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Lessons From The Hills



Rachel Ram Len Mawi



The Future

I cannot know which of the the winding paths ahead will lead us to eventual military victory, nor which pitfalls will deflect and delay the course of our revolution. Even less clear is the shape our victory will take: Burma will be a freer place, to be sure, and the structures of governance will likely fall along the lines of “less-centralized federal or confederal democracy” along which the myriad parties have reached tacit agreement (or at least, in the case of those with more central ambitions, resignation).

The details, though, are less clear: what will be the position of women? How will the various indigenous peoples wield and exercise their newfound autonomy? What answers will we find to the crisis of a climate in turmoil? In these potentialities and poised questions, we will define the revolution. In this open and accessible range of futures, we will define ourselves. In the uncertainty, we make our certainty.

I offer these observations, reflections, critiques and hopes, not as any kind of conclusive treatise on this revolution, but as an invitation to all struggling peoples with whom our movement holds solidarity. We fight, here, as part of a new internationalism.

In all the fronts and foreign tongues of our global revolution, we must learn from the victories and the difficulties of those who have struggled before and alongside us. As I have learned and grown from the challenges faced here, I hope, in some small way, to have helped my beloved comrades in these unconquerable mountains to grow.

The Spring Revolution, our particular front in the international struggle against rising Fascism, is also an overdue and complex process of shaking off the stubborn remnants of a long legacy of colonial and post-colonial exploitation. It offers many new answers to old questions, and many new questions to which our old answers cannot prove sufficient. The work of shaping this struggle toward lasting revolutionary victory rests squarely in the hands of the rising communities who have at last said “Enough!” to the modern structures of state violence which have shaped and uprooted their lives for generations.



I am not of this beautiful place, not originally. I do not naturally or easily fit into this revolution, this shatter zone at the periphery of empire. We each came here, quite recently on any useful timeline, from the imperial core. My home, or perhaps now my old home, is a point as near to the center of Western Hegemony as I believe exists. Today though, we make our lives, and make death, in the free and wild mountains on the periphery's periphery, in the unassailable liberated far reaches of a nation that churns and yearns for a better future.

The world that raised me, like all the world, is in crisis. As rising temperatures and rising fascism feed and chase one another around an ever-accelerating vicious cycle, the governmental and supergovernmental structures which many once relied upon for dubious protection have increasingly collapsed or turned their attention to ever more meaningless matters of structural, hierarchical self-preservation. Of course, the horrors of these great adversaries of our time are being felt earliest and with the most severity in those areas already ransacked by the winds of capital, already cast to the margins of a global machine of atrocity.

All is not so bleak as we might fear: Like the mountains I terribly miss, and these mountains I now fight for, the social fabric of free life is a regenerative fire ecology. As the seeds of revolt and revolution take their root more readily in this scorched earth, they prove to us all the real possibility of victory in our time. So too, as the bombs of the enemy rend the land and shatter the very stone of the earth we stand on, do the beginnings of a new and brighter future sparkle and glimmer like little gems in the new cracks.

In my short time so far in this diverse and intricately woven tapestry of nations marked so cleanly on the map as a single state, I have seen and experienced a broader range of life-ways than I once thought to exist in all the world. These strange daily normalcies are both old and new: people in these mountains and plains live by well-worn traditional practices developed to accommodate the already vastly variable climate and extreme geography of these lands. In doing so, and in adapting these old methods to incorporate modern challenges and modern tools, I believe the revolutionary peoples of Burma are pioneering many models of life and struggle from which we all can learn.

While I will seek to stop short of orientalizing these cultures and their approaches, I cannot promise any measure of objectivity in my assessments. I have already fallen far too deeply in love with this revolution, its people, and its promise to ever offer the rigor and detachment of study that western scholars of technology, ecology or anthropology might demand of me. To those academics, I can offer only my condolences.

Power

Power, the lack thereof, and the necessity of both seem to make up the foundation, and the most challenging contradictions, of almost every revolution. Here, this holds true with regards to all varieties of power, from the electrical to the political and social.

In the workings and mechanisms of this revolutionary struggle, electrical power and its shortage make up a critical building block of (and stumbling block to) forward progress and military efficacy. Every front line, every logistics hub, every nook and cranny of this fight seem to be built and centered around nodes of electrical power. It is a necessity both for the myriad doodads and gizmos critical to each military goal, and for the phones by which each revolutionary fighter satiates their incessant need to post.

These nodes of power vary in source and scale, but we can begin with the simplest and smallest: the power bank. Every soldier worth their salt has at least a small power bank in their equipment, big enough to charge their phone a few times. These power banks are held almost in common, in what I have often described as a “Theft Economy”, and the electrons held within them seem to be wholly un-ownable. A particular power bank might temporarily belong to a single soldier, but the rights of property extend only so far as nobody else measures their own need to be greater than the object’s supposed owner. As soon as a phone dies, or a radio, the concerned fighter’s first instinct is to glance around their immediate vicinity and claim the first power bank they see, along with its ephemeral contents, as their own. I have, in the past months, laid claim to many a power bank. Each of these has been taken from me in some comrade’s moment of presumed need, and other than the very first, each of them came into my possession by the same means.

These power banks are refilled at every opportunity from one of two sources: either from one of the simple and makeshift photovoltaic systems which are erected by fighters everywhere they go using mismatched and salvaged components, or from a generator.

The former, these haphazard and remarkably effective solar arrays, are sight to behold, especially as I come from a place where photovoltaics remain terribly expensive, keeping them out of the hands of all but the wealthiest liberals. By comparison, the solar power systems here are profoundly basic. By gathering small panels, cheap controllers and simple lead batteries, the revolutionaries in this fight (like the villagers whose lands they fight to liberate) build reliable systems at a scale far smaller than we would consider worthwhile in The West. Capable of charging a few phones at a time, or powering some efficient little LED lights, these systems are well-suited for the minimal electrical needs of a village household or a small unit.

Generators, meanwhile, are used in larger groups or in situations that require more reliable, and more significant power. Each front

Joy

Perhaps the greatest strength of this revolution, expressed in a constant stream of beautiful moments, is its capacity for joy. The people of these mountains, assailed from all sides over the centuries by their (never truly successful) would-be conquerors, have built an entire culture which centers, above all, celebration.

Every victory, great or minute, is cause for a feast, for drink, for shared song and earnest prayer. Every loss, every death, every sacrifice, is cause for the same, if not doubly so. There is a natural depth to celebration and joy here which I, a westerner, simply lack the words or ideas to understand. I get a little closer, though, each time I feast on boiled salted pork in good company and do the flapping-armed bird dance in clumsy unison with the revolutionary armies I fight alongside.

I hope to someday see this immensity of joy expressed among the communities that are still organizing, still fighting, in the mountains I hail from. I have seen so many attempts to bring such a shared joy to fruition, none of them truly successful. I suspect that the secret might be found in the ease and intensity of communal bonds which are to be found in every village, every valley, every little community that exists here. Back home, our celebrations are not truly an expression of communal joy: by necessity they must instead be a deliberate tool of building it.

If we are ever to reach such heights of revelry as can be found in a Chin victory feast, I am convinced we will only do so on a foundation of real, committed connection to one another, and to the land beneath our feet. Without such a foundation, we have nothing.





line will usually have a couple generators, and these will be run as fuel allows, supplying the needs of computers, drones, power tools and larger communication systems, especially the satellite internet systems which commanders generally deploy at the column level. They're loud, and smelly, and attract far too much attention, both from friendly soldiers needing power and from enemy drones. As such, most combatants with any experience choose to make their temporary homes a reasonable distance removed from the local generator, relying on power banks or solar for their day to day needs.

These tiered and layered systems of electrical power mirror quite directly the extant structures of political, military and social power in the revolution: Individual soldiers hold a little bit of power in common, occasionally squabbling over it. Those responsible for a team or section hold a modest sum of power, occasionally squabbling over it. The people in charge of a column or similar large group, or even a group of such groups, hold in theory a great deal of power, occasionally (and at times, catastrophically) squabbling over it.

Of course, these systems of power are all subject to failure if abused, or if not properly kept in check: Power banks or solar batteries over-discharged by careless or irresponsible soldiers will puff up, ignite, or simply die a quiet death, their blinking warning lights ignored until it's too late to recover them. Section leaders without proper accountability to their team, and especially without a real revolutionary framework and understanding, will make bad decisions or take unfair privileges, the consequences ranging from discontent to massed casualties. Generators, and the column commanders who possess them, frequently melt down or explode if not properly maintained by people who can be trusted with the task.

I may be beginning to stretch metaphors here, but the lesson I have learned is simple: left to its own devices, any means of wielding or holding power of any kind carries with it the risk of bad or even catastrophic outcomes.

Of course, the risk and rate of these outcomes begs the question of whether the power is worth having in the first place, whether we would simply be better off solving our problems and meeting our needs by other means. As an anarchist (and a Luddite), this idea tempts me greatly, but I have seen too the problems which arise when power is disavowed, ignored, or left unchecked by those who would hope and claim not to hold it.

As this struggle has taught me repeatedly: Power, and its absence, are both points of instability which must be actively maintained with intention and care based on shared principles.

I have come to realize, especially in the context of revolution, that any structure or organizational model capable of maintaining the absence of power is similarly capable of maintaining the moderation and deliberate application of power. Again and again in this worthy

fight I see examples of the remarkable feats which can be achieved when we wield these tools (and power of any kind is just that, a tool) with intention, responsibility, and most importantly, accountability. Whether a generator or a general, any concentration of power without accountable people and structures to keep it in check will inevitably reach a point of catastrophic failure.

Water

Early in my time here, just after my very first foray to the front, I sat in a little village outside a small town, drinking coffee. As I and my comrades sipped away, slowly waking up, the topic of conversation turned to the recent unreliability of our water supply. In this village, as is the case in most of the region, the water for each house or each cluster of houses is provided by a small, elevated water tank. These tanks dot the landscape of the Chin Hills everywhere that people gather and make their lives: Blue plastic or gleaming steel, they catch the eye from afar and highlight the presence of a home, a family. These tanks are usually filled from a network of plastic (or, as I saw in one particularly old village, bamboo) pipes originating at some uphill spring, and are about as consistent as that description of the system suggests.

“It’s usually like that”. Piped up one member of our team, who’d been on the ground here longer than the rest of us. “Sometimes the mountain gives us water, sometimes it doesn’t”. We all exchanged a silent look of concern. “There’s a local legend about this, actually.” He went on, looking over to one of our local comrades for confirmation, and receiving a nod as she recognized what tidbit of culture he was about to pass on to us. “They say there are certain trees upstream, up every creek and tributary, whose roots extend all the way down into the water. If you cut down those trees, or any trees too close to the water, the stream will dry up and stop flowing.”

I don’t know, honestly, to what extent the legend of these water trees is widely shared in this area, or how much faith people place in such tales, or whether the younger generations pay enough heed to their elders’ stories that they might not cut wood from the precious water trees. Of course, I don’t even know if my comrade was actually sharing local wisdom or simply trying to mess with us.

Importantly though, little legends such as this one are common everywhere in societies still recently and cohesively linked to their historical culture. They make up a basis of knowledge, a system of understanding the world which many today might view as unscientific, or primitive, but which nonetheless often arrives at the correct answer: If you deforest the area around a creek, it will indeed cease to flow, or at the very least cease to flow with such reliability as it once possessed.

There is a saying, often shared by educated people who believe themselves clever: “All models are wrong, but some are useful”.

sat there, gazing through stacked glass at his distant form, as one of his comrades dragged him, heavy and limp, away from the scene of his end. I see that moment, the desperate heave of his struggling comrade, nightly.

In the first days after this action, I was truly lost. I swam through each day in a daze, disconnected from my body, my identity, and my comrades. I was no longer myself, I was no longer human. I was death, nothing more. I tried desperately to talk to my comrades about it. One, a peer, was comforting, saying all the right things from a western perspective: “it’s not easy, but it’s part of the fight for liberation”, and “it’s normal to grieve after you have to kill the enemy”, and so on. The other response, from our commander, felt almost callous. To paraphrase: “this is war, it’s revolution. Their job is to kill us, ours is to kill them.” To me, neither response felt right.

Later, in sniper training with dozens of other revolutionary women, I felt more estranged still: in the showers and around communal meals, I listened to these girls, many of them teenagers, listing off their “K” counts like video game scores. This belittling, almost commoditizing approach to human death did not feel like the revolution I was fighting for.

In the end, my process of coming to terms with death, and especially with killing, took many forms: poetry, song, prayer, nightmare. All helped, in their own way, but none helped me solidify my own understanding of killing, of the immense violence we sometimes inflict as part of revolutionary struggle, so much as a single moment: a comrade needing me to help them reconcile their own feelings on the matter.

I arrived, mid-sentence, at the truth that both I and they needed to understand: Revolutionary struggle is a beautiful thing, and so every part of it is beautiful. These notions I’d been presented before, of cold calculations or ends and ugly means, are the logic of states, the mantras of traumatized soldiers. “It was him or me.”, “I had no choice”, or worst of all: “it was terrible, but justified.”

These are not the models of death, of killing, or of struggle that could ever serve us as revolutionaries. Instead, as I told my comrade that day, our task in this fight is to find and express the beauty in every single facet of struggle. Whether baking bread before dawn for our team, or digging trenches, strumming guitars or ending lives, we *must* learn to do it all with reverent joy.

We don’t have to become trite about it, amused, unaffected, like those comrades in my training. We don’t have to dehumanize or de-realize our targets, our victims. We don’t even have to assign to them some innate evil as justification. What we can do, what we must do, is to treat their deaths (and our victory) as a thing both beautiful and worthwhile. We can stand tall, as free people, as revolutionaries, and declare our victories for what they are, without the moralized guilt or cold calculation that the culture of state armies has imposed upon our consciousness all our lives.

Death

“Death has friendly hands that gently guide you.

They are calm, and they do not push.”

— Rachel Corrie

Death is everywhere here. I was entirely unprepared, personally, for the scale of it. In a single operation, the first I saw in these mountains, 89 of our comrades were martyred, with hundreds more wounded. Enemy airstrikes take from us revolutionaries and villagers alike by the thousands. We are winning, but victory comes slowly and costs us dearly.

The first time I saw a dead enemy (or in truth, any corpse) up close, I expected it to impact me more than it did. The invading forces had attempted to capture a strategic position from us, and been promptly rewarded for their hubris. As we approached one of our usual fighting positions to play a “military joke” on the enemy, the only notable change we found on the front line at the point of this failed assault was a pair of dead soldiers, dressed in the hideous orange digicam of their fascist and incompetent army, both their heads popped like balloons by the bullets of our snipers.

I saw them on the ground, braced for the wave of shock, or horror, or deep discomfort that I was sure would overcome me as we passed them by, and was instead overwhelmed only by a sense of “nothing”: they had been alive, they had fought against their own people, and now they were dead. The only sense that really clings to me, to this day, from that moment is the smell: a sharp metal sting of iron, and the unmistakable funk of human shit.

The real horror of death, for me, never came from anything up-close and personal: those deaths were clear, detailed, complete. There was nothing to wonder about, no questions were left unanswered by the testimony of the broken body. The horror, the nightmares, the scenes that I fear will still play out on repeat in my head years from now, came from the impersonality of death that I, personally, brought upon the enemy.

I came to this revolution with specialized skills. These skills were not immediately easy to apply in this context, it took me quite some time and many failures to finally bring them to real impact against our adversaries. My specialization, though, allows for me and my team to bring death upon enemies far beyond the reach of our eyes, and thus of our real comprehension.

The first time I knew, for certain, that I had killed an enemy, I didn’t see him actually die. I saw him alive, I executed my tasks, and then I

Those who might repeat this saying are, of course, often the people most likely to dismiss traditional practices and especially orally-disseminated systems of knowledge. In these forested mountains, I have encountered many broadly-understood truths and practices which at first glance struck my foreign-raised mind as obviously wrong, or oversimplified, but which are then proven again and again to arrive at the intended goals, or to prevent the relevant problems.

Of course, traditional models of knowledge and practice can stumble when pressed into wholly new or unexpected situations. One clear example of such difficulties can be seen in the primary challenge regarding water in Burma, and broadly in most of rural Southeast Asia: access to clean water, and protection of that clean water.

A standard local way of building an outhouse is a simple hole dug into the ground, with a small structure built over the top housing a squat toilet which drains into the hole, and a bucket of water with which to flush the toilet and clean up after using it. Sometimes these holes in the ground are capped with earth or concrete before the structure is built, with a pipe for the toilet’s drain, other times the structure is simply suspended above the pit.

In a setting of sparse populations and lands held in common, these systems are perfectly usable, posing few or no real problems. As the country has modernized and grown, though, the density of dwellings and the enclosure of land rights has squeezed each family, each household, each group into ever-smaller areas, in many cases requiring the toilets to be constructed without appropriate distance from drinking water supplies.

Illness as a result of contaminated drinking water is a common factor of life here, one people go to great lengths to avoid: Few, if any, people in populated areas drink un-boiled water. Standard practice is to continually keep filling a large jug or pot with freshly boiled water, and to drink only from this supply. Still, unsafe drinking water contributes to a high portion of child mortality in the region, and is a common cause of hospitalization (as I experienced myself on a recent mission in the lowlands).

Of course, I have seen rapid adaptation occurring. Predictably, in the wealthy houses in cities many of the upper classes have installed mass-produced septic systems, along with western-style toilets and water filtration. These expensive options are by no means the only modern solution I have encountered, though. In many places, simple and low-tech changes have been made to the design of the traditional outhouses, digging multiple tiered chambers to function similarly to a modern septic tank, and in some cases lining the upper chambers in rough hand-mixed concrete to minimize leeching of pathogens into the groundwater. These changes, made both through organic sharing of knowledge and through copying the principles of other systems, adapt the traditional practice to accommodate new challenges.



On the topic of Love, the Spring Revolution (or at least those parts of it that maneuver in these western mountains) can perhaps teach us more in setback and defeat than in victory.

As is so often the case in The West, many here proclaim Love to be the ultimate expression of revolutionary spirit. Especially among the young and horny, these assertions and convictions are near-universal. In my time here, however, I have found "Love" to be second only to alcoholism in its track record of removing otherwise committed revolutionaries from the fight. Especially in the case of women, almost the standard expected path within the revolution is to hang out in various units for a while, meet a boy, marry him, then be socially and sometimes officially re-assigned to the role of "Soldier's Wife".

These particular issues and outcomes may be different from the challenges of love in western revolutionary movements (which of course stem mainly from power couples, breakups and the resultant infighting), but they highlight the same root problem: for those of us raised within the present structures of capitalist modernity, our models of love (even those models we might consider subversive or radical) are often simply incompatible with revolutionary commitment.

I cannot claim to have yet arrived myself at any real answer to the question of Revolutionary Love, but I have learned through direct experience one thing: that the bond — the love — felt between committed comrades is more powerful, more absolute, and more sacred than any other bond of human connection I have yet encountered. I would posit here that for those seeking to develop a model of Revolutionary Love, this bond of camaraderie ought to be considered the foundation on which all love (and perhaps all of the revolution) is built.

without any such standard being imposed by a central body. The parts for a modern Kenbo, available at any village shop, can be used just as readily to fix a 40+ year old Honda, or anything in between. While the Kenbo brand is prevalent, a plethora of other companies and brands are similarly popular, all copies and duplicates of one another. Bikes that do not fit this “default” design exist, of course, but they are widely regarded by the rural population as foolish and impractical luxuries.

Even when the supply chain dries up, as it did in the Battle of Falam, rendering replacement parts scarce, this collective standardization renders almost any problem fixable, so long as one is willing to wander around a while looking for an appropriate damaged or crashed bike to harvest components from. Again, thanks to the standardization, one never has to look far.

Love

Many before me have sought to answer the question of Love in the revolution. I wonder, is an answer even what we should seek? Many people, in the movements where I first fought, would repeat or recite clichés such as “Love is Revolutionary”, or “Revolution is Love”. These pithy equivocations assert confidently the link between two subjects which, I realize now, none of us then could begin to understand.



We might turn, for wisdom, to the free women of Kurdistan here: Their idea of “Revolutionary Love” is a potent model, to be certain. Of course, as any cadre of democratic modernity will tell you, it is perhaps that paradigm’s most complex, nuanced concept. I will not attempt to explain it here, not least of all because I cannot claim to wholly grasp it myself. I will only promise that neither I, nor you, dear reader, have yet achieved it. This is in part, I think, because it is an ideal of struggle intended and expected to be ongoing. As in all areas of revolutionary life, Love can and should be a permanent work of communal self-development for every one of us.

Food

I sit here writing now in a Zomi village, in the north of Chin State (locally known as Zoland). Of course, whether this particular village, even this particular house, is located in the south of Zoland or the north of Chinram, or whether these are all part of any shared political, ethnic and cultural entity in the first place depends on who you ask, what language they speak, and which members of their extended family they’re closest with. One unifying factor between all of these people is to be found in wooden pens behind their houses: the pig.

Every household with the means to do so has at least one pig at all times, if not a whole family of them, kept in simple elevated pens made of rough-cut planks cut from local trees. Each day, a bucket of food waste from the kitchen is brought outside and dumped in the pen, or placed in a corner to be devoured like stinky soup until the bucket is empty and must be collected to prevent it, too, from being eaten.

I can now always tell, while moving around the Chin Hills, when we’re approaching a village, because the smell of pigs and chickens permeates the air around each collection of homes. Thick and heavy, the scent hangs at ground level, seemingly unaffected by wind, until (at this time of year at least) the daily torrential rains arrive to wash the air clean, and rinse away the various goops that build up in the pig pens, chicken coops, and drains. It is the smell of freedom, the smell of real localized food security, and the smell of a society that refuses to be easily governed.

Nothing of consequence happens in Chinram without a pig. Marriage? Kill a pig. Important or beloved visitors? Kill a pig. Meeting between tribal leaders? Pig. Beginning or end of a military action against the state? Pig. Religious holiday? Oh man, the pigs are cooked. Especially in Zoland, I have encountered a beautifully animist syncretism around the killing, especially the hunting, of animals as part of a celebration or event. It’s so simply and unashamedly a duality of traditional practice and relatively-recent Christianized life, to such an extent that they don’t even bother to rename spirits and gods as new saints, or to alter the language and structure of their practice to fit a Christian model of prayer. They simply perform their traditional ceremony, then move on seamlessly to Christian worship.

The only animal more important (or at least, historically important) to local foodways than the pig is the mithun: a semi-domesticated forest ox, famed for its delicious meat and traditionally prized as the greatest of all livestock. These remarkable and immense creatures are browsers (like goats) rather than grazers, and can be easily raised in intact and healthy forest ecosystems. Historically (and still to this day, if you make your way out of the towns and up the less traveled village tracts), Mithuns have been kept by villagers as a prized and critical food source. They require little tending, often

being released semi-wild to freely forage in the mountains in the day, the villagers calling them home at night with shouts and the promise of salt.

A mithun, or a herd of mithun, has traditionally been a symbol of great wealth in these hills. This is for good reason: the meat of even one mithun is both bountiful and delicious, and can be easily dried or otherwise preserved using traditional local techniques to create a stable and reliable supply of protein. In one battle, our entire revolutionary alliance (hundreds of people) were fed for weeks by the dried meat of a single mithun. As a supplement to our daily rice, the tough dried beef was a welcome source of nutrients, and the arduous process of chewing it proved an effective diversion from the boredom and anxiety of a then-stagnant front line.

Of course, the enemy also recognizes the local importance of the Mithun: in the past two decades, the dictatorship's military forces have routinely confiscated entire herds from Chin villagers. Such incidents have been often hand-waved away by authorities as simple disciplinary issues of hungry local soldiers, but extensive reporting has documented the mass confiscation of herds as an organized source of profit for the military, and a tool of control over indigenous communities. The traditional (and environmentally responsible) practice of raising these animals is one which primarily lends itself to localized subsistence economies. This runs counter to the interests of the hegemonic Bamar Nationalist government, which has extensively sought to encourage commercial extraction of local resources such as lumber, and the establishment of commercialized and profitable farming practices.

Everywhere we go, there's a certain (new) dependence on imported food, especially rice, grown using these modernized agricultural practices in neighboring areas. This dependence, though, is softened, buffered, by the prevalence of these traditional and decentralized ways of raising and eating animals.

Livestock is not the only form of traditional agriculture in the Chin Hills. Every yard in every village is full of edible plants, ranging from fruit trees to common vegetables to semi-domesticated local flora. This diverse mix of species and emphasis on local crops allows the gardens to blend seamlessly into the surrounding ecosystems, rendering them resilient and productive, even when un-maintained. During the Battle of Falam, despite months of neglect in the emptied town, the gardens continued to produce an ongoing bounty from which we and the other fighters routinely foraged. These foraging expeditions sometimes took us into abandoned gardens, sometimes into the surrounding forest, and in every case we returned heavily laden with greens, tomatoes, local "aubergines" which are not actually eggplant, chilies, and more varieties of fruit than I could possibly have imagined.

One example of the productivity of local food forests is the diverse variety of bananas grown here. I know them only by the local names:



Plentiful throughout the region, they cost only a couple hundred dollars for a decent used example. These little motorcycles (loosely based on the old Honda Super Cub, but heavily improved) comfortably carry two people (or three, or four in a serious pinch) over steep, rough, muddy terrain that most people would struggle or fail to tackle even on foot. They can be completely repaired or rebuilt with the most basic of hand tools, and parts can be bought at every tiny village shop.

They are not fast, or comfortable, or pleasant to ride, but they will get literally anywhere with even an inexperienced rider, and will happily do so hauling more cargo than most westerners would think could be carried by a full size car.

In lieu of good fuel logistics, especially in the rainy season, and even more-so in this time of war and Junta blockades, the majority of these bikes are run on ethanol, an ethanol-gasoline blend, or often even harsher, sketchier locally brewed fuel alcohols. These eat away at some of the seals, hoses, and the paint inside the fuel tank, causing reliability issues, but the mechanically dubious ingenuity of the local people knows no bounds. Somehow, these bikes are repaired in ways that slowly adapt them to the use of these horrific fuels, and over time as more and more dissolved parts are replaced, they become immune to the corrosive effects.

The most impressive aspect of this moped culture is the embrace of a singular design, the collective and communal decision to standardize on a single motorcycle platform (the 125 Honda clone)

Movement

To discuss movement in these western mountains of Burma, we must discuss the history of movement here, and the way this rugged terrain, in its eternal opposition to human movement, has fundamentally resisted and deterred effective colonization for centuries.

As we see in all corners of the world, these mountains are where people go to be free. Historically, the city of Falam (as an example) began as a village at the base of the mountain. When raids and attacks came from neighboring peoples, the village moved up the ridge. When the attacks came again, it moved still higher. Like other mountain villages of the Chin Hills, and like the unassailable peak-dwellings of free mountain-people the world over, the geographic advantage of mountaintop life allowed Chinram and its people to remain largely free while the majority of Burma fell under the rule of a series of kings. Only when the British arrived, with their overwhelming military technology and extensive imperial might, did these peaks finally succumb to outside rule. Even then, the ability of the British Empire to truly rule in the region was limited to the central areas of their Hill Stations (of which Falam was one), and the most heavily traveled of the roads between them. Broadly speaking, life in the surrounding villages was able to go on, with minimal ability for the British to project power into the unforgiving terrain.

That same unforgiving terrain is a key factor in the modern revolutionary struggle, and a reason the Chin Hills were able to be liberated so quickly. Within the first phases of the revolution, the SAC dictatorship forces became constrained, like the British before them, to the mountaintop bases they controlled, and some of the roads in between. Before long, each of those roads became impassable to the invading forces, as a result of ambush tactics by the revolutionaries. Finally, once cut off from land routes, these remaining Hill Stations began one by one to fall. Falam, one such Hill Station, fell in the spring of 2025 after several months of hard fighting, in which I and my comrades participated heavily.

This unforgiving terrain, while primarily an impediment to the movement of the enemy, also of course poses difficulties for the revolution, especially as we enter the latter stages of Guerilla struggle. In particular, as I write this now in the rainy season, the roads to get from this village to anywhere, in any direction, are wholly impassable to any four-wheeled traffic on account of mud, erosion, and landslides.

In such conditions, the only viable means of mechanized transport readily presents itself; cheap and reliable, sturdy and capable. It is the donkey of this revolution, the Hilux of Chinram: the venerable Kenbo 125 moped.

“Banh Pi” (big banana), “Banh Te” (little banana), “Banh Hmuy” (sweet-smelling banana), and of course, “Thur Banh” (which I believe means sour banana, and is known in The West as a pineapple). Between the many “bananas”, plentiful dragonfruit, grapes, and many other strange fruits I cannot name in English (one of which was simply translated to me as “sugar fruit”), the forests and gardens here teem with sweet delights in every season. This is no accident: even well into the last century, the Chin people continued to cultivate and steward their local food-forest ecosystem, shaping it carefully over countless generations to fit the needs of their people, while helping to maintain the diversity and ecological health necessary to prevent collapse of these complex forests. Only recently has deforestation come to pose a serious risk to the local environment, such in the areas around Tedim, where a Chinese investor (with the strong backing of the central Myanmar government) has established a booming business purchasing massive quantities of charcoal from the local villages, encouraging mass-scale destruction of the forest ecosystems, which are then replaced by more extractive methods of agriculture.

I cannot say whether, or how long, these traditional practices and food ways will survive the onslaught of capitalist modernity. I maintain hope that recent experiences, in which the Chin people have survived and carried on more readily and freely in the face of the hardships of war thanks to the diversity and resilience of their traditional agricultural practices, will encourage hesitancy in the future when economic opportunities come knocking, offering “development” at only the cost of the local ecology. Whether my hopes are well-founded will, for now, remain to be seen.

Technology

Technology, within the context of this revolutionary struggle, ranges from the advanced and imported (such as the Satellite internet nodes around which each command structure is centered) to the positively prehistoric. Across this entire spectrum of complexity, each tool continues to be developed, improved, and iterated upon by revolutionaries at every level of the fight. A particular trend I have noticed is that the overall or “total” complexity or advancement of a given piece of technology is not the best predictor of its effectiveness in struggle. Rather, the key factor determining the use of a technology in this fight is how well the technology has been adapted, localized, and iterated upon to most properly fit the situation at hand.

Every pickup truck passing through the mountains, for example, rather than carrying modern recovery equipment, carries a handful of soldiers equipped with the locally produced digging tools that resemble a cross between a pickaxe and a hoe. When they reach an impassable section of road, rather than busting out mud ladders, winches, or other modern tools of off-road travel, they climb out of the truck, and using their strength and hand tools simply cut a new road into the mountainside. Further examples of this trend are to be

found throughout the fight: homemade mortars constructed of pipes and fuses, immense slingshots and trebuchets used to launch pipe bombs, a powered grinding wheel built from the back half of a wrecked motorcycle, worn-out truck engines repurposed as air compressors, and so on.



Only our certainty and conviction, channeled into autonomous women's revolution, can maintain the revolutionary momentum and culture of struggle beyond the eventual "end" of fighting, and press all of society into continued forward motion. Only this intentional certainty can maintain struggle and change as a way of life, resisting and sidestepping the predictable wave of post-revolutionary reaction.

Examples of this can be seen already in this revolution: in the areas still contested, the hot spots of urgent struggle and upheaval between the dictatorship and the revolution, many women continue to press onward to newfound heights of militancy and victory, earning the respect of their male comrades. In the solidified areas though, where revolutionary and military victory has been a fact of life for years now, we already can begin to see women's position return to one of quiet, resigned periphery. Between local misogyny, and the constant patriarchal influence of capitalist modernity and its anticultural imperialism, the cracks have again closed on more lives than I can count.

At the front lines, dirty-faced and sweating under half a hundred pounds of equipment, the most frequent question I am asked is "Are you a woman?". Away from the fighting, mingling along with my internationalist comrades in the villages and rearward mountain guerrilla camps, the question inherently becomes "Are you his wife?".

If there is one lesson I have gained from this revolution, above all others, it must be this: No oppressed group can be certain of their path to freedom simply by participating in a revolutionary struggle led by others. Our struggles for liberation *must* be autonomous, and in our autonomy we can build stronger and more real freedom not only for ourselves, but for the entire revolution.



man could comprehend, and yet this hope alone cannot be the basis of our liberation.

A smaller portion of the women I have fought alongside, trained or trained with, and most importantly found community with, have exemplified a more critical and challenging characteristic of any revolutionary: the trait of certainty. They are not only hopeful for a better future, they are certain of it. They are not hopeful about their ability to fight, they are certain of it. They do not rely on hope for victory, they hold in themselves an intentional and powerful certainty that they can, and will, defeat the enemy.

I see this certainty in the eyes and the actions of women throughout this struggle: a grandmother in a misty village, inspecting from afar the passing convoy, trucks bristling with tired revolutionaries singing their songs of hope. A tough butch squad leader with short hair and rolled up sleeves, urging her soldiers again through yet another round of push ups. A comrade at the front, sneaking shoulder to shoulder with me over broken rubble in the pitch dark to approach a favorite kill-hole. A young girl, walking home from her local school, gazing at the armed and joyful women of her village's little PDF, now certain that the future holds more for her than only the home and the family.

Most critical to this certainty, and the factor which has most helped me to find it in myself, is the building of real, strong, and autonomous women's structures of revolution. The revolutions I referred to in the beginning of this chapter included women, to be certain, but they were not women's revolutions, and they did not succeed in building real autonomous women's power. Their example, and their lesson to us, is that simply fighting as women in a men's revolution will not further our cause, or our place in the world. Whether victorious or defeated, periods of uprising and social struggle are followed by a deep communal search for normalcy, comfort, and stability.

In this wave of normalization that follows any uprising, the remaining extant privileged positions and identities tend to be shored up, and the lines redrawn and bold-faced between the privileged and the oppressed.

Women, perhaps the first identity and without doubt the first colony that humanity ever created, are time and time again the first group pressed back into their "expected" place in society in the wake of any revolutionary period. The cracks of revolution allow breathing room and space to maneuver, for certain, but in the periods that follow, cracks are closed and walls rebuilt. Individual gains of freedom and independence for the "bravest" or "special" women are at best insufficient to hold open the cracks. At worst, their very example as "special" is used to convince other women of why they are simply not good enough, not "unique" enough to deserve freedom. See? The men say: This woman succeeded, we didn't stop her. You simply aren't as capable as she is.

There is a real beauty to these "organically" developed solutions: without the influence of capital on the development process, these technologies avoid pretense and evade regularity. Each example, even as it follows a general pattern or "idea" replicated elsewhere, exudes the signature traits of the individual, group, purpose and place which brought it about.

Of course, "Technology" of the highest order is as pervasive and carcinogenic within the scope of this revolution as it is anywhere in the world, at least in the situations wherein its use is possible. One cannot wander through a rebel camp or base without hearing the persistent tinny chatter of dozens of young soldiers' TikTok feeds, all cranked to full volume to overpower the pervasive noise of our own collective making. As is common nowadays the world over, a shocking amount of the enemy's intelligence on the revolution (and even their targeting data) is successfully gathered by merely monitoring the public posts of revolutionary fighters.

As I looked up from writing the last paragraphs, I noticed a strange filter over my vision. The alternating light and dark lines of text on my screen had burned their way into my eyes, producing an effect not dissimilar from a VHS tape that has been rewound one too many times. Looking out through misty dusk at the mountains in which this revolution finds its strength and refuge, the technology I rely on for so many of my contributions to the fight left its clear mark on the way I see the world around me. The same was always true on the front lines at night, as the light of my thermal optic scorched my sight and left me in the dark without its unnatural aid.

The same is true of the revolution here: the organic and social technologies developed within the movement can only flourish and drive us forward in the pockets where higher and more capitalized technology fails to maintain its grip. These technological margins, like the geographic and political margins of the mountains, form a fertile terrain of struggle and political development. The ability of the revolution here to take root in these margins of every type should give hope and inspiration to all people of the world, especially to those most acutely facing the growing crises of fascism and ecocide.

Womanhood

Under a smiling portrait, I lay badly in the women's house. A power churns beneath me, a round about to cook off with no target yet in sight. This old fire has a name, one I still have yet to learn. It is a fire not my own, in my outstretched veins it begs me not to wait.

In the fire (is it God?) we are old enough to know better than this. *You mustn't miss.* It hisses, magnitude without its own direction. It is strengthened, oh the strength it gives is not without beginning. Clear reaction: our foremothers in their dedication burned for us, a nation, the first colony of many; fire, fire in the blood scalding ever brighter. *Burn ahead, my fighters,* She reminds us. Among my sisters, I am not frightened. In sacrifice and the song of arms, we feed the flame for one another. In aggregate, we shape a worthy target.

In every revolution I have yet studied, examples can be found of brave women participating in struggle. From the Communards to the Sandinistas to the PFLP, women have pressed their dogged way to almost every front line imaginable in the long history of liberatory violence. Early in my time here, I wrote of revolution and its cracks: the crumbling of social walls, the erosion of oppressive norms. I rejoiced in particular at the ways that women have stepped forward into this newly open terrain, seizing opportunities for revolutionary action and their own liberation.

This process has continued since my last writing, and my experiences of this process have further filled me with hope. I have joined hands and raised arms with women from more political, religious, and social backgrounds than I could ever list. Each of them has brought me new perspectives, and each has upheld one clear shared trait, one which I have begun to see as a defining characteristic of the revolutionary woman: hope.

Hope is a critical, and dangerous tool of revolution. It is one of the strongest motivating emotions of all human action, especially the joined communal action of communities and movements. The mass popular uprisings which sparked this very revolution, and the early days of haphazardly armed and bravely-fought guerrilla struggle that followed, were motivated by exactly such hope, and by the powerful, fundamental rage at that hope's betrayal.

Hope, however, is an unsteady foundation on which to build any revolution. It can be shaken loose, knocked aside, by the ceaseless setbacks and stumbling blocks that any movement will face as it progresses through the stages of armed struggle. My fellow revolutionary women in this fight have proved more capable, more ready, more determined in the task of upholding their hope than any

