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KMT Troops and the Border Consolidation Process in Northern Thailand


Cui Feng*

After the Kuomintang (KMT) lost control of mainland China in 1949, some of its troops retreated to mainland Southeast Asia, marking the start of a period of mutual interaction between the KMT troops and Southeast Asian states in the context of the Cold War. The objective of this paper is to focus on the KMT troops who retreated to Northern Thailand. The author argues that the KMT troops, as protagonists in border areas, promoted border consolidation in Northern Thailand through war and village building. The Thai government, lacking effective jurisdiction over the border, took advantage of the KMT, using it as the most effective tool for border management and as a military force to counter the Communist threat along border areas. Through years of fighting with the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT), KMT troops helped eliminate potential security risks in Northern Thailand. Consequently, border villages with defenses bolstered during the war years epitomized the Northern Thai border being brought under the aegis of state control.

Keywords: KMT, Cold War, Chiang Rai, CPT, Northern Thailand, Chiang Mai

Introduction

After the government of the Republic of China (ROC) was defeated by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) in the Chinese Civil War, tens of thousands of Kuomintang (KMT)¹⁾ soldiers retreated to the border areas between Burma and Thailand. Later, in the 1950s and 1961, some of them withdrew to Taiwan; but thousands chose to stay in the mountainous areas of Northern Thailand, mostly the remote areas of Chiang Rai and Chang

* 崔峰, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, Blk AS8, Level 6, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, Singapore 119260
e-mail: cui.feng@u.nus.edu
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0955-5163>

1) The KMT (Chinese Nationalist Party) was the dominant ruling party of the Republic of China on the mainland from 1928 to 1949. The KMT regime was defeated by the CCP in the Chinese Civil War and retreated to Taiwan in 1949. This paper focuses on the KMT soldiers who retreated to Southeast Asia after 1949 and later settled in Northern Thailand.

Mai. There are numerous excellent works on these KMT veterans and their descendants stationed in Northern Thailand (Chang 2001; Duan 2008; Clymer 2014; Zhang 2014). However, most of this research has adopted an anthropology focus, such as the transformation of the identity of the KMT soldiers and the integration of KMT soldiers and their descendants into Thai society. Some papers have also concentrated on the interaction between KMT soldiers and the ROC (Taiwan) and the Thai government, as well as Taiwan's aid work for these diasporas (Hung and Baird 2017). In addition, a few outstanding works explore the role of KMT soldiers in drug trafficking, ethnic politics, and military actions in the Golden Triangle (Chao 1987; McCoy 1991; Smith 1991; Lintner 1994; Renard 1996; Gibson and Chen 2011).

This paper, based on previous scholarship and supplementary sources, analyzes the role of KMT troops from the perspective of the consolidation of Northern Thailand's border areas. Northern Thailand, a remote area for the central government in Bangkok, was not incorporated into the territory of the Bangkok regime (Chakri Dynasty) until 1892. A few Tai kingdoms had been established one after another on the border of Burma and Laos in the past, though it should be noted that there was no modern national border. Later, although the Thai government drew its entire national border lines, the border in Northern Thailand remained simply a line on the map, subjected to little enforcement from Bangkok.

Following the specific characteristics of border areas in Northern Thailand, this paper argues that the KMT troops eventually became one of the vital promoters in the consolidation of the boundary areas in Northern Thailand. In other words, the KMT soldiers, as one of the groups of participants, helped the central Thai government to formally launch an effective boundary administration that carried out the physical incorporation of the border areas of Northern Thailand into state power. In order to prove this argument, this article is divided into two main parts. First, it gives an account of the particularity of the history of Chiang Rai, which is one of the main cities in Northern Thailand, followed by a series of historical narratives from KMT soldiers after they entered mainland Southeast Asia. Second, the article discusses the border war between the KMT troops and the Communist armies that lasted several years following the rise of Communist insurgencies in Northern Thailand. The objective here is to analyze the role of the KMT troops throughout these historical events in the border areas of Northern Thailand. The author went on a field trip to conduct research in Mae Salong in Chiang Rai Province in 2018. He visited several border villages where descendants of the KMT lived, and recorded personal conversations with both KMT veterans and their descendants. Additionally, the author was able to collate precious historical materials from these border villages, such as the KMT's military plans and operational reports of attacks on

the Communist Party of Thailand (CPT) in the mountainous areas of Chiang Rai.

From City-State to Province, an Entity without Boundaries

From the beginning of the thirteenth century, political entities, or so-called kingdoms, formed by Thais began to emerge in mainland Southeast Asia. David Wyatt termed the period from the thirteenth to the fourteenth century in mainland Southeast Asia the “Tai Century” (Wyatt 2003, 30–49). In 1262, during the reign of King Mangrai, Chiang Rai was established as the center of the Lanna Kingdom. As a traditional kingdom of Southeast Asia, the Lanna Kingdom had no boundaries in the modern sense; it can be said that the kingdoms of Southeast Asia and Western countries had different concepts of boundaries (Thongchai 1994, 62–80). The British government dispatched a delegate to Chiang Mai from 1834 to 1836 to explore the border (Thongchai 1994, 68)—the first record of a border exploration mission in Northern Thailand. By this time Chiang Rai was already a subsidiary state of Chiang Mai. It can be said that Northern Thailand had been developing independently for a long time, since it contained political entities.

It was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Northern Thailand was gradually integrated into the jurisdiction of the central government of Bangkok (Penth 2000, 69–85). Chiang Rai was proclaimed a province of Thailand in 1933. However, even though Northern Thailand has had clear borders on the map since the start of the twentieth century, for people living in the border area the line dividing different territories has not hindered cross-border exchanges. In the early part of the twentieth century, borderland residents in mainland Southeast Asia tended to regard the line itself as “an artificial separation of their centuries-old trade and social networks” (Turner 2010, 267). To the central government of Bangkok, the line was unrealistic and an inefficient way of administering strict boundaries in the remote northern area. The Thai government did not manage to devise an effective way to administer boundary areas in Northern Thailand at that time (Kessaraporn 2015, 16). This was a parlous situation that became a harbinger of what was to come later, during the Cold War.

Homeless Soldiers with Borderless Land

The first time KMT troops entered Northern Thailand was in the spring of 1961, after their base in Burma had been besieged by Burmese troops and the Chinese People’s Liberation Army (PLA) (Gu 2019, 273). However, the earliest interactions of KMT

troops in mainland Southeast Asia can be traced back to 1949, close to the end of China's civil war.²⁾ At the end of 1949, the PLA launched a general offensive campaign against KMT troops in Yunnan. Then, Lu Han, chairman of Yunnan Province, surrendered to the CCP (Bian 2014, 14). On February 24, 1950 the KMT troops in Yunnan were basically either eliminated by the PLA or ceased to offer resistance. But Li Guohui, head of the 709th Regiment of the 237th Division, Eighth Army of the KMT troops, led a retreat of more than two thousand soldiers to the borders of Myanmar, Laos, and Thailand, an area known as the Golden Triangle (He 2012, 4–13). At the same time, around 2,500 soldiers from the 93rd Division of the 26th Army of the KMT fled the Yunnan border (Sun 2010, 14–19). Soon after this, these retreating KMT troops were effectively reunited and organized by General Li Mi, who had been dispatched by the ROC government (Taiwan). The KMT troops grew rapidly and absorbed many people who had fled from Yunnan.

By the end of 1950, the KMT troops that had retreated to the Thai-Burmese border swelled to about ten thousand (Qin 2009, 7). The KMT soldiers stranded in mainland Southeast Asia attracted the attention of the United States, which provided them with urgent military assistance in order to contain mainland China, which the United States had fought in the Korean War, and also to prevent Burma from becoming the next Communist country (Clymer 2014, 25). In fact, assistance was provided to the KMT by cooperation between the United States and Thailand. CIA personnel set up a company called Southeast Asian Defense Supplies in Bangkok to supply the KMT with weapons, which were delivered to the Thailand-Burma border by Thai police and the CIA (Qin 2009, 124). At the beginning of the Korean War, the United States provided General Li Mi's army with two thousand carbines, one thousand rifles, and two hundred machine guns (Kanchana 2003, 32–33).

On May 15, 1951, after the KMT troops had accumulated enough numbers, General Li Mi commanded more than eight thousand soldiers to counterattack Yunnan. The KMT troops, boosted by their strong morale, quickly seized several cities along the Yunnan border, including Lan Cang, Meng Lian, Xi Meng, and Nan San. Nevertheless, the KMT had to retreat from Yunnan again under siege from the three divisions of the PLA in July 1951 (Gibson and Chen 2011, 78–82). Although the counterattack against mainland China failed, the KMT troops led by Li Mi continued to grow in mainland Southeast Asia; and

2) During World War II the KMT army was an important participant in the Burma battlefield. After the end of World War II, this army also participated in the takeover of Northern Vietnam. Both these actions represented the deep engagement of KMT soldiers in mainland Southeast Asia. However, this paper focuses on the KMT soldiers who retreated to Southeast Asia after the KMT's defeat in the Chinese Civil War in 1949.

by 1953 Li Mi had three corps with a total strength of thirty thousand to forty thousand soldiers, with the assistance of the CIA (McCoy 1991, 162–174). However, the rapid growth of the KMT army in northern Burma had aroused great concern and hostility on the part of the Burmese government (Chang 2001, 1092), and in 1953 Burma sought to mobilize elite troops to annihilate the KMT troops in one fell swoop in order to restore national security. However, the Burmese army was defeated after some brutal combat and so had to find a diplomatic way to resolve the issue of the KMT troops being stranded in Burma.

On March 28, Burma submitted the appeal of “Complaint by the Union of Burma Regarding Aggression against Her by Kuomintang Government of Formosa” to the United Nations. The resolution was passed by the United Nations, and the KMT troops had to withdraw from the region. Burma’s diplomatic appeal brought tremendous diplomatic pressure to bear on the United States and the ROC. Therefore, the United States also exerted pressure on the ROC to facilitate the withdrawal of the KMT soldiers from Burma to Taiwan. Dean Acheson, who was the United States secretary of state at the time, told the ROC government that Burma’s appeal to the United Nations had caused great embarrassment to Taiwan and asked Taiwan to estimate the specific withdrawal time (Clymer 2014, 28). Between November 1953 and June 1954, some 6,568 KMT troops retreated from Burma to Taiwan (Qin 2009, 168). This represented only a partial withdrawal, though, as the KMT still had five thousand soldiers left on the border between Thailand and Burma, an area that was being used as a base for counterattacks on mainland China (Kanchana 2003, 66–67). The remaining troops renamed themselves the Yunnan Anticommunist Volunteer Army (*yunnan fangong ziyuanjun*) in order to distinguish themselves from the regular army of the ROC. However, the ROC government still connected with them covertly. Both mainland China and Burma viewed the KMT troops remaining in Burma as a huge threat. Therefore, between 1960 and 1961 the PLA and the Burmese army conducted two joint military operations in order to completely eliminate the remaining KMT troops.

The PLA dispatched the 13th and 14th Armies, and three border defense regiments of the Yunnan Military Region, with a total force of ten thousand troops. On November 12, 1960 the PLA entered Burma for encirclement and suppression (Xu 2014, 78–79). The first military operation lasted two months, but the outcome was not ideal as the main force of the KMT troops was left damaged. Therefore, on January 25, 1961 the PLA carried out a more draconian operation, this time employing four regiments. This military onslaught dealt a withering blow to the KMT troops, who suffered the loss of two division commanders and 740 soldiers while one deputy division commander was captured (Xu 2009, 5–9). The remaining KMT soldiers fled to Laos and Northern Thailand. At the

same time, Taiwan stepped up the last round of withdrawal of the remaining KMT troops from mainland Southeast Asia.

From Burma to Thailand, Becoming Alien Border Guards

The last evacuation of KMT troops to Taiwan took place in 1961. According to a CIA report, the ROC government (Taiwan) had withdrawn 3,371 soldiers and 825 dependants from Burma-Thailand-Laos border areas to Taiwan between March 17 and April 12, 1961 (CIA, July 29, 1961). However, many soldiers and officers were reluctant to retreat to Taiwan, since most of them were from Yunnan and saw Taiwan as a distant and unfamiliar place. General Duan Xiwen, the leader of the Fifth Army, explained:

Well, most of us here are from Yunnan, just across the Burmese border with China. We all have relatives there. Someday we hope to be able to return when the Communists are beaten. Between Taiwan and mainland China, there are many miles of water. It is not so easy to get to China from Formosa. (*New York Times*, September 8, 1966)

Officers were also concerned that they would lose their military and political cachet in Taiwan since most of them came from irregular troops, which were not trusted by the ROC government in Taiwan. Accordingly, the Third and Fifth Armies refused to retreat, which then compelled the ROC government to officially cancel the designation of these two troops and halt their supplies. After that, these KMT troops became active in the border areas of Northern Thailand. The Third Army numbered 1,400 men and was stationed in Tham Ngob in Fang District (later in Chaibrakan District) under the leadership of General Li Wenhuan, while the Fifth Army, led by General Duan Xiwen, comprised 1,800 men and was stationed in Mae Salong, which lay north of Chiang Rai (McCoy 1991, 352).

An important reason why these KMT troops were dotted around Northern Thailand was that the Thai government had still not been able to implement effective national management of the northern border. Apart from the historical reason, as mentioned above, the Lanna Kingdom (later the Chiang Mai Kingdom too), which had once been a traditional Southeast Asian kingdom without clear boundaries, had only recently been incorporated into Thai territory. The borders of Northern Thailand faced Burma and Laos and were lush with mountains and forests. Thailand lacked sufficient human and material resources to manage its more remote borders, but with the arrival of the KMT troops and the ongoing Cold War the northern border became dramatically more significant. Mutual cooperation between the Thai government and the KMT troops resulted in tremendous changes in the border issue in Northern Thailand. The collaboration

between the KMT and the Thai government created a more effective form of management and a safer border around Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai. The KMT helped the Thai government to solve two major border problems in Northern Thailand: the lack of border security and the lack of human resources.

Because of border security concerns and a fear of Burma, Thailand had always wanted to use the KMT soldiers to defend its border. As early as the end of March 1954, when the Thai government realized that Taiwan was going to withdraw all the KMT soldiers, it disagreed with Taiwan's decision to withdraw the troops on the pretext that the Burmese army and the Karen army were at war in the border area (Xu and Liao 2016, 37). The Thai government wanted Taiwan to leave some troops in situ as a bulwark to defer incursions of armed forces from Burma or Laos into Northern Thailand. As General Li Mi said:

If our army remains in this area for a long time, it can prevent the threat of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) and the Communist Party of Burma (CPB) toward the north and west of Thailand. Therefore, the Thai government regards us as harmless. (Xu and Liao 2016, 37)

A declassified archive of the ROC Ministry of Foreign Affairs shows that the Thai government had asked the ROC ambassador to Thailand to resume the deployment of KMT troops in Northern Thailand in order to fight the Communists in Laos and Burma in 1961 (ROCMOFA 1961, A303000000B).

Between 1961 and 1969, the remaining KMT troops built about twenty radio stations along the Salween River, which is part of the natural dividing line between Thailand and Burma. Each of these radio stations was guarded by eighty to a hundred soldiers (Kessaraporn 2015, 27) and served two purposes: providing border intelligence and enabling an exchange of information on the transportation of opium.³⁾ After more than ten years of fighting along the border areas between Burma, Thailand, and China, these KMT troops were now entirely familiar with the mountainous areas in Northern Thailand. According to merchants from Shan State, all cross-border trade was subjected to inspection by Chinese (KMT) forces in Northern Thailand. Thai senior military and government officials also used the KMT troops as a means to profit from the opium trade in the northern border areas. As a frontier patrol force, the KMT troops acted as custodians of the opium trade in the region and shared the profits with the Thai elites (*New York Times*, August 11, 1971). The KMT army profited from protecting the transportation of opium, which helped to strengthen it and bolstered its role as the guardian of the Northern Thai

3) Since Taiwan cut off supplies to the troops who refused to retreat to Taiwan, the remaining troops began to protect the opium trade in order to ensure the survival of the army. For references to the KMT and the opium trade, see Hung and Baird (2017).

border. General Duan Xiwen said, “If we were not here, the Communists would be. We are the watchdog at the northern gate. In other parts of Thailand, there is subversion, but not here”—a sentiment that some Western diplomats privately shared (*New York Times*, September 8, 1966, 5). Soon after, by the mid-1960s, the ranks of the CPT swelled in Thailand’s mountainous northern border areas and became a threat within the country. At this time, KMT troops had begun to be recruited by the Thai government to participate in the new border fighting.

Formation of a Stable Boundary in Northern Thailand by Fighting with the Communist Guerrillas

The CPT was founded in December 1942, during the first National Deputies’ Party Congress (CPT 1978, 2–3). It attained legal status in Thailand after World War II, when the Thai government repealed the Anti-Communist Act (Alessandro 1970, 200). In the meantime, the CPT’s main focus was on urban areas and on augmenting its power in the cities (Baker 2003, 522). However, after Phibun won power in 1947 the Thai government began to suppress the CPT and left-wing politicians; and in 1952 the Phibun government enacted the second anti-Communist law (Wyatt 2003, 254–257). Many leftist politicians were arrested by the government, while others went into exile because of the increasingly oppressive political environment. In 1952 the CPT held its second National Deputies’ Party Congress in Bangkok in secret in order to adapt to the new situation. After this congress, the CPT began studying the specter of an army struggle in mountainous areas (Baker 2003, 524).

When the CPT gradually shifted from cities to remote areas, Communism had begun to meld with regionalism in Thailand. The combination of these two ideologies in remote areas represented a threat to the border in the eyes of the Thai government (Lovelace 1971, 16–18). The CPT quickly trained Hmong guerrillas as anti-government forces in the border mountains in Chiang Rai (Lovelace 1971, 16–18). On August 7, 1965, CPT guerrillas launched their first attack on security forces in Northern Thailand (Saiyud 1986, 180), and after that armed struggle expanded rapidly in remote areas of Thailand. A document from the United States Armed Forces, 7th Psychological Operations Group, showed that there were about one thousand official members of the CPT operating in Thailand around 1966 (Department of the Army Headquarters).⁴⁾ The CPT, based in the

4) The 7th Psychological Operations Group is a psychological operations unit of the United States Army Reserve.

border mountain areas, easily obtained supplies from ethnic tribesmen (Lovelace 1971, 52). *People's Daily* reported that the CPT's armed action had spread to 25 provinces and included over five hundred incidents of conflict. In total, more than one thousand enemies were wiped out by the CPT's armed struggle between 1965 and 1967 (*People's Daily*, August 17, 1967). During this period, the Royal Thai Government implemented a series of measures to counter the Communist insurgency. In General Saiyud Kerdphol's opinion, the local authorities could not handle the Communists' violence in the 1960s and so it became necessary to respond to the CPT threat with the establishment of national-level security (Saiyud 1986, 14–17).⁵ However, the Thai government did not achieve effective results during this period due to inadequate cooperation between the Royal Thai Army and the police force. In addition, much of the leadership's approach was based on its anti-insurgency experiences of the past in remote areas and so did not adapt well to the new landscape (Marks 1994, 99–109). Bob Bergin, a former CIA official, admitted that the CPT forces had increased in the 1960s despite the government's severe suppression (Bergin 2016, 27).

In September 1969 Prayad Samanmit, the governor of Chiang Rai, and other senior officials were assassinated by the CPT forces, sending shock waves through Thai society (Gu 2019, 318–320). The Thai government accepted that its actions to eliminate the CPT over the years had not been very effective, so it decided to use the KMT troops; the latter did not only possess greater knowledge of the border terrain but were by now armed with battle experience too. The government sought to have the KMT and other warlords create a buffer zone in Northern Thailand to sever the territorial connection between the CPT and external Communist forces (McCoy 1991, 430; Smith 1991, 297).

At the end of 1969 Thai Defence Minister Thanom Kittikachorn contacted General Duan Xiwen and General Li Wenhuan, the main leaders of the KMT troops at the time, seeking their help to suppress the CPT and maintain order at the border, in exchange for the Thai government providing supplies to KMT troops (Shen 2002, 320). After lengthy consideration, the KMT troops accepted the proposal, and from then on they began to fight for the consolidation of Thailand's border areas and the KMT's own survival in Thailand. Tangwo and Mae Salong, two small towns located in the mountainous border area of Northern Thailand, served as the headquarters of the KMT's Third and Fifth Armies. The general headquarters were set up in the Border Police camp of Chiang Rai. Thousands of KMT soldiers went to war in Northern Thailand in the name of the Volunteer Defense Corps (Gibson and Chen 2011, 293–302). By this time, the CPT had estab-

5) Saiyud Kerdphol is a four star general and former supreme commander of the Royal Thai Armed Forces. He was the director of the Internal Security Operations Command, which was in charge of Communist insurgencies within Thailand.

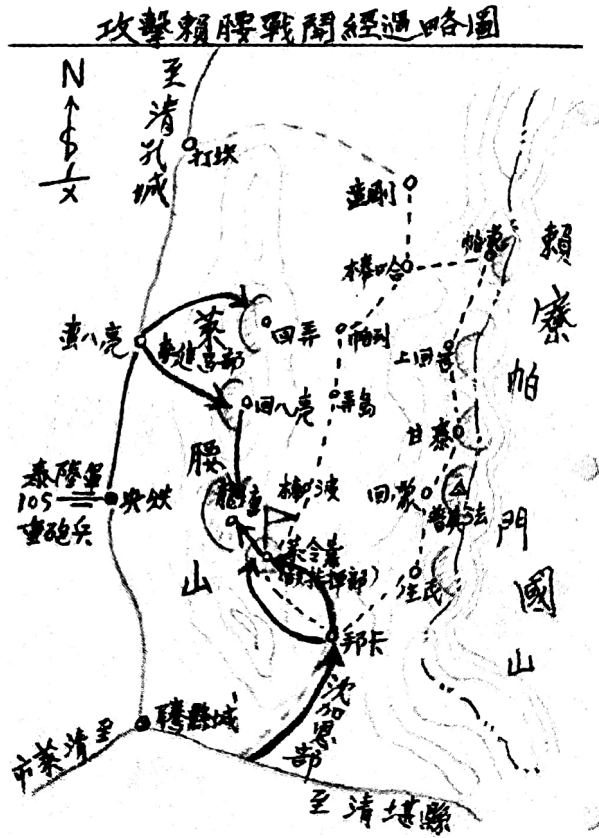


Fig. 2 Sketch of the Battle of Lai-Yao in 1970
Source: Personal Collection of Zhang Huatai

to Laos by virtue of the geographical advantages of the border (Gu 2019, 343–344). Therefore, the CPT frequently gathered forces from Laos to enter the border area of Chiang Rai and attack the KMT on the front lines (Gu 2019, 343–344). In order to effectively control the border areas, from 1971 the KMT troops cooperated with the Thai government to build roads in remote border areas. At times the CPT disrupted the road construction process, compelling KMT troops to fight against the CPT to ensure that road building remained on course, an endeavor that lasted until 1979 (Xu and Liao 2016, 87–88). In addition to taking the KMT’s help for building roads, the Thai government dispersed KMT troops across critical strongholds on the northern border of Chiang Mai and Chiang Rai, adjacent to Laos and Burma. There they set up villages with armed defense forces in order to prevent the CPT from fighting back and to develop the economy of the border areas. Zhao Xueyuan, a former guerrilla in the Fifth Army of the KMT in

Chiang Rai, said that in order to prevent the CPT from damaging roads, the Thai government organized the KMT to help build it. He recalled:

The KMT troops also set up a death squad to attack the CPT. I signed up to join the death squad and be responsible for logistics supply. The CPT had slightly more people than the Third and Fifth KMT Armies, mainly Yao and Hmong people. They often organized guerrilla groups with about ten people to set up mines and cut off water sources everywhere. We were often ambushed by them, resulting in sacrifices. After fighting against the CPT for more than four years, we were stationed at the border to maintain order and patrol. (Bian 2014, 144–145)

The KMT troops' gradual establishment of villages equipped with border frontier defense functions represented a critical step for the Thai government in completing border construction in the remote areas of the country. After 1971 the government resettled these KMT soldiers in 13 border villages in northern Chiang Rai and Chiang Mai: Doi Mae Salong, Ban Mae Aep, Ban Pha Tang, Ban Huai Khrai, Ban Piang Luang, Ban Kae Noi, Ban Muang Na Tai, Tham Ngob, Ban San Makok Wan, Ban Luang, Ban Muang Ngam, Ban Napapaek, and Ban Hua Lang. It was an extraordinarily arduous process to develop the border areas, as recounted by Wang Huifen, a second-generation Chinese in Mae Salong:

The village used to be a forest, and in the beginning there was no road. Those [KMT] veterans cut grass and trees to make the main road in our village. At that time, people in the village did not go out after 3 or 4pm because there were many dangerous wild animals outside. (Wang Huifen, February 12, 2018)⁶

A Thai observer at the time said:

The guerrillas (KMT soldiers) are well trained and well armed. They do the work of maintaining law and order in the border areas for the Thai government. If there were no guerrillas (KMT soldiers) to do this job, Thailand would need to dispatch at least two divisions of troops from other places to garrison in these places to protect the border. (Bian 2014, 65)

The last major battle between the KMT troops and the CPT took place in 1981. Two years earlier, General Serm Na Nakorn of the Supreme Command Headquarters of the Royal Thai Army had issued a direct order to notify the KMT armed forces on Thailand's northern border to enter into war against the Communists in the Phetchabun region.⁷ In January 1981, around four hundred KMT soldiers commenced battle in the name of the Volunteer Defense Corps. This military action was part of Operation Phamuang Padetsuek, which lasted four months—from January to April (Saiyud 1986, 183). Even-

6) Personal conversation with Wang Huifen in Mae Salong, February 12, 2018.

7) Source from Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum in Chiang Rai.

tually, these KMT forces captured the entire Khao-Ya and Khao-Khor areas and destroyed all the Communist bases in this region (Lintner 1994, 260–261). One Chinese source stated:

The Volunteer army played an important role in attacking the guerrillas and occupying the CPT's armed bases. They captured the Khao Khor area, which was considered an invincible Communist armed base. Under the crackdown by targeted armed forces, the CPT was steadily losing ground. (Ding 2015)

The KMT's contribution to national security was recognized at the highest level by the Thai military (Fig. 3). Major General Theb Kromsuiyasakdi (เทียบ กรมสุริยศักดิ์) of the Third Military Region wrote:

Volunteer Defense Corps [KMT soldiers] captured the whole of the Khao-Ya area in Operation Phamuang Padetsuek. . . . [KMT soldiers] have made great contributions to national security. . . . I would like to express my highest respect to all the soldiers of the Volunteer Defense Corps [KMT soldiers]. (Third Military Region 1981)

The success of the military operation also accelerated the demise of the CPT. The KMT began a completely peaceful transformation, and its members became border residents of Northern Thailand. KMT soldiers and their descendants developed the border area's economic activities, for example, the tea industry and tourism in Mae Salong. The former headquarters of the KMT troops continues to attract increasing numbers of tourists. Even though these veterans and their next generation have obtained Thai identity cards, they still maintain a firm Chinese identity. Zhang Taihua, a second-generation veteran, affirmed:

My father died in battle when I was five years old. Later, General Duan [Duan Xiwen] paid my tuition fees and living costs. At that time the Thai government did not allow us to learn Chinese, and Thai police often came to check Chinese schools during the day. Therefore, our school moved Chinese lessons to the evening. . . . We are Chinese. We must learn Chinese; that is our mother tongue. (Zhang Taihua, February 12, 2018)⁸

A conversation with Mo Xianghai, a second-generation veteran who broke his leg when fighting the CPT in 1980, also underlined a strong sense of Chinese identity: "My ancestral home is in Yunnan. No matter where I go, I am proud that I am Chinese." In explaining his and others' willingness to fight on behalf of the Thai government, Mo was keen to emphasize that they fought purely as a means of survival. He lamented: "We are foreigners, and our pension after being injured is much lower than that of Thai soldiers. We are

8) Personal conversation with Zhang Taihua in Mae Salong, February 12, 2018.



แจ้งความกองทัพอากาศที่ ๓ ส่วนหน้า
เรื่อง ชมเชยการปฏิบัติงานดีเด่น

เมื่อ ๓ ก.พ. ๒๕๑๔ บก.๑๔ ได้จัดกองร้อยอาสาสมัคร โภช เข้าปฏิบัติหน้าที่ในการปราบปราม พลา. ส. ณ เมืองบุงนาระคาเมืองเค็งคัก ๒ ตั้งแต่ ๘ ก.พ. ๒๕ ถึง ๑๕ มี.ค. ๒๕ ในพื้นที่เขตอำเภอเมือง จ.มหาราษฏร์ โดยที่ บก. ๑๔ ได้ควบคุมอำนาจการกองร้อยอาสาสมัครไทยเข้าปฏิบัติการตลอดระยะเวลาดังกล่าว จนสามารถยึดพื้นที่เขาเข้าได้เป็นผลสำเร็จ

จากผลคุณงามความดีของกองร้อยอาสาสมัครไทยครั้งนี้ ได้ใช้ปฏิบัติการไหวพริบ ความสามารถ ความกล้าหาญ อุตสาหะ เสียสละ โดยไม่หวั่นเกรงอันตรายแม้ชีวิต มีขวัญดี มีวินัยดี มีจิตใจสู้รบห้าวหาญ แสดงออกถึงการมีประสิทธิภาพในการปฏิบัติงานสูงยิ่งหน่วยหนึ่ง ถึงแม้ว่าเป็นกำลังถึงทหารที่มีขีดจำกัดในบางกรณีก็ตาม อนึ่ง ผู้บังคับบัญชาทุกชั้น ฝ่ายอำนาจการของ บก.๑๔ และกองร้อยอาสาสมัครไทยได้ควบคุมและอำนาจการในการปฏิบัติของหน่วยอย่างใกล้ชิด จนควรได้รับการยกย่องสรรเสริญ และประกาศเกียรติคุณ เพื่อเป็นตัวอย่างแก่บุคคลและหน่วยต่าง ๆ ต่อไป

ข้าพเจ้าในนาม กองทัพอากาศที่ ๓ ส่วนหน้า ขอสดุดีวีรกรรมของ กองร้อยอาสาสมัครไทย พร้อมด้วยเจ้าหน้าที่ของ บก.๑๔ มาด้วยความจริงใจ
จึงแจ้งความมาให้ทราบโดยทั่วกัน

แจ้งความมา ณ วันที่ ๑๘ เมษายน ๒๕๑๔


พลตรี: 
(เทียบ กรมสุริยศักดิ์)
รองแม่ทัพภาคที่ ๓ ทำการแทน
แม่ทัพภาคที่ ๓

Fig. 3 Commendation Letter Issued by the Headquarters of the Third Military Region to the Volunteer Defense Corps (KMT Soldiers), Which Took Part in the Military Action against the CPT in 1981. Signed by Major General Theb Kromsuiyasakdi (เทียบ กรมสุริยศักดิ์) on April 19, 1981
Source: Collection of Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum

not Thai soldiers but Chinese who want to survive in Thailand” (Mo Xianghai, February 12, 2018).⁹⁾ It is particularly noteworthy that although most of these first- or second-generation veterans tend to support the Republic of China (Taiwan), they love watching China Central Television (CCTV), which is run by the CCP. TV channels from mainland China also enhance and remind them of their Chinese heritage.

9) Personal conversation with Mo Xianghai in Mae Salong, February 12, 2018.

Conclusion

In the aftermath of China's civil war, after 1949 some KMT troops found themselves in exile in mainland Southeast Asia. Shortly thereafter, their fate was greatly impacted by the Cold War in Southeast Asia. These soldiers first established bases in Burma. Both the ROC government in Taiwan, which wanted to launch a counterattack on mainland China, and the United States, which participated in the Korean War, saw the value of the KMT troops. Consequently, with the help of the United States and Taiwan, the KMT troops launched two large-scale attacks on Yunnan in the 1950s—though ultimately both failed.

Later in the decade, due to changes in the geopolitical landscape along with no small amount of diplomatic pressure, the United States retracted its support of the KMT troops while Taiwan repatriated some of the soldiers. The rest of the troops were reluctant to go to Taiwan, but China and Burma launched two large-scale encirclement and suppression operations in the 1960s in an attempt to wipe out the KMT troops. As a result, the remaining KMT troops chose to retreat to Chiang Rai in Northern Thailand, where border controls were weak. Although the Thai government harbored considerable doubts about these troops, it was unable to effectively control its northern border at the time and was also faced with the threat of armed groups from Burma and Laos from the 1950s. Therefore, the Thai government decided to use the KMT troops for border defense.

From the 1960s onward, the CPT changed its revolutionary strategy and began to follow Maoism while also shifting its activities from cities to remote mountainous areas. Due to the complex terrain and the lack of effective state governance, Northern Thailand became one of the places where the CPT flourished. The CPT developed several well-armed forces by mobilizing the tribes in Northern Thailand. In retaliation, the Thai government launched a series of attacks on the CPT along the northern border of Thailand by employing KMT troops with considerable combat experience. After four years of armed fighting between the KMT and CPT in Chiang Mai and in the mountainous areas around Chiang Rai, the situation stabilized in the early 1980s. The KMT troops also gradually formed defensive villages along the border in the battle with the CPT, at the behest of the Thai government. At the end of the Cold War, the border villages of KMT troops witnessed a transformation as their hitherto dormant economies grew, driven by agriculture and tourism. Executive control of these borders eventually returned to the Thai government.

In summary, the KMT troops in Northern Thailand helped the Thai government to eliminate Communist insurgencies by means of war. Meanwhile, the border villages formed by the KMT troops with the help of the Thai authorities also promoted effective

management of the border areas. This was an instance of Thai state power spreading to remote border areas in Northern Thailand. Although first- and second-generation KMT veterans have gained legal Thai nationality after decades of fighting for the country, they still maintain a very strong Chinese identity.

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