyarwaddy, Bago, and Magway Regions. Particular attention is paid to bombings and assassinations that have fuelled conflict. The sixth chapter looks at the situation of Burmese children displaced to the neighboring countries of Bangladesh, India, and Thailand.

The remainder of the book is taken up by analysis of policy. Chapter 7 aims to analyze the main initiatives taken by stakeholders in their attempts to protect children affected by armed conflict in Myanmar. This chapter looks at international, state, and interstate organizations, including the Association of Southeast Asian Nations and the United Nations and its various agencies (including UNICEF, UNHCR, FAO, ILO, and WHO). It also discusses the efforts of international humanitarian nongovernmental organizations, including Médecins Sans Frontières and Save the Children. It then focuses on local community-based organizations and civil society organizations before turning to the National Unity Government and the State Administration Council. Chapter 8 deals with the obstacles facing stakeholders, which include the lack of con-

sensus among various actors and also the limited funding available for humanitarian responses addressing the needs of children in armed conflict. The chapter points out the challenges of working with or alongside the Tatmadaw. As the author observes, a lack of consensus among local and international stakeholders—including the regime in power—makes addressing the issues affecting children particularly difficult to resolve.

Chapter 9 discusses Chen's proposal for a humanitarian ceasefire as a policy option, which, the book argues, could be the most feasible solution to protect children from armed conflict. As the war has long reached a stalemate, in which no side can gain an advantage that would end the war, the conflict is unlikely to end anytime soon. Components of Chen's plan include the immediate provision of humanitarian assistance to victims of armed conflict in Myanmar—especially vulnerable groups such as children. Further, the author points to the need for safe passage of civilians, both out of and into the regions affected by conflict. He notes the need to address the large numbers of prisoners and detainees held by the state, which could be as high as twenty thousand. These include members of ethnic minorities and armed groups, but also journalists, scholars, and human rights activists.

Chapter 10 summarizes the book's research. It acknowledges the shortcoming of the author's inability to visit the conflict-affected areas to speak directly to those impacted. The chapter also points to future avenues of research and policy development. Specifically, the author notes one important area in which more research is needed: "the extent to which Myanmar will be militarized in the future" (p. 83).

This book is useful in providing an empirical overview of the key issues facing children and the armed conflicts in different regions of Myanmar—from that involving Rohingya in the west to those involving broader alliances of ethnic groups in the north and east. The major shortcoming of the book is one the author acknowledges several times: that it is not the product of firsthand research on the ground but is instead a survey of what was available online on the relevant topics at hand. A secondary issue, however, is that it also does not use sources in local languages from either the state or the constellation of ethnic or political groups which oppose it. It is reliant on English-language news sources, which naturally are not able to provide a full picture of events in Myanmar, especially those directly relevant to children. These news sources, in turn, are reliant on reports by international organizations and nongovernmental organizations, which have limited access in the country and may themselves lack local knowledge.

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