

Proposal for Panel
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"Shifts, Fractures, and Stimuli: Opium and Transition in Southeast Asia"

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Opium revenue has funded the expansion of empire, state making, economic growth and warfare across Asia. Using well-researched historical analysis of opium, this panel interrogates assumptions in scholarly and policy literature about the operation of drug markets in Asia.

One assumption, called the “balloon effect,” is an oft-used analogy to explain changing patterns of drug production. According to this model, a state’s suppression of opium in one area can stimulate production in another. But it is not clear if this model fits all cases, raising fundamental questions about the processes behind state-led prohibition as well as shifts in patterns of opium cultivation.

A historical view shows shifts in the locus for intensive opium cultivation in Asia. For centuries, it was British India. But in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, China became the region’s major producer. Next, in the second half of the 20th century, intensive production shifted to mainland Southeast Asia, and finally to Afghanistan. But most scholarship on opium focuses on the India to China trade during the colonial period.

To better grasp the operation of drug markets, this panel examines their emergence and the factors that shape their evolution. This panel’s papers draw on cases from Southeast Asia to provide analysis of local, regional and global-level factors and their impact on farmers, states and traffickers. Historical-comparative analysis will provide both new perspectives on the blurred relations between licit/illicit drug markets and insights into how states use opium as a source of revenue to drive warfare and expansion.

Discussion Format: Single Session Panel