

*China and ASEAN: Changing political and strategic ties*

Edited By JAMES K. CHIN &amp; NICHOLAS THOMAS

Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, 2005. Pp. 277. Maps, Plates, Notes, Bibliography, Index.

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This book originated from a conference on China-ASEAN relations held in 2001 at the University of Hong Kong. It consists of 15 chapters including the introduction by the editors. The other 14 chapters are grouped into four parts, focusing on four topics respectively, the development of ASEAN and ASEAN + 3, Sino-ASEAN relations, the development and role of the ASEAN Regional Forum and Sino-Vietnamese relations.

The volume is a good choice for students and researchers as background reading. It contains rich details about the driving forces and challenges in China-ASEAN relations. It is successful in providing the historical evolution of the China-ASEAN ties from the early 1990s to the early 2000s. Overall, the book portrays a sanguine picture of China-ASEAN relations, highlighting China's proactive posture, ASEAN's willingness to engage with China, China-ASEAN all-round cooperation and the generally positive trends in regional integration. At the same time, the book also takes note of various barriers and challenges in bilateral relations, such as lingering strategic mistrust and the South China Sea disputes. In addition, the volume rightly emphasises the point that China has approached ASEAN + 1 and ASEAN + 3 largely from its own perspective of national interests and less from the perspective of region building. In a nutshell, the chapters in the volume are useful in providing clues for understanding Sino-ASEAN relations in the second half of the past decade.

Four weaknesses may characterise this edited volume. Firstly, the book has a few chapters that are written in Chinese. The editors claim that the bilingual format allows for a greater range of perspectives (p. 8), but such format may not be convenient for many readers who are not bilingual. Secondly, readers who are interested in more coherent themes or theoretical frameworks may be disappointed. The contributors apparently have not made any conscious effort to work on a few common themes or attempted to explore China-ASEAN relations from various theoretical perspectives. The last few chapters on Sino-Vietnamese relations seem to be isolated from the other parts of the book. It is not clear why the Beijing-Hanoi relations are singled out for elaboration. Thirdly, some of the chapters are much better developed than others. A few chapters are not well researched and are simply commentary-style articles.

Fourthly and perhaps most importantly, some of the views and conclusions in the volume do not seem to reflect the current reality in China-ASEAN relations or international relations in East Asia. The emphasis on ASEAN + 3 as the overarching mechanism for East Asian regionalism may not accurately reflect the reality in East Asia now. In recent years, various existing multilateral forums have evolved; new institutions have emerged; and new grand proposals have been put forward. These include the East Asian Summit, the Asia-Pacific Community idea proposed by the Australian leader Kevin Rudd, the growing trilateral cooperation among China, South Korea and Japan, and even sub-regional cooperative regimes between China and ASEAN such as the Pan-Beibu Gulf Economic Cooperation Scheme.

In this sense, the book is a good one for background information but not very useful for readers wishing to catch up with the current dynamic changes that are taking place in China-ASEAN relations or East Asian international relations.

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## Burma

### *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*

Edited by MIKAEL GRAVERS

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Gravers' edited volume, *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma*, offers a much-needed interdisciplinary addition to Southeast Asian Studies in general, as well as Burma studies in particular, as it unites the work of eight scholars of Burma to discuss the various issues of ethnic categorisation, politics and conceptualisation in the country. As Gravers rightly notes, the book is the first of its kind in several decades, and represents a crucial step in redressing the fact that much popular discourse conflates Burma Studies with *Bamar* Studies. In so doing, the volume not only surveys and problematises the ways in which political and geographic understandings of human diversity in the region have led both to conflict and resistance, but also seeks to examine how ethnic categories and exception have often defied those very categories as well.

In addition to the instructive and meaty introduction and conclusion by Gravers, the book consists of six individual chapters dealing with issues of the Kachin, Karenni / Kayah, Mon, Shan, Karen and Chin groups. Particularly useful are the ways in which individual authors, particularly Sadan, Chit Hlaing and Takatani, are careful to discuss the ways in which Burmese politics, both internally and externally, have consistently conflated these ethnic categories, thus making the volume a useful comparative study of such politics in the Southeast Asian country.

The Kachin end up being the most heavily represented group in this volume, and the coverage of this group by Sadan, Dean and South offers a useful exploration of Kachin politics through the lens of the varying fields of political science, history and social geography. Particularly salient are Dean's analyses of boundaries and sovereignty in relation to Kachin political, social and symbolic places and the politics of the Kachin Independence Organisation. Furthermore, Takatani Michio's contribution, 'Who are the Shan? An ethnological perspective' is especially useful, not only in that the author draws upon both Shan and Bamar written sources, but also looks at the ways in which the political interrelations have been posited over the *longue durée*. Furthermore, especially since there is considerable scholarship on Burma as well as the Shans in the Japanese language, it is useful that the author draws upon this corpus.

In terms of possible course assignments, several chapters of *Exploring ethnic diversity in Burma* would be instructive for both undergraduate students of