

Strongmen as Benefactors: Opium, Patronage and State (Dis)Formation in Burma's Shan State (1959-1996)

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John Buchanan is a founding member and the Director of Research for the Institute for Strategy and Policy, Myanmar, which is a Yangon-based think tank. He received his Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Washington – Seattle in 2017. His dissertation, “The Rise of the Bo: Autonomous Strongmen, Opium Capital, and State Formation in Mainland Southeast Asia (1948-1996),” examines processes of local state formation in opium producing areas and the emergence of powerful autonomous strongmen. His study of the nexus of state formation, militarized violence and illicit capital accumulation draws attention to the persistence of non-state spaces. Drawing on archival research conducted in Bangkok, Chiang Mai, London and Washington, D.C., as well as extensive fieldwork in Burma and Thailand, he examines the conditions under which strongmen exercise social control autonomous of state agents. In doing so, he challenges conventional market-focused analyses of the commercialization of opium production in Mainland Southeast Asia and the fragmentation of political authority. His research shifts the focus, instead, to localized dynamics within agrarian societies that involve efforts to mitigate risks posed by predatory armed groups. During the year at Agrarian Studies, John will transform “The Rise of the Bo” into a book manuscript while continuing to contribute to policy and scholarly debates on a range of topics including drug crop production, state formation, and armed conflicts.

Wednesday, October 3

12:00 Noon

Room 203, Luce Hall, 34 Hillhouse Avenue