

EuroSEAS Conference, Paris, 2022
Proposal for Screenings with academic discussion

Zooming Out: Viewing Change and Continuity in Burma's Opium Trade through Adrian Cowell's *The Warlords*

Convener: John Buchanan, Tallinn University

In 1972, two British documentary filmmakers - Adrian Cowell and Christopher Menges - entered Burma's Shan State with mules carrying equipment to shoot a documentary film about the opium trade. A year and a half later, they returned to the UK with the footage to produce *The Warlords*. At a time when the US war on drugs was getting underway, the film is a tour de force offering one of the few first-hand accounts of the opium trade in Shan State.

After a half-century war on drugs, global illicit opium production has grown tenfold. While methamphetamine has replaced opium as Shan State's primary drug export, many of the same forces at work in the early 1970s are still present. The country remains mired in militarized violence. Drug abuse has become a prominent social issue. While efforts to restrict illicit poppy cultivation have evolved to address the developmental needs of farmers, a law enforcement model utilizing state agents to enforce prohibition underpins global drug control efforts.

This panel proposes an innovative approach to examine the drug trade in Shan State that involves screening of *The Warlords* and presentations on different segments of the opium trade followed by a discussion. The film by Cowell and Menges remains unprecedented in its access to primary actors in Burma's opium trade and provides an unusually granular account of its operation. The film is part of a larger corpus of work that offers points of view of different actors in the opium trade. By presenting the perspectives of farmers, foot soldiers, leaders of armed resistance organizations, government-allied militias, and drug traffickers, this film reveals a complexity often absent from the current scholarly and policy discourse on the opium trade. The film sets the stage for critical engagement with narratives of opium production. The proposed format for discussion will be a two-hour panel (or more if possible), which will include:

1. Short Introduction by Convener (7 mins)
2. Screening of *The Warlords* (53 mins)
3. Three Presentations (35 mins)
 - a. Frances O'Morchoe, University of Erfurt
 - b. John Buchanan, Tallinn University
 - c. Patrick Meehan, SOAS
4. Discussion (25 mins)

Using well-researched historical analysis, the three presentations build on the framework used by Cowell and Menges by looking at a broad range of actors including local colonial officials, poppy farmers, militia leaders, brokers, and anti-narcotics officials. At the same time, the panel zooms out to take a macro-historical view of changes and continuity in the Shan State and its opium trade. Each presentation looks at different periods and elements of the opium trade. The panel aims to provide historical context about the evolution of Burma's opium trade useful for interrogating academic and policy literature about the operation of drug markets and their impacts in Southeast Asia.