

# The Watchdog at the Northern Gate: How the Kuomintang Lone Army Sold Its Anti-Communism in Northern Thailand, 1950 to 2023

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## ABSTRACT

After the Chinese Civil War, remnants of two Kuomintang armies retreated from Yunnan into Burma and, after two forced evacuations to Taiwan, settled in the mountains of northern Thailand. Most accounts treat these men as objects moved by larger powers, armed by the Central Intelligence Agency, disowned by Taipei, and hired by Bangkok. This paper argues the reverse. Building on Xu Peng's study of the Kokang borderland, it contends that the remnants pursued their own strategies by controlling one asset that no patron could manufacture for them, a claim about who they were. Anti-communism functioned as that claim, and its value was set by whichever state was buying. Drawing on published scholarship, the memorial museum the community built at Mae Salong, declassified intelligence reporting, a Taiwanese archival thesis, and the remnants' own statements to the foreign press, the paper traces how the same claim was sold three times. Bangkok paid for it with asylum, land, and citizenship. Taipei paid first with silence and finally with martyrdom, enshrining the soldiers' spirit tablets in 2023. Beijing now courts the same villages and pays for Chineseness rather than for anti-communism. The paper finds that the remnants were neither loyal instruments nor abandoned victims, but sellers of a claim whose price the buyer always set.

**Keywords:** *Kuomintang, Golden Triangle, northern Thailand, Cold War, anti-communism, proxy warfare, statelessness, Mae Salong, historical memory, Chinese diaspora*

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**INTRODUCTION**

On 30 June 2023, in heavy rain, honor guards carried 948 spirit tablets into the National Revolutionary Martyrs' Shrine in Taipei, each standing for a soldier of the Republic of China Yunnan Anti-Communist National Salvation Army (You, 2023). This was the Nationalist force driven out of Yunnan in 1949 and 1950, which then spent decades in the borderlands of Burma and Thailand. A descendant who came from northern Thailand for the ceremony said his father, ninety-six, had waited more than seventy years for it, and that almost all of the man's comrades were already dead ("948 Ming," 2023).

The state that honored these men in 2023 had once refused to admit they were its own. After the first evacuation of guerrillas to Taiwan in 1954, the Republic of China announced that any who stayed behind did so as private individuals owed no aid. When Thai officials complained in 1972 that the remnants were collecting illegal tolls in Chiang Rai Province, Taipei replied that it had no relationship with these men at all (Bian, 2014, p. 64). Disowned in the 1950s and disavowed in the 1970s, the same soldiers became national martyrs in 2023.

That reversal does not fit the way these men are usually described. In most accounts, they are the instrument of a Central Intelligence Agency scheme, the discarded proxy of Taiwan, or the hired auxiliary of a Thai army fighting its own insurgents. Each is true in part, yet none explains why a stateless army could be cast off by its patron and honored by that same patron seventy years later, or why three governments each paid for what these men claimed to be.

This paper argues that the remnants pursued independent strategies to leverage both regional governments and Cold War superpower rivalry to their own interests, and that the instrument they used was a claim about who they were. Anti-communism was that claim. It was not a belief outsiders merely read in different ways, but an asset the remnants issued, priced by whichever state was buying. Bangkok paid in asylum, land, and citizenship. Taipei paid in silence and finally in martyrdom. Beijing now pays for their Chineseness instead. The claim held constant. The buyer changed, and the buyer set the price.

**METHODOLOGY**

This study is a work of historical analysis built on published and archival sources. It uses no interviews, surveys, or other research involving human participants. Where it draws on a museum built by the community it studies, it treats that museum as a primary source, evidence of how the community presents itself, rather than as a neutral record of events.

The evidence falls into four groups. The first is peer-reviewed scholarship on the remnants and the wider Golden Triangle, including Cui (2022), Hung and Baird (2017), Chang (2001), and Han (2020), together with Gibson and Chen's (2011) history of the remnant armies. The second is a Chinese-language master's thesis by Bian (2014), based on fieldwork and Republic of China Foreign Ministry archives, which supplies internal detail on how the Fifth Army governed and funded itself that is available nowhere in English. The third is primary material, namely declassified United States intelligence reporting, contemporary foreign press coverage, and the exhibition panels of the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum at Mae Salong, photographed by the author. The fourth is Taiwanese news coverage of the 2023 enshrinement.

Two features of this source base shape what the paper can show. Much of the richest evidence originates from the Republic of China or from the community itself, and so reflects a Nationalist and a local point of view. The paper treats these sources as evidence of how the remnants and their patron represented the past, which is its subject, rather than as disinterested fact. The Thai state's own archives, which would show the purchase from the buyer's side, remain largely closed, so the argument about what Bangkok paid rests on secondary reconstruction. These limits are revisited in the discussion.

## **THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK**

Until recently, the scholarship on proxy warfare was built around the sponsor, asking what a state gains by fighting through an armed group rather than with its own soldiers, and treating the group as a means to that end. Mumford (2013) defines proxy war as a conflict in which a third party intervenes indirectly to influence the outcome, and the field's vocabulary, patron and client, principal and agent, places the sponsor first. Rauta (2018) argues that this vocabulary smuggles in a conclusion, since words such as client, pawn, and puppet build subordination into the terms before any evidence is examined (p. 452). Even the more careful models inherit the assumption. Salehyan (2010) analyzes external support through the principal-agent framework, in which a principal delegates a task to an agent who then has room to pursue his own ends. This grants the agent some independent will, yet the direction still runs downward, from the state that delegates to the group that carries out.

A different starting point has emerged from the borderlands themselves. In his account of the Kokang mutinies, Peng (2026) treats the region not as a board on which outside powers move their pieces but as an institution with interests of its own, and finds that although external states mattered, the primary drivers of a century of conflict were the local factions, who summoned patrons into quarrels that were fundamentally their own (p. 42). This belongs to a wider revision of how the upland peoples of Southeast Asia are understood. Scott (2009) argued that the region's highland societies long survived by evading the lowland state, though he held their room for maneuver narrowed once modern states reached the hills after 1945. The history traced here suggests one such community found room to maneuver by engaging the state rather than fleeing it, turning the attention of successive governments into a resource.

This paper adopts that reversal and pushes it toward a mechanism. If a borderland group can summon patrons rather than serve them, it must possess something the patron wants. For the remnants, that something was not territory, which they did not hold, nor manpower, of which the region had no shortage. It was a claim about who they were. Anti-communism, in this reading, functioned less as a fixed conviction than as an asset the remnants issued and maintained, priced not by the sincerity of the seller but by the needs of the buyer. Such a claim can be sold more than once, to different buyers, at different prices, and even after the thing it describes has ceased to exist.

One complication must be admitted. The remnants do not fit cleanly into the category of non-state armed group, since they were the fragments of a state army funded for a time by a government in Taipei that still claimed to rule all China. This makes them a proxy whose sponsor was itself a client of the United States, so the chain of delegation ran through several hands. Rather than weaken the argument, this layering sharpens it, by multiplying the patrons to whom the same claim could be sold.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Three bodies of work bear on the Kuomintang remnants, each illuminating part of the story while leaving the central question unasked. They treat the remnants through the history of narcotics, through the territorial consolidation of the states that hosted them, and through the memory of the community they became. Together they explain much about what was done to these men. None asks what the men themselves were selling.

The narcotics literature is the oldest. McCoy's (1991) study of the heroin trade places the remnants at the center of the Golden Triangle's opium economy and treats their anti-communism largely as cover for commerce, a flag of convenience over a smuggling operation the Central Intelligence Agency tolerated. Gibson and Chen (2011) narrate the same history in greater archival detail and are less willing to reduce the remnants to traffickers, but they too organize the story around the drug trade. This work establishes what the remnants did in the mountains, yet it reads their anti-communism as a mask over the real business rather than as a thing of value in itself. The claim is treated as false advertising, not as the product.

A more recent body of scholarship treats the remnants as an instrument of state-building. Cui (2022) argues that the Thai government, seeking to extend its authority over an ungoverned frontier, used the remnants as the most effective tool for border management (p. 178). Hung and Baird (2017) show how they became the means by which the Thai state projected control into its northern borderlands, and Han (2020) sets the same dynamic in comparative frame, arguing that Thailand used the Kuomintang as a buffer force for its own border defense (p. 214). Its account of what Bangkok wanted is persuasive, yet in every version the grammar is the same.

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The state is the subject and the remnants the object, the tool used, the buffer employed. What the remnants extracted in exchange, and how they made themselves worth extracting from, falls outside the frame.

A third body of work turns to memory and identity. Ohlendorf (2025) reads the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum at Mae Salong as a site where a diasporic community reconstructs its past, and argues that such memory is selective, recreating history to serve the present (pp. 5-6). Siriphon (2022) traces how the same community now positions itself between Taipei and Beijing in Chinese-language education, accepting support from both. This scholarship takes the community's account of itself seriously, but its focus is inward. It asks what the community remembers, not what that self-presentation was for, or how it once functioned as a claim addressed to outside states in exchange for concrete rewards.

The gap between these three literatures is the space this paper occupies. The narcotics scholarship treats the anti-communism as a cover story, the state-building scholarship treats the remnants as a tool, and the memory scholarship treats their self-presentation as identity work performed for themselves. None considers that the self-presentation was itself the instrument of the remnants' strategy, a claim issued to successive buyers and repriced as the market changed. Reading the remnants not as traffickers in disguise, nor as tools of stronger states, nor as a community curating its memory, but as sellers of a saleable claim, is what this paper attempts.

### **Selling to Taipei, 1950 to 1964**

The Lone Army named itself before any state agreed to own it. In early 1950, as the People's Liberation Army completed its conquest of Yunnan, the surviving fragments of two Nationalist armies crossed into the eastern Shan hills of Burma, gave themselves a name, and, without authority, telegraphed the general Li Mi in Hong Kong to come and take command (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 10). They did not wait to be organized from above. They organized themselves and then invited a patron in. Taipei sent a little money through its military attaché in Bangkok, refused further appeals, and told its army to capture whatever supplies it needed from the enemy (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 10). From the start, the relationship was conditional on both sides. The remnants offered a foothold on the mainland's southern edge; Taipei offered a little money and a great deal of deniability.

For a few years, the arrangement suited the Republic of China. With covert American support through the Central Intelligence Agency, the remnants raided Yunnan in 1951 and 1952, and though they were thrown back each time, the raids let Taipei show something for its claim to be the government of all China (Gibson & Chen, 2011). The trouble came from Burma, which took its complaint over the foreign army on its soil to the United Nations. Under that pressure, a first evacuation flew roughly sixty-five hundred soldiers and dependents to Taiwan in 1953 and 1954 (Cui, 2022, p. 181).

Taipei used the evacuation to sort its own from the disowned. It announced that the men who stayed did so as private persons for whom it bore no responsibility, and withdrew its formal connection to them (Cui, 2022, p. 181). The gesture cost Taipei nothing and freed it to keep an anti-communist force on China's border while denying the force was its own. The remnants, for their part, kept flying the Nationalist flag without implicating the government that had disowned them. Both sides found the fiction useful, which is why it held.

It held again in 1961. That year, joint operations by Burma and the People's Republic shattered the remnants' bases, and Taipei arranged a second evacuation. This time two armies would not go. The Third and the Fifth, under Li Wenhuan and Duan Xiwen, refused to retreat, and Taipei canceled their designations and cut off their supplies (Cui, 2022, p. 182). Whether these men disobeyed an order or quietly followed a secret one, the outcome was the same, and every source agrees on it. By 1962, Duan Xiwen was in Bangkok asking for money and being told the relationship was finished. The claim that had bound the remnants to Taipei was now theirs alone, because Taipei had stopped paying for it.

Cut loose, the remnants did not abandon the claim. They carried it to a new buyer while still displaying it to the old one, and the clearest evidence comes from Duan Xiwen himself. In September 1966, on the mountaintop at Mae Salong, he received a correspondent from the New York Times and gave a performance pitched at a Western Cold War audience. His men gathered information, brought out refugees, and stood guard against the communists to the north. "We are the watchdog at the northern gate," he said, adding that other parts of Thailand suffered subversion while his did not (Braestrup, 1966; Cui, 2022, p. 183). He complained, in the same conversation, that neither Taiwan nor the United States gave him support (Braestrup, 1966). The complaint was part of the pitch. A loyal anti-communist force abandoned by the great powers it served was exactly the figure most likely to command the sympathy, and the money, of the audience he addressed.

By the mid-1960s, the remnants had finished the first phase of a long transaction. They had sold their anti-communism to Taipei for a decade of intermittent support, and when Taipei stopped buying, they did not fold. They held the claim in reserve and waited for a buyer who needed it. That buyer was already emerging to the south, in a Thailand growing frightened of its own communists.

### **Selling to Bangkok, 1967 to 1982**

The second buyer did not arrive by accident. By the mid-1960s, the Communist Party of Thailand had begun an insurgency in the northern hills, and the Thai state, which had never fully governed that frontier, needed men who knew the mountains and hated communists. The remnants were both. What followed was not

a state conscripting a passive tool, the way the episode is usually told, but a negotiation in which the remnants set their own terms.

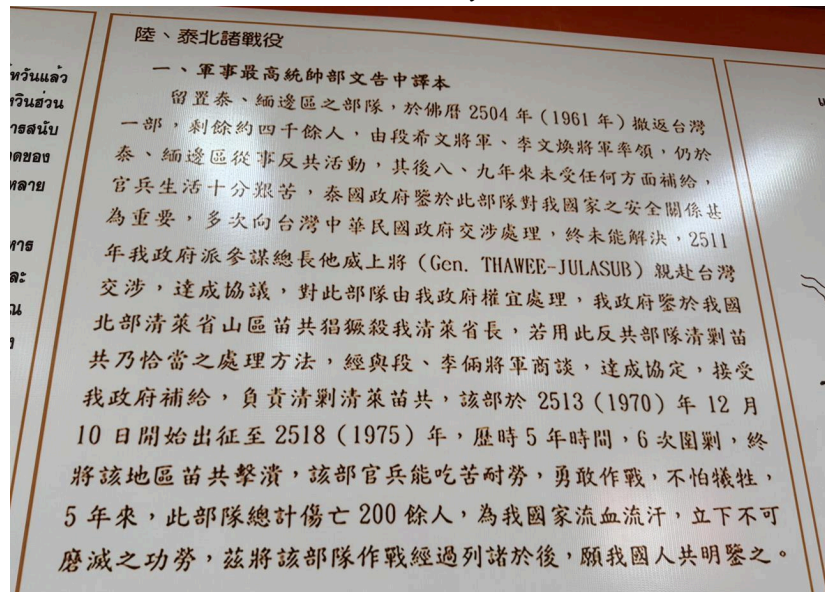
Those terms survive in the remnants' own words. Chang (2001) reproduces the five-point letter that Li Wenhuan and Duan Xiwen submitted to the Thai government, and its structure is that of a party stating its price. They asked for legal status and permission to bring their troops and dependents from Burma. They promised to obey Thai law. They agreed to surrender their arms while keeping a few for self-defense. They requested land and help making a living. And they offered, as the fifth point, to fight the Thai communists (Chang, 2001, p. 1093). The remnants wrote the offer and named what they expected in return. The Thai government asked them to suppress the communists and promised partial supplies (Chang, 2001, p. 1093). This is a transaction between two parties, not the requisition of an instrument.

The bargain sealed at Chiang Mai in 1970 shows how much the remnants secured. In return for fighting the insurgency, the Third and Fifth Armies were resettled on government land, the villages they occupied were regularized, and Mae Salong was renamed Santi Khiri, the hill of peace (Gibson & Chen, 2011, pp. 282-283). The general who struck the deal privately assured the commanders that the required disarmament was for public consumption and would not be enforced, and that if they obeyed Thai law they would receive not mere residence but citizenship (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 283). The disarmament was a fiction both sides accepted, and the payment that mattered was promised in secret.

The remnants delivered. Between 1970 and 1975, the Third and Fifth Armies fought six campaigns against the Communist Party of Thailand in the mountains of Chiang Rai (Cui, 2022, p. 186). In 1981, they returned to the field in the Khao Ya area of Phetchabun, where roughly four hundred men fought a campaign the community would afterward treat as the summit of its sacrifice for Thailand (Cui, 2022, pp. 188-189). The museum the remnants later built at Mae Salong records these campaigns and displays, as proof of the debt, a commendation from the Thai Supreme Command.

**Figure 1**

*Commendation Panel at the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum, Mae Salong*



*Note.* The panel reproduces, in Chinese, a communiqué from the Royal Thai Supreme Command praising the Yunnan forces for six campaigns against the Communist Party of Thailand and recording that more than two hundred of their men shed blood for the nation. The nation named is Thailand. Photograph taken by the author at the Chinese Martyrs' Memorial Museum (泰北義民文史館), Mae Salong, 2026.

The panel is the community's own display of the receipt, the Thai state made to certify in its own words that these men bled for Thailand. Yet the certificate was worth more to the remnants than the service was worth to Thailand, and the clearest measure of that gap is a silence. Bergin (2016), a former Central Intelligence Agency officer, credits the defeat of the Communist Party of Thailand to Thai political reforms, to an amnesty that emptied the jungle of insurgents, and to Beijing's decision to end its support after Vietnam invaded Cambodia. Nowhere in that account do the remnants appear. The men who built a museum around their campaigns against the Thai communists are absent from the professional assessment of how those communists were beaten, and Hung and Baird (2017) confirm it directly, finding the remnants were not the main reason for the insurgency's collapse.

That the service was overvalued does not weaken the argument. It is the argument. What Bangkok bought was never the military labor, which its own forces and its amnesty ultimately supplied. It was the claim, the standing anti-communist auxiliary whose mere presence let the Thai state reach into a frontier it had never

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held. The remnants grasped this better than anyone. Pressed in 1967 to explain how his men survived, Duan Xiwen answered without embarrassment: to fight communism required an army, an army required guns, and guns required money, and “in these mountains the only money is opium” (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 251). The line is usually read as a confession of the drug trade, and it is one. But it is also a sales pitch, translating opium into the vocabulary of anti-communism for a Western journalist in the years when the Western press was inventing the Golden Triangle. The traffic and the claim never pulled against each other. The claim was what made the traffic tolerable to the states that could otherwise have shut it down.

By 1982, the remnants held land and were on the path to the citizenship they had been privately promised. They had sold their anti-communism a second time, to a second buyer, and been paid in the one currency Taipei had always withheld, legal existence. The claim had proven sellable again, to a different state, for a higher price.

### **Reprising the Claim, 1987 to 2026**

The Cold War ended, the Communist Party of Thailand collapsed, and the service the remnants had sold twice should, by any ordinary logic, have lost its market. An anti-communist auxiliary is worth little once there are no communists to fight. Yet the claim did not lose its value; it was repriced. Over the four decades after 1982, the same self-presentation was sold to new buyers on new terms, and the arc of those sales, from tea to tourism to martyrdom to a courtship from Beijing, shows how thoroughly the remnants had learned to detach the claim from the fighting that once gave it meaning.

The first move was economic, and it began before the last campaign was fought. After his fruit-tree experiments failed, Duan Xiwen resolved to turn Mae Salong to tea, and in 1972 the Republic of China’s Veterans Affairs Commission and the Central Intelligence Agency agreed to send an agronomist to run the project, with Kriangsak’s support (Bian, 2014, p. 62). The tea terraces that now cover the mountain and draw tourists to Santi Khiri were planted by the same men, under the same military hierarchy, that had organized the opium caravans a decade earlier. The transition from poppy to tea is usually told as a triumph of development. It was also a change of product by an organization that had always known how to sell whatever the market would buy.

The final campaign, at Khao Ya in 1981, produced the payment promised in secret a decade before, and its terms expose the logic of the whole relationship. Drawing on a participant’s memoir, Bian (2014) records that when the Fifth Army commander Lei Yutian negotiated the operation with the Thai military, they promised his men compensation and citizenship, and warned that if the remnants lost, the weapons, the supplies, and the citizenship papers would all vanish (p. 43). The remnants won, and the fighters and the Mae Salong refugees

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were naturalized in batches (Bian, 2014, p. 43). Citizenship, the thing Taipei had withheld for thirty years, was granted by Thailand on a condition that inverted the remnants' whole identity. They received legal existence in exchange for laying down the arms that had made them an army. The anti-communist soldier was paid to stop being a soldier.

Taipei returned to the market late and paid in a different currency. Through the 1980s, the Free China Relief Association, a semi-official body tied to the Nationalist party, resumed the irregular aid it had long extended to the Yunnanese villages, funding roads, schools, and agriculture (Chang, 2001, p. 1099). But the fullest payment came only after the soldiers were dead. In 2012, the Ministry of National Defense enshrined 440 of the fallen in the National Revolutionary Martyrs' Shrine in Taipei, and in 2023 a further 948 ("948 Ming," 2023). The government that had once declared it bore no responsibility for these men now honored them as national heroes. The reversal makes sense only in the terms this paper has proposed. The claim the remnants had maintained for seventy years, that they were loyal soldiers of the Republic of China who had fought communism in exile, had finally found a buyer in a Taiwan that needed such symbols for its own present purposes. The soldiers could not collect. Their descendants and their government collected for them.

The most recent buyer is the one the remnants spent their lives fighting. The People's Republic of China now cultivates the Yunnanese villages of northern Thailand, and it does so through the very institution the remnants built to hold their community to the Republic of China, the Chinese-language school. Siriphon (2022) reports that of the 110 Yunnanese schools registered in northern Thailand, more than forty have accepted Beijing's support and reorganized along mainland lines, and that many now signal neutrality between Taipei and Beijing to draw benefits from both (p. 4). The old anti-communist villages have become an asset in Beijing's cultivation of the overseas Chinese, valued now not for their anti-communism but for their Chineseness. The claim has been repriced one final time. What was once sold as loyalty against China is now, by the same community, sold as belonging to it.

Across seventy years and four buyers, the pattern holds. The remnants issued a claim about who they were, maintained it through decades in which its literal content became first strained and then obsolete, and sold it to whichever state would pay, in whatever currency that state had to offer. Taipei paid in aid and eventually in honor. Bangkok paid in land and citizenship. Beijing pays now in the resources it directs toward a diaspora it wishes to claim. The sincerity of the claim was never the point. Its value was set, each time, by the buyer.

**DISCUSSION**

Treating the remnants as sellers rather than instruments does more than relabel them. It changes what counts as evidence. The principal-agent framework behind much of the proxy-war literature assumes the

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sponsor sets the task and the agent carries it out with some latitude (Salehyan, 2010). The remnants reverse that order. They wrote the letter that set the terms of their own employment (Chang, 2001, p. 1093), kept their claim alive in the foreign press when no sponsor was paying for it (Braestrup, 1966), and sold it in turn to a Nationalist government, a Thai one, and now a Communist one. This is not an agent awaiting delegation but a seller working a market, and it is the reversal Peng (2026) urges for the borderlands, where initiative can run upward from the periphery rather than downward from the capital.

This reading also clarifies why the drug trade and anti-communism were never in the tension that troubles the narcotics literature. Scholars who treat the anti-communism as a cover for the opium (McCoy, 1991) are describing two halves of a single instrument. The claim to be a Cold War auxiliary made the opium tolerable to the states that could have suppressed it, and the opium funded the force that made the claim credible. Duan Xiwen said as much when he explained the one in the language of the other (Gibson & Chen, 2011, p. 251). The remnants did not hide the trade behind the ideology. They sold both together, to buyers who wanted the first and could live with the second.

Two limits should be stated plainly. The evidence leans toward the seller. Much of the richest material, including the Bian (2014) thesis, comes from the Republic of China or the community itself, and records how the remnants wished the past to be seen, while the Thai archives that would show what Bangkok thought it was buying remain largely closed. And this is a single case. It cannot show that the mechanism operates elsewhere, only that it operated here, explaining features of this history, the disavowals, the reversal of 2023, the courtship from Beijing, that standard accounts leave puzzling. Whether the same lens fits other cases is a question the paper raises but cannot settle.

**CONCLUSION**

The remnants were neither the instruments the drug and state-building historians describe, nor simply the community of memory the identity scholars describe. They were sellers. Anti-communism was their product, a claim about who they were that they issued, maintained, and repriced across seventy years and four buyers. Taipei paid first in a decade of intermittent support, then in silence, and at last in martyrdom, carrying into its national shrine the spirit tablets of men it had once called private persons it owed nothing. Bangkok paid in asylum, land, and the citizenship that gave these stateless men a legal existence, on the condition that they lay down the arms that had made them worth the payment. Beijing now pays in the resources it directs toward a diaspora it wishes to claim, through the very schools the remnants built to bind their children to Taipei. The claim held constant. The buyer changed, and the buyer set the price.

This is a small history, a few thousand people on a mountain at the edge of three states. But it bears on a large question, how much room the weak have to act inside the designs of the strong. The scholarship on the Cold War in Southeast Asia has often written its borderland peoples as the objects of superpower strategy, moved from Washington and Beijing and Taipei and Bangkok. The remnants of Mae Salong suggest a more complicated picture, in which a stateless and defeated community found, in the one asset it controlled, a way to make four successive states pay for its survival. They did not escape the Cold War's designs. They learned to sell inside them.

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