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# 1

## Introduction

UNTIL THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, European powers defended opium as integral to managing an empire. “Opium was one of those things,” declared one imperial politician in 1875, “which enabled us to serve God and Mammon at the same time.”<sup>1</sup> Colonial states in Southeast Asia taxed opium consumption as a vice, at once collecting revenue and claiming just reasons for doing so. During peak years, the British and French collected more than 50 percent of colonial taxes from opium sales to local inhabitants, while other European rulers across the region reported smaller yet still significant shares sustaining the public coffers.<sup>2</sup> It was possible, an administrator stationed in Burma wrote, that this drug could “raise for the public benefit, the greatest amount of revenue with the smallest possible consumption.”<sup>3</sup>

Into the first half of the twentieth century, however, the same powers were disavowing opium as a proper source of revenue and reconfiguring rationales that had once aligned the fiscal might and moral right of imperial rule. Before Parliament, John Morley referred to the British Empire’s anti-opium resolve as “that civilizing mission of the regeneration of the East,” while the French senator Édouard Néron wrote approvingly that “[o]ur commitment to ending the consumption of opium in Indochina has been made unambiguously clear” at an international conference in Geneva organized to combat dangerous drugs.<sup>4</sup> By the 1940s, all major beneficiaries of colonial opium were restricting once permissible habits of opium consumption, closing down opium shops and punishing violators of these new interdictions.

The prohibition of opium altered the foundations of colonial government and justifications for European rule across Southeast Asia. It involved reconfiguring old fiscal arrangements and fashioning new claims to authority, as opium went from being a significant source of public revenue to an official

danger that states condemned. This remarkable transformation is the subject of this book.

Specifically, *Empires of Vice* puzzles over this historical process in two respects. First, prohibiting opium entailed abandoning a key source of revenue for colonial states. Thus, it sits uneasily against influential theories that view modern states as guided by efforts to maximize revenue.<sup>5</sup> Second, a shared turn against opium unfolded unevenly across Southeast Asia under European rule. There were diverse experiences, with the timing and tenor of opium-related reforms differing not only between empires but also among colonies of the same empire. Such variations complicate conventional understandings of colonial opium policies as following metropolitan regimes that medicalized drug control or as a response to religious actors and transnational activists who altered the moral conscience of the world.<sup>6</sup>

How did colonial states come to prohibit opium in such different ways? This book addresses the question, focusing on the British and French Empires—two powers that relied especially heavily on opium revenue collected from vice taxes—and tracing how they restricted opium sales and consumption in Burma, Malaya, and Indochina from the 1890s to 1940s. I argue that local administrators stationed in each colony are key to understanding when and how such reforms were possible. Prohibition involved unraveling a state's deep-seated opium entanglements, a process enabled by a loss of confidence deep within the bureaucracy about the drug's contributions to colonial government. Local administrators played a pivotal role in constructing official problems, which internally eroded the legitimacy of opium's commercial life for European colonial states across Southeast Asia.

Local administrators were minor agents of imperial rule, far removed from greater intellectual debates of their times and seldom directly involved in the high decision-making of empires. Yet, these actors exercised surprisingly strong powers, as they produced official knowledge about opium in overseas colonies that provided evidentiary bases for major legal administrative reforms. They were poor theorists but rich empiricists of colonial reality. By way of doing what lowly administrators do on a day-to-day basis—implementing policies and keeping records—they developed commonplace philosophies about opium consumption as a colonial vice and forceful opinions about profits gained from the ills of others, while generating copious records that described and explained what challenges, what dangers, what wickedness seemed to mar local order. Seemingly radical reversals to Empire's approach to opium in each colony were

the sum of accumulated tensions arising from longstanding efforts to manage opium markets. Anti-opium reforms occurred at different times for different reasons, depending on the ways in which local administrators defined opium problems and affirmed them as politically actionable causes. But commonly, prohibiting opium was made possible through the work of anxious overseas bureaucracies.

The power of a state is felt intimately when it declares new interdictions. In the case of Southeast Asia, opium had long been a part of both the public and private lives of people. When nineteenth-century colonial rule began, opium was sold openly in the busy ports of Singapore under British rule and French Saigon to sailors and dockhands, in tin mines of Malaya where Chinese and Indian migrant workers toiled, as well as at opium shops in bustling bazaars throughout the region. The ones in Rangoon “are like gin shops in London with conspicuous signboards and often attractive in appearance particularly at night,” described one British official living in Burma in the 1880s.<sup>7</sup> A French doctor named Angélo Hesnard remembered the Saigon opium manufacturing factory where “busy Chinese, half naked, covered in sweat, labored in a vast hall . . . filled with the infamous odor of ‘boiled chocolate.’”<sup>8</sup> As a sumptuary practice, consuming opium touched the lives of both the rich and the poor, the pious and the profane, as a habit associated with the highest of pleasures and the lowest of pains. For those who smoked, ate, or otherwise ingested it, opium was a drug “at once bountiful and all devouring, merciful and destructive, sustaining and vengeful,” in the words of the novelist Amitav Ghosh.<sup>9</sup>

This everyday world changed under prohibition. Vendors faced restrictions on who they could sell opium to, at what price, and at what times of the day, while some saw their businesses taken over altogether by the same authorities who had issued sales licenses. In turn, people changed how they acquired and consumed a good that disappeared from respectable markets, from well-off merchants in Saigon to impoverished rickshaw pullers in Singapore who smoked opium excessively in pursuit of brief reprieves from the physical hardship, disease, and profound loneliness that came with working as a migrant away from home.<sup>10</sup> Some individuals were summoned before authorities to register as opium addicts and avow the state’s way of defining their experiences. Others did not and became labeled as illicit, illegal, and indeed criminal actors. By demonstrating how this shift was made possible through the nitty-gritty work of local administrators, this book tells a larger story about how states transform themselves.

## The Underbelly of Bureaucracies

The bureaucracy holds a privileged place for understanding modern states. It enforces laws, oversees taxation, provides public services, and allocates resources to people. Such administrative activities can introduce and naturalize fundamental categories through which individuals understand their place in groups, society, and a nation, while inculcating a sense of the inevitable presence or self-evident utility of the state. Bureaucracies have and continue to assume a powerful role organizing the exercise of physical and symbolic forms of state power.

While many scholars now agree that the state is not a monolithic entity with a unified purpose, we have been slower to acknowledge the bureaucracy in a similar way.<sup>11</sup> In the shadow of Max Weber's ideal type of the professional bureaucracy—an organization ordered by hierarchy, routinized tasks and rules, internal meritocracy, and the triumph of rational-legal authority—many conceive of administrative activity as first and foremost a rule-bound process of executing top-down directives.<sup>12</sup> Public choice theorists also favor a minimalist view of bureaucracies comprising principal-agent relationships, hampered by frictions that arise from misaligned interests between implementing administrators and the ministers, regulators, and technocrats who formulate policies.<sup>13</sup> Both perspectives posit a general logic to bureaucracies as pursuing goals set by upper echelons of the organization, seeking to efficiently implement policies formed from above.

This conventional wisdom tends to pathologize the discretion of low-level officials. From a high vantage point at the center, low-ranking administrators who act by their own volition are sources of bureaucratic inefficiency. From a Weberian perspective, these actors defy the rules of an organization and thwart its ability to realize goals. Everyday administrators who implement policies imperfectly and produce imprecise paperwork, vague records, as well as gaps between professed objectives and achieved results are suspect agents who exploit their principal's relative lack of information and difficulty monitoring in order to implement alternative policies or pursue private ends. Discretionary power within bureaucracies often has a negative connotation, from misleading superiors and shirking responsibilities to rent-seeking behaviors and outright corruption<sup>14</sup>: The desk officer who sidesteps procedure. The tax collector who reports ambiguous numbers. The financial officer who misreports funds and blurs entries in the budget. The wayward official who alters, contradicts, or even challenges given directives. Typically, all are familiar as willful figures who distort the rational workings of a bureaucracy.

But when we actually look within a bureaucracy, these administrators are no longer so familiar. This book argues that the discretion they exercise represents commonsense acts in the contexts in which they work, as solutions to problems with perceived urgency. They acquire felt imperatives to act, which vary widely depending on the history and inherited precedents for their particular realm of administrative activity. More than mere disobedience or corruption, the ways that low-ranking administrators behave differently from the bidding of superiors reflect their own reasons for easing tensions, making accommodations, and exercising authority on a day-to-day level of work.<sup>15</sup> Thus, to understand discretionary power within bureaucracies, it is necessary to understand what problems fueled the everyday work of minor officials. From the perspective of these insiders, the bureaucracy was not a coherent organization but a messy structure defined by multiple logics of operation, shifting objectives, as well as contradictory reasons for action. Political scientists have long stressed that bureaucracies are mired in politics, arising from external ties to elected politicians and legislators, business interests, professional communities, intellectuals, and activists, as well as through interactions with everyday citizens. I tell the lesser known story of micropolitics *within* bureaucracies. This requires exploring the concrete and granular workings of administrative governance, focusing on what actors deep within the underbelly of a bureaucracy actually did and wrote.

## Contributions

This book's approach to bureaucracies and opium in colonial Southeast Asia offers several interpretive and theoretical contributions. First, for scholarship in political science and sociology on the modern state, it places the everyday bureaucracy and power of ideas at the center of how we think about states and their claims to govern. A growing literature on symbolic dimensions of state capacity recognizes the ways that seemingly banal administrative categories, labels, classifications, and regulatory rubrics can profoundly order and organize socioeconomic life.<sup>16</sup> When explaining how bureaucrats develop and implement such administrative schemes, most studies focus on external interactions with political actors and social forces. But less sustained attention has been paid to the interpretive work that actors *within* bureaucracies do: how they choose and puzzle over objects of regulation, how they define the meaning of their own work, and how they develop narratives about the necessity and viability of official action. This inner world of bureaucratic activity is

important for understanding how states govern concretely and claim authority to rule.

For comparative historical studies of colonialism and state building, this book's focus on opium illuminates an often overlooked realm of fiscal capacity and authority for European colonial states: the vices of subject populations. Taxing colonial vices enabled rulers to exercise social control, collect revenue, and assert moral claims to govern. It simultaneously gave institutional expression to imperial logics of domination based on difference, while instantiating Empire's ambivalence about the terms on which to articulate reasons for differentiating among and dominating presumed others. Yet, few studies have treated colonial vice taxes as a central subject of inquiry or been curious about how exactly this system operated.<sup>17</sup> *Empires of Vice* does both. It situates the regulation of vice at the heart of European colonial state building, focusing on policies and arguments for regulating opium consumption as a peculiar vice among non-European subjects through excise taxation.

Finally, for histories of opium and empire, this book gives reason to be more puzzled about how opium prohibition happened across Southeast Asia under European rule since the late nineteenth century. The anti-opium turn of empires has been best understood from global perspectives that center on the political economy of China and India, transnational forces behind international norm changes, as well as the role of the United States and League of Nations. Seen as a region, however, Southeast Asia merits special consideration, not least due to the distinctive regulatory conundrums that taxing opium consumption posed for colonial states. Using a diverse range of administrative sources, I give access to the inner lives of bureaucracies on colonial ground and elucidate the variety of administrative challenges that different colonial states faced by identifying the authors of official facts about opium problems invoked in major anti-opium reforms, the architects behind administrative categories, the creators of revenue numbers and government statistics on crime and diseases relating to opium, as well as the narrators of public transcripts of the state with their descriptive, causal, and normative assessments of colonial reality. In doing so, this book aspires to tell a history that compares, in the words of Frederick Cooper, without "sweeping the particular under the global."<sup>18</sup> It also underscores the imperfect and incomplete nature of this process of change, in ways that demonstrate how Southeast Asia today bears the lasting legacies of colonial opium prohibition.



### *Symbolic State Power and Everyday Bureaucracies*

States are powerful, with a capacity “to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who.”<sup>19</sup> They can impose categorical distinctions on society by officially defining, declaring, and sometimes naturalizing the basic terms on which people understand the world they live in. While the modern state is most famously the wielder of physical coercion par excellence, it is also an entity that exercises a more subtle yet equally forceful presence by generating formal categories, shared vocabularies, and frameworks of reference that guide human interactions. If a claim to monopolize the legitimate use of violence distinguishes the state from other entities capable of coercing, disciplining, and ordering society, then the state is also distinct in its claim to centralize control over symbolic realms of social and economic activity, constituting as “given” what people experience as meaningful.<sup>20</sup>

In recent decades, studies acknowledging the importance of symbolic state capacity for understanding historical dynamics of state formation and contemporary governance have gained much currency. They provide valuable correctives to canonical theories of the modern state focusing predominantly on the military, police, and bureaucracy in establishing and defending territorial jurisdictions, waging war, and extracting revenue, by shifting attention to the many other composite institutions of the state and its additional pedagogical, corrective, and ideological roles.<sup>21</sup> In this revisionist vein, studies on symbolic power generally give sustained attention to cultural and ideational dimensions of state capacity; recognize the importance of legitimate authority for exercising power; challenge blunt separations of material versus immaterial, hard versus soft forms of influence; and stress the ways by which coercive and extractive acts occur alongside, or indeed require, nonmaterial capacities that shape an individual’s ideas, beliefs, values, as well as his or her social, linguistic, and practical relationships with others.<sup>22</sup>

The pervasive presence of bureaucracies in people’s lives has proven a fruitful vantage point for understanding how administrative capacities emerge and evolve to reconfigure social hierarchies, construct the taken-for-granted, and mask the intrusive presence of the state. The census; registries for birth, marriage, death, disease, and criminal behavior; cadastral maps; tax lists; land surveys; and passports mark but a few of the many sites where seemingly mundane bureaucratic arrangements “can become powerful instruments of state rule, as they help constitute what they appear merely to represent.”<sup>23</sup> For instance, the census classifies, quantifies, and serializes people in ways that at once

enabled the rise of imagined political communities, grammars of resistance against it, as well as the remaking of ethnic and racial identities and struggles for political recognition.<sup>24</sup> Even the most microlevel administrative practices such as creating surnames and standardizing units of measurement can render society “legible”—generating knowledge about local practices into standardized forms—in ways that facilitate efficient fiscal extraction and social control.<sup>25</sup> In the international realm, everyday patterns of action that perform competency can shape war, diplomatic cooperation, and conflict, as well as the efficacy of international organizations through reiterative interactions that “embody, act out, and possibly reify background knowledge and discourse in and on the material world.”<sup>26</sup> Banal, yet clearly existing forms of political authority may prevail through administrative practices that produce official statistics, conduct surveys, and employ technologies to map, label, and narrate supranational entities as a social fact.<sup>27</sup>

This book advances the current literature by taking the lens of everyday practices further inside the bureaucracy. Many studies on symbolic power have focused on state–society interactions: between bureaucrats and citizens, elites and nonelites, technocrats and laypersons, official and unofficial actors, those who govern and those who are governed.<sup>28</sup> This reflects a predominant approach to studying the power of administrative categories in light of what people recognize as legitimate, of how society regards the state. But if we pause to ask where a state’s vocabularies, narratives, and professed ways of knowing come from, then the existing literature tells a partial story. There is a prior step of fashioning labels, attaching referents in the empirical world, transforming words into official names, and entering them into the formal lexicon of the bureaucracy. State actors enact public transcripts that are produced through very prosaic acts of paperwork, recordkeeping, sorting, and scripting that tame unwieldy and abundant information into seemingly coherent narratives. Low-level bureaucrats also express their own convictions about what is or should be treated as real about objects of administration. Such convictions are formed cumulatively, by way of dwelling on regulatory precedents, internal archives, and shared commonsense about the possibilities and limits of administrative action. Put simply, in addition to looking outwardly, everyday bureaucrats look inwardly and backwards at their own pasts and construct official realities that they themselves find persuasive.

The inner workings of bureaucracies are messy, murky, and often hidden from sight. Understanding them requires a critical stance that steps back from established ways of asking how states wield symbolic state power through

administrative categories. Who does the actual work of producing official knowledge and what does the process look like? What fidelity do bureaucrats have to the languages they use and when do the state's own agents recognize formally sanctioned ways of categorizing and classifying the world as legitimate, appropriate, or absurd? Why do some constellations of ideas, interests, and sentiments shared among administrators become official narratives while others do not; and through what mechanisms does a bureaucratic realm of imagination guide state action? I address these prior questions that concern how administrative actors come to act, speak before, and interact with society in the ways that they do.

A sustained focus on administrative narratives about rule and revenue laden with symbolic power runs counter to how social scientists typically study policies relating to economic, fiscal, and financial matters. The words that official actors use are often treated as either secondary to hard material interests or as smokescreens for unspoken alternative goals. There is also a tendency to discount what bureaucrats say, assuming that efforts to explain, record, or hide their activities are guided by insidious intents such as misleading superiors, pleasing external audiences, or performing otherwise absent competency.

This book pushes against such preconceptions. I insist on the importance of language for bureaucratic activity and approach the self-regarding ways that administrators articulate reasons for action (or lack thereof) as interpretive acts. Even the lowliest of officials can justify their decisions, without necessarily seeking to perform competency before, or conceal corruption from, superiors, but because it is an everyday practice that makes sense in their narrow worlds. They can fashion and weld together labels and idioms, conceptual frameworks, presuppositions and biases, standards of necessity, causal and descriptive explanations, as well as worldviews that may appear odd and even hypocritical to outsiders but still make sense internally. An absurd quality may color a repetitive and almost comically self-referential process that nonetheless has a method to its madness, "conjur[ing] up . . . visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group."<sup>29</sup> The narratives that administrators use may enact and express ideas to accord with these visions. And desires to find meaning in actions taken in their official role may give these agents of the state reason to actually believe in the categories they construct.

This prior layer of interpretation within bureaucracies has political consequences. It sets the boundaries of a state's officially acceptable speech by generating guidelines for what information and truth claims can be made publicly and what must remain unspoken. It defines formally actionable causes by

establishing criteria for the necessity and feasibility of state action among those most intimately involved in actual administrative work. It decides (or negates) reasons for policy change and produces narratives that explain why certain initiatives succeed (or fail). It invents political facts by abstracting information and generalizing knowledge that bureaucrats produce. It induces state actors to believe in, defend, or at least justify their own ideas publicly and behave accordingly. It constructs realities that become taken for granted as obvious objects of state action.

In sum, this book approaches bureaucracies from the inside out. It takes seriously the importance of language and knowledge in administrative work and locates what political scientists might call endogenous sources of policy change in struggles *within* the bureaucracy. Even the most minor officials and their seemingly petty ideas can have major influence over how states wield symbolic power, by constructing official realities. Throughout this book, I refer to the surprising strength of weak actors to capture this link between micro- and macro-level dynamics of change and trace the processes through which everyday bureaucratic practices and ideas have real, observable political consequences.

### *Taxing Colonial Vices*

The vices of others formed a hidden pillar on which colonial states were built. Empires were obsessed with deviant sexualities, illicit addictions, and perverse moralities, developing regulatory regimes that collected revenue and policed unfamiliar societies, while also defining what constituted abnormal behavior among subject populations. An interdisciplinary literature on colonial history recognizes the regulation of vice as simultaneously manifesting logics of colonial domination, while also serving purposes of social control and managing boundaries.<sup>30</sup> State interventions that presupposed the difference of colonized subjects involved in prostitution, gambling, drinking, and use of narcotics—to name just a few of the most studied vices—are understood as both constitutive of the fundamental nature of colonialism and instrumental to its maintenance. Many scholars have focused on the paternalistic regard of European rulers toward non-European subjects, while some have also explored how people blurring distinctions of race, class, and gender commanded the attention, anxiety, annoyance, but also sympathy of colonial states.<sup>31</sup>

The ambivalence of official actors has become a key thematic guiding students of colonial vice who historicize the regulatory role of the state. An earlier generation of scholars influenced by subaltern studies and critical

Marxism as well as social and cultural historians focused more on the colonized and their agency, seeking to move beyond reductionist views of victimhood attached to people at the ostensible margins of colonial society.<sup>32</sup> More recent studies have reconsidered the colonizer, dissatisfied with blunt characterizations of the colonial state as a monolithic entity with primary goals of exploitation. According to one especially influential line of reasoning indebted to the works of Michel Foucault, even if colonial impositions clearly worked to the detriment of people's welfare, economy, identity, and dignity, we risk drawing overly straight lines between the state's intentionality and consequences in ways that run roughshod over processes of implementation, reversals, as well as unobserved state–society interactions that profoundly shaped not only lived experiences of the past but also later outcomes.<sup>33</sup> Now, serious references to the state's gaze or colonial mind acknowledge its fractured and context-dependent nature, as well as the polyvalence of discourses that may coexist and comply with numerous political agendas at once.

Existing scholarship as such, is attentive to the many and conflicting imperatives that shaped the regulation of colonial vice. Historians of empire studying gender and sexuality have produced an especially vibrant research agenda showing how policies dealing with prostitution and trafficking in women and children not only reflected but also impacted evolving concerns about race and class difference, public health and hygiene, as well as labor productivity and security that pulled state authorities in conflicting directions: to both protect and punish presumed inferiors, to both acknowledge and disavow sources of disrupted social order, to both police and condone illicit intimacies.<sup>34</sup> The colonial state, as Philippa Levine demonstrates lucidly, “frequently found itself in the curious and ambiguous position of upholding the moral and political authority of the modern Western judicial mode but simultaneously seeking to reassure the foreign population subject to that mode that it would not unduly interfere with either their laws or customs.”<sup>35</sup> Studies of colonial crime and deviance also establish the ways that European authorities regarded gambling, drinking, and drug use among native populations as both troubling but understandable, worrisome but necessary.<sup>36</sup> These works enrich our understanding of how regulatory regimes for colonial vice wrought profound changes over peoples' lives without being confined to asking whether authorities succeed or failed to actualize their intended changes. They enable us to acknowledge but not halt at the normative implications to questioning why states behaved in the ways they did and who bears responsibility for the improvement (or worsening) of people's welfare and developmental outcomes under colonial rule. This

growing literature thus opens opportunities to become newly curious about the nature of colonial governance and its effects.

This book's focus on the bureaucracy pursues one such line of inquiry. Given the ambivalence of administrative actors toward colonial vice regulation, how did they settle on specific policies? If European officials perceived of prostitution, drunkenness, excessive drug use, and gambling among the colonized as problematic yet inevitable, then what explains the emergence of certain regulatory approaches? I argue that the nuts-and-bolts aspects of administrative work can generate a slow-moving process through which official problems that the state deems worth solving are constructed, translating general ambivalence into specific policy.

It often starts small. Minor disruptions to routine abound at the level of everyday administration. From so many occasions where little things can go wrong, modest officials gain recurrent reasons to reflect on the causes and significance of such disruptions. Introspection occurs frequently, as biased and always partial assessments of what obstacles, what challenges frustrate the work of lowly bureaucrats. Routines continue. Disruptions repeat. And as these actors continue to ponder imperfectly, so accumulates anxiety within the bureaucracy. Documentation of felt sources of worry are archived, giving paper reality to perceived problems alongside names and labels, causal narratives, as well as numbers and ways of calculating that affirm already presumed reasons for concern. A process of escalation ensues, fueled by the regularity of routine administrative work. Bureaucrats at once reaffirm problems of their own making and struggle to solve them. They may gain remarkable discretionary power over defining what constitutes an actionable cause for the state by authoring official facts, assessing the necessity and viability of policy changes, and producing the language through which the state explains publicly the purpose of its actions (or reasons for a lack thereof).

Southeast Asia's experience with regulating opium consumption as a colonial vice illustrates this process, which I call the bureaucratic construction of official problems, with particular clarity. European rulers gained a substantial fiscal base from indirect taxes collected from non-European subjects who consumed opium. Yet, local administrators held deeply ambivalent positions about the legitimacy of revenue collected from what was deemed a peculiarly Asian vice and debated the proper nature of state involvement. Opium consumption in Southeast Asia under European rule thus represents a colonial vice with high fiscal stakes for which the meaning of regulation was especially contested. It took a near half-century-long process of bureaucratic problem

solving for opium consumption to become a taken-for-granted object of state control and prohibition.

More generally, a study of the bureaucratic making of colonial vice regulation invites scholars of modern state formation to consider how states arrogate authority to themselves by constructing official problems, dangers, and threats to society that make top down interventions seem obviously necessary.<sup>37</sup> Charles Tilly once famously likened states to criminal organizations. The activities of a classic Weberian state, he observed, bears striking resemblances to a protection racket, a scheme to produce both a danger and at a price, the shield against it. “If protection rackets represent organized crime at its smoothest,” Tilly reasoned, “then war-risking and state-making . . . qualify as our largest examples of organized crime.”<sup>38</sup> This analogy has durably shaped how social scientists think about the state. Many ask how states provide protection in the comforting sense of the word—how do rulers ensure the security of society; with whom do they bargain, what sorts of contracts do they establish, and by what mechanisms do effective and credible shelters endure?

However, Tilly reminds us, the word protection also sounds an ominous tone. The distinctive brand of protection common to the state and disreputable practitioners of organized crime also involves producing shields from threats that may be real or imaginary, threats that states themselves “simulate, stimulate, or even fabricate.”<sup>39</sup> This darker sort of statecraft has received less sustained attention. Remedying this asymmetry, this book explains how states come to define official problems, construct dangers, and reify them through everyday bureaucratic work.

### *Opium Prohibition across Southeast Asia and Colonial State Building*

For nineteenth- and twentieth-century histories of opium and empire, what distinguishes this study is the greater weight given to asking *how* anti-opium reforms occurred in European colonies in Southeast Asia rather than explaining *why*. The many causes behind the rise of global prohibition regimes against opium have been established by prominent studies about the religious origins of transnational activists who morally condemned opium, galvanized a change in international norms, and mobilized policy changes in metropolitan and international arenas.<sup>40</sup> We also know a great deal about the geopolitical tensions and ideological forces that weighed upon the British and French to ban opium smoking in their colonies during this period, especially in light of the United



States' entry into Asia as an imperial power and its efforts to assert global leadership through a moralizing antinarcotic position.<sup>41</sup>

Few, however, have been curious about the process through which the sinews of overseas rule built on opium were dismantled and how official narratives justifying this practice were reversed. Seminal histories have sidestepped this aspect as obvious, following either one of two lines of reasoning: that collecting and justifying opium revenue became untenable for European imperial powers in a world with new anti-opium norms, and colonial states transitioned to alternative fiscal bases while realigning official discourses to echo the lofty dictates of an international community and peer empires.<sup>42</sup> Or, as those dealing more squarely with opium in Southeast Asia more often suggest, colonial states never really changed their practices but better hid them from external scrutiny, and bureaucratic language about gradual opium suppression served as smoke-screens.<sup>43</sup> Especially trenchant versions of this second perspective draw attention to institutions called opium monopolies (also called *régies*) that centralized control over opium markets, replacing tax farming systems that had delegated the management of opium sales and distribution to private entrepreneurs with direct management by state officials and their appointed agents. The base fact that states effectively continued to oversee opium sales to local populations and collected revenue has been taken as evidence that the monopolies were profit-seeking entities, hardly serious about restricting the drug's commercial life and popular opium consumption in the colonies. Many have discounted the bureaucracy's justifications, regarding the opium monopolies as primarily profit-maximizing institutions, centralizing systems for efficient revenue extraction.<sup>44</sup>

However, the archival records of the opium monopolies for multiple British and French colonial states that I have consulted cannot be read solely through the lens of avarice. They also contain traces of anxiety, frustration, remorse, pride, boredom, as well as conflicting expressions of irrational confidence and profound skepticism about the integrity of the monopolies. "The history of the East is strewn with the wrecks of control schemes, of one kind or another, as regards opium," acknowledged one administrator in 1936, even as he pondered ways to design yet another such scheme.<sup>45</sup> Expressions of overt acceptance of colonized people injured by opium consumption are preserved in the official record alongside equally conspicuous concerns with the welfare of vulnerable others. Evidence of keen alertness among local administrators based in the colonies regarding Empire's damaged reputation and lost prestige couples with blatant exasperation with, diffidence toward, and indeed disregard for what



politicians, activists, and others outside the bureaucracy thought about opium policies on the ground. In other words, it is difficult to see just untrammelled pursuits of profit, desires for social control, or the conceit of civilizing missions within the opium monopolies. All were present.

I would like to explore rather than presume rationales for administrative action. Therefore, I give more weight to the words of official actors than is conventional and interpret the emergence of the opium monopolies as the rise of opium prohibition, which was what involved administrators called it at the time. When doing so, the monopolies begin to make more sense as vexed institutions mired in problem-solving rather than simply profit-seeking entities.<sup>46</sup> Grappling with the ideas that state actors expressed, both publicly and privately, reveals practices of governance that were not necessarily hidden but less visible from the outside, including mechanisms for “officializing” facts about opium’s significance for colonial society (Chapter 4), calculating opium revenue and converting it into a source of investment wealth (Chapter 5), as well as simultaneously reporting and disguising degrees of fiscal dependency (Chapter 6). The foundations of Southeast Asia’s colonial states were tightly entangled with opium in ways that belie any notion that their dismantling was ever an easy or obvious task.

An untold story of prohibition through the opium monopolies thus emerges, as the continuation of colonial state building rooted in administrative struggles dating back to initial moments of territorial conquest. European rulers began to levy taxes on opium based on preconceptions about its consumption as a vice among local inhabitants of non-European territories, but with inchoate understandings about what exactly defined its evil, harm, and injury. If modern states “puzzle before they power” and must formulate conceptions about societies they govern in order to develop policies, then most colonial states in Southeast Asia did the opposite. They powered before puzzling, by collecting revenue and intervening in people’s lives first, and clarifying reasons for doing so afterwards.<sup>47</sup> This reverse ordering durably shaped the work of subsequent administrators in the colonies. From early overreach came backward looking practices for managing opium markets, oriented toward solving problems arising from haphazardly formed, imperfect policies of the past. By way of doing their regular work, administrators came to conceive of certain challenges as more formidable than others, as threats to the stability and integrity of governance and eventually, as major challenges warranting forceful solutions. Over time, these actors came to lose confidence in the viability of the opium-based foundations of colonial states that they were tasked with managing, enabling anti-opium reforms.

I stress the inadvertent ways that low-level officials transformed the colonial state from within, using terms like haphazardness, unintended outcomes, and perverse consequences to describe how regulatory changes eluded the control of any single actor, yet were constantly propelled through the actions and ideas of individuals. But to be clear, I do not mean to suggest that administrators had given intentions that were thwarted or straightforward visions of ideal outcomes to be achieved that failed. Rather, these were captured actors within a flawed bureaucratic apparatus who were engaged in routinized work that had escalatory effects. Major anti-opium reforms were possible when those most intimately involved in everyday administration persuaded themselves of the reality of constructed opium problems and deemed them politically actionable causes.

This book thus tells a colonial history of opium prohibition that focuses squarely on the administrative state's perceptions and regulatory practices. It excavates a more tenuous and fragile side to the opium monopolies than what existing histories have recognized. Opium in Southeast Asia is best known as a drug that often had detrimental effects on the health and livelihoods of colonial populations, a good associated with Chinese migrant workers, tax farmers, and business families, a commodity integral to colonial political economies of labor and trade, as well as a form of contraband.<sup>48</sup> Usually, the state represents a constant, an entity that injured people, tax farmers and entrepreneurs bribed, opium consumers reproached, and smugglers evaded in diverse ways.<sup>49</sup> By contrast, this book reveals a more dynamic side to the colonial state, focusing on the inner anxieties that riddled its everyday bureaucracy.

### *Colonial Legacies*

Today, the region of Southeast Asia hosts an especially dense cluster of countries that sanction capital punishment for drug trafficking and certain forms of consumption. Currently, only around thirty countries in the world retain the death penalty for nonviolent drug offenses, but one-third of them are concentrated in this region.<sup>50</sup> Such draconian drug laws are matched by aggressive policing strategies or “drug wars” that employ both extrajudicial and state-sponsored forms of violence. The world's second largest illegal poppy cultivation area is also located in this region, anchored in the highlands of Burma and sprawling across borders into northern Laos and Thailand.<sup>51</sup> Alongside concerns related to “social ills” stemming from opiate addiction and urban disorder, drug-fueled conflict and corruption, real and rumored, animate popular

and political discourse. This book demonstrates how Southeast Asia's vexed opium-entangled political and economic landscape today is a product of its colonial experience with opium prohibition. A more general imprint left by colonial opium prohibition has been the recurrence of sharply delineated conceptions of illicit and dangerous aspects of commercial activity, which once found strong expressions in paternalistic rationales for external rule and are emerging during the twenty-first century as leitmotifs for state interventions and coercive controls over people's lives. By attuning scholars and policymakers to these themes, *Empires of Vice* invites the reader to pause and reflect on the assumptions and anxieties lying beneath our ongoing conversations about the harms of drug addiction, trafficking, and criminal undergrounds. How do we understand these seemingly obvious problems? What shapes our sensibilities of the need for policy action? What renders the criminality of vice visible, but masks the corresponding roles of the state and law, with their claims to moral authority? How did we get to where we are today and what has been lost sight of along the way? This book makes the case that the only way to fully understand these questions is to address them through historical inquiry, by illuminating the colonial legacies that have profoundly shaped contemporary Southeast Asia's illicit economies and punitive states.

## Organization of Chapters

Chronologically, this book spans eight decades of British and French rule in Southeast Asia, beginning in the 1870s and ending in the 1940s after World War II. Chapter 2 presents the guiding concepts, theoretical claims, and analytical frameworks that guide the book. How did colonial states come to ban opium consumption, a once permissible vice that they had taxed and justified collecting revenue from? The change was the product of longstanding tensions within the colonial bureaucracies. The everyday work of managing opium markets involved makeshift solutions to small problems that accumulated over time and escalated into large perceived challenges to the legitimacy of colonial governance. Local administrators played a key role in this process by constructing social, fiscal, and financial problems relating to opium, through their everyday work. Chapter 2 lays out this argument in detail, while clarifying definitions of colonial vice, prohibition, and the state that the book uses throughout.

Chapter 3 surveys the opium monopolies of Southeast Asia from the 1890s to the 1940s, laying out differences in regulatory reforms for restricting opium sales and popular consumption. For readers unfamiliar with the nineteenth- and

twentieth-century history of opium in Asia, this chapter provides background on key events and developments that inform existing scholarship on colonial opium prohibition: the decline of the India–China trade, the US annexation of the Philippines, and imperial entry into Southeast Asia, as well as the emergence of medicalized drug control regimes in Britain, France, and internationally under the League of Nations. The chapter also aims to persuade those already familiar with this history to be more puzzled about the colonial institution of an opium monopoly. Looking across multiple empires, I show how differently European powers implemented policies restricting opium that not only differ on a colony-by-colony basis in ways that challenge conventional understandings of opium monopolies as arrangements for maximizing revenue collection, but also do not map neatly onto major metropolitan and international developments. In this regard, Chapter 3 argues that prohibition unfolded unevenly across Southeast Asia as local administrators constructed official problems in ways that were responsive to but not necessarily reacting to external pressures; thus, there is reason to pay more attention to what was happening locally in the colonies.

Part II examines the opium monopolies of British Burma, Malaya, and French Indochina in detail. I focus on periods in the lifespans of each monopoly that are especially illustrative of the bureaucratic construction of official problems and proceed chronologically, with each chapter beginning in the decade where previous chapter ended: Burma from the 1870s to 1890s (Chapter 4), Malaya from the 1890s to 1920s (Chapter 5), and Indochina from the 1920s to 1940s (Chapter 6). Together, these cases are layered temporally to cover a long period of eight decades, with the aim of conveying detailed microlevel narratives about individual administrators while situating their ideas and actions in macrolevel political economic developments.

Chapter 4 begins with Burma in the 1870s. It traces a twenty-year process through which the British colonial state came to define a crisis of “moral wreckage” caused by opium and introduced an opium monopoly, while enacting an unprecedented ban on Burmese opium consumption in 1894. Chapter 5 turns to Malaya, another site of British rule, where the monopoly was introduced more than a decade later in 1910, without expressed concerns about indigenous opium consumption or sumptuary restrictions. It shows instead how the British colonial state was highly reliant on opium revenue; and the monopoly emerged as local administrators were reversing longstanding acceptance of such dependency as a natural condition of colonial government. Over the course of several decades, taxing opium sales became conceived of as an untenable

practice and challenge to fiscal order, culminating in the introduction of an opium revenue reserve fund in 1925 to enable the substitution of opium taxes. Chapter 6 looks to Indochina in the 1920s, when the French colonial state was reporting comparably high shares of revenue from opium taxes to British Malaya. This chapter identifies a very different set of concerns animating local administrators who misreported official revenue numbers while struggling to manage an opium monopoly that ran itself into bankruptcy. I trace a process through which a minor accounting measure in 1925, originally designed to allow emergency liquidity for purchasing foreign opium, became an entrenched mechanism for artificially balancing the budget, which slowly accumulated into a crisis of overdrawn accounts and unpaid debts that threatened the financial viability of colonial government.

Part III addresses the contemporary and theoretical implications to understanding Southeast Asia's experience with colonial opium prohibition. Chapter 7 traces the lasting legacies of the opium monopolies, linking the infrastructures they established for restricting opium's commercial life to the region's post-World War II illicit opium economies and harshly punitive laws against drug trafficking. It also utilizes a set of historical photographs to dwell on what alternative visions of state power and perspectives on vulnerability are rendered visible by better understanding the colonial history of opium prohibition. Chapter 8 concludes by reflecting on the analytical and normative significance to this book's approach toward colonial bureaucracies and inner anxieties of the administrative state.

## Method and Sources

This book provides a comparative method for explaining a complex process of historical change, which prioritizes identifying hitherto neglected similarities and differences across multiple sites. Colonial opium prohibition represents an event with a "lumpy" temporality that unfolded at uneven paces across multiple locations.<sup>52</sup> For the context of Southeast Asia, where received wisdom about colonial state behavior regarding opium regulation as driven by moral concerns with imperial reputation and revenue is especially strong, the anti-opium reforms that transpired during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries seem obvious enough that spatial and temporal variations within this process are often overlooked. A paucity of inter-empire and cross-colony histories of opium has further limited opportunities to compare and contrast the regulatory activities of European powers across the region.

I present three case studies of British Burma, Malaya, and French Indochina as layered comparisons: each builds on the previous one to clarify how differently local administrators worked in contexts in which one might expect more similarities in administrative responses to opium-related problems as colonies of the same national empire (Burma and Malaya) and with high fiscal dependency on opium revenue (Malaya and Indochina).

It is worth being clear upfront about what these case studies do and do not do. Each case privileges contexts that mattered for administrators who played pivotal roles in constructing opium problems, for instance, figures like Donald MacKenzie Smeaton in British Burma, who inscribed the official label of “moral wreckage” in government records; Arthur Meek Pountney, who designed the opium revenue replacement reserve fund for the Straits Settlements; and Joseph Ginestou, who oversaw the near bankruptcy of Indochina’s opium monopoly. Empires were multiscale concatenations of evolving legal administrative frameworks, “located in wider global fields of conflict and competition . . . reach[ing] across, through, and down to more localized settings of power relations.”<sup>53</sup> In turn, administrators situated in the colonies felt such reach with varying degrees of intensity and shifting importance. What constitutes pertinent extra-bureaucratic influence—from the dictates of international conventions and metropolitan scrutiny to the input of professional experts, knowledge communities, and the media—thus differs for each case. Some events famously associated with opium in Asia remain in the background (such as the end of the India–China opium trade and World War I), while other events figure more prominently (including border tensions with China and World War II). In other words, these three case studies do not offer general histories of opium regulation by colony, but present dense contexts salient for understanding state actors consequential for pivotal anti-opium reforms.

Layered comparisons are well suited for explaining differences in policy-making and implementation for connected sites that defy standard comparative case study methods in the social sciences, which require presuming independence across cases to test causal arguments.<sup>54</sup> I draw inspiration from innovative approaches like Iza Hussin’s use of networked cases (which examines the making and remaking of colonial law in light of dense interchanges in ideas, strategies, and modalities of translation and extrapolation that connected India, Malaya, and Egypt under British rule) and works by sociologists who extend the metaphors of ecologies and fields in reference to arenas of contestation that extend beyond nation-state boundaries.<sup>55</sup> The additional value to layering cases lies with elucidating contrasts and interrogating what politics

and struggles are uniquely bound to a given site despite its clear connection to other sites.

Burma, Malaya, and Indochina were embedded in a densely interconnected world of ideas and interests vested in opium's commercial life. Until the end of World War II, the illegality of this realm had yet to be defined clearly as empires and states, colonial and independent, debated the terms on which international law might collectively restrict opium traded between countries and limit the drug's legitimate use to medical purposes. Asia represented the core of this global political economy of opium. In 1922, conservative estimates placed the world's annual opium production at 8,000 tons, of which more than half was grown in the southern provinces of China; around 2,000 tons in eastern India; and 1,100 in Turkey and Persia combined. Poppy cultivation itself was not limited to Asia; the flower that yielded a precious milky latex sap also bloomed in Greece, France, parts of today's Slovenia and Serbia, as well as Latin America. But the networks, capital, and knowledge necessary for commercializing its produce as a trade commodity had flourished earlier in Asia. British India served as the main hub for supplying opium to the world, dominating exports until 1935.

On the receiving end, small amounts of legal opium entered metropolitan Western Europe, usually Turkish and Iranian opium that had high morphine contents profitable for pharmaceutical industries.<sup>56</sup> The vast remainder of the world's opium, mostly from China and India, was destined for territories in Asia under the purview of what the World Peace Foundation once called the "opium smoking powers": Britain, France, Japan, the Netherlands, and Portugal.<sup>57</sup> Their colonies in Southeast Asia imported opium that was sold to local inhabitants for popular consumption.

Figure 1.1 shows these territories on a 1929 map produced by a League of Nations commission. The bold lines trace the itinerary of this commission, which was tasked with ascertaining the peculiarities of opium colonies in Europe's Far East (which I discuss in detail in Chapter 2). This map illustrates how observers during the early twentieth century placed these countries, which encompass what are today regarded as three subregions of South, Southeast Asia, and East Asia, within a common framework relating to opium.

Burma, Malaya, and Indochina illustrate the context-specific administrative tensions that opium taxation and vice regulation posed with particular clarity, as the British and French operated opium monopolies across multiple colonies. Whereas the opium monopolies for the Dutch East Indies and Portuguese Macao were limited to one colony, the sprawling reach of British and French



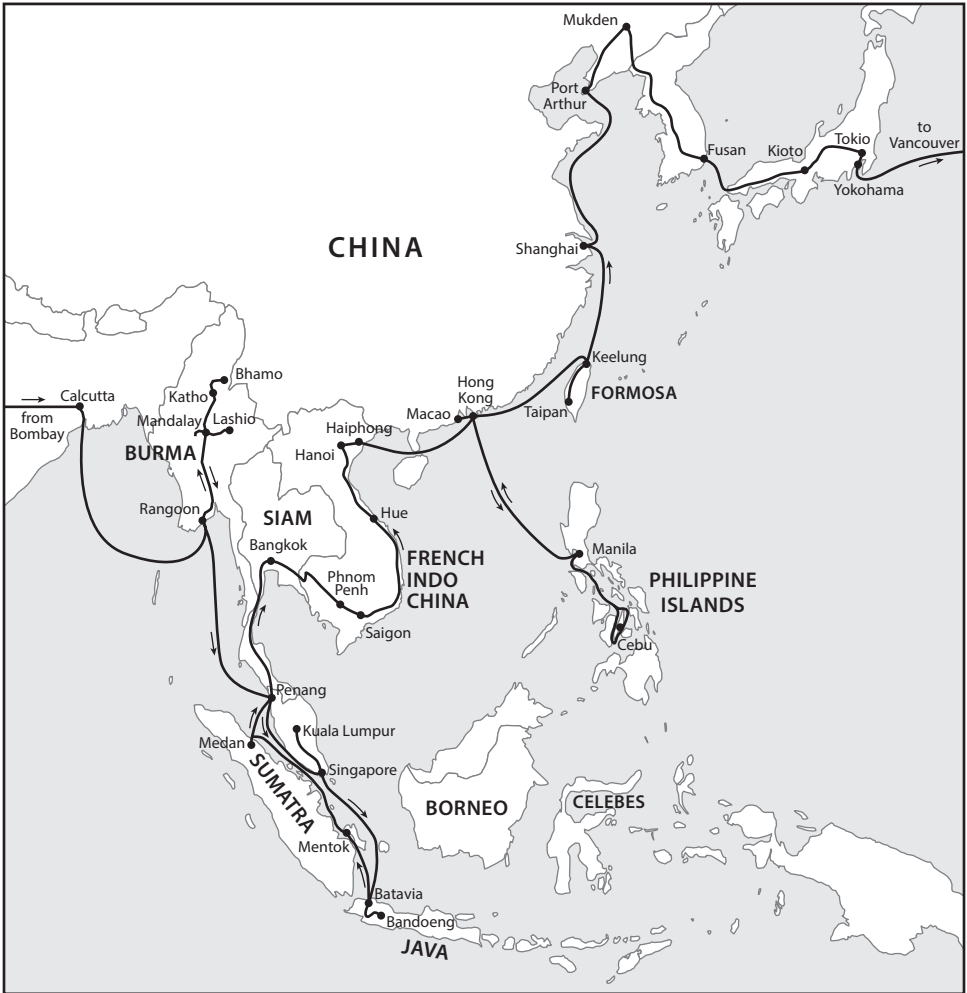


FIGURE 1.1. Map of colonial Southeast Asia in Europe's Far East, c. 1929. (Credit: Archives nationales d'outre mer, France, INDO/GGI/43095.)

empires rendered opium administration a messier affair, raising difficult questions about regulatory precedents, their transferability, as well as whether colonies under the same imperial power were comparable at all.<sup>58</sup> The British established separate opium monopolies for India, Burma, Hong Kong, Malaya, as well as Brunei, Sarawak, and North Borneo. Burma was administered as a part of India until 1935, but its monopoly operated differently without involvement in production and trade, unlike the India monopoly, which famously oversaw



poppy cultivation, opium manufacture, as well as exports. The Malaya opium monopoly was in fact two monopolies: one for the Straits Settlements of Singapore, Penang, and Malacca, which comprised a Crown Colony under direct British rule and another for the indirectly ruled Federated and Unfederated Malay States; and it operated closely alongside three monopolies for Brunei, Sarawak, and North Borneo in the British-claimed parts of the Malay Archipelago. The French established opium monopolies for Indochina; in China for the leased territory of Kwang-Chou-wan; in India for the settlements of Chandernagor, Pondicherry, Yanaon, Karikal, and Mahé; as well as for the French protectorate of Oceania in the Polynesian Islands of the South Pacific. The Indochina opium monopoly was the largest, combining five older subregional monopolies for the colony of Cochinchina and protectorates of Tonkin and Annam, Cambodia, and Laos.

The colonial states of empires with multiple opium monopolies had distinctive experiences. Although local administrators actively learned from each other and shared information, these actors were also engaged in an intricate politics of comparison.<sup>59</sup> “Comparisons in the hands of colonial officialdom were also conceptual assessments and grounded interventions,” Ann Stoler reminds us, and “[c]olonial agents disagreed over what constituted comparable contexts, often sharply aware that these choices had potent political effects.”<sup>60</sup> Such choices were especially loaded for local administrators of the British and French Empires. As much as they could stress similarities and make analogies between different sites to argue for converging opium policies, these actors could also contrast their jurisdiction’s imperatives to others under the same imperial power and declare unique local circumstances. The notion of an empire’s general approach to opium was a fiction fashioned on high diplomatic stages. There was a reality of incoherence and accommodation to locally defined exigencies that underwrote the rise of opium prohibition across Southeast Asia. This process was common to the region, but unfolded in especially complicated ways for the British and French territories.

To trace this process, I consulted records collected over the course of twenty-two months of archival research in multiple repositories in Britain, Cambodia, France, Myanmar, Vietnam, and the United States. Administrative records concerning the opium monopolies and prohibition that involved officials produced represent the most proximate sources for reconstructing the insider’s perspective of a colonial state. They are also the more tedious archives of the state, preserved in serialized records, internal correspondence, minutes of meetings, policy memos and drafts, as well as papers compiled for commission

inquiries. These documents span a wide spectrum of granularity, moving from town and village-level assessments to district-level and colony-wide monthly and annual reports, across departments and offices overseeing customs and excise, taxation, finance, jails and prisons, crime and policing, as well as medical hygiene and medical services. When available, I also consulted the private papers, family correspondences, and diaries of local administrators, as well as commentary in the press concerning their activities.

I treat the writings of these actors as containing theories, opinions, and interpretations about social and economic realities of overseas colonies, following approaches by Jon Wilson and Karuna Mantena, who have examined imperial administrators in their capacities as less remembered political thinkers of empire.<sup>61</sup> A few of the local officials I examine were also well-known figures of their day who left behind texts containing glimpses into their petty philosophies. More often however, my protagonists were uncelebrated figures, politically inconsequential, whose names appear in passing as authors of government reports, some altogether anonymous. Yet, in some instances, the rich administrative records have made it possible to chase these individuals in the archives and trace a genealogy of ideas and ways of reasoning.<sup>62</sup>

Abundance is not always a blessing. It may amplify the myriad biases, misrepresentations, willful and inadvertent distortions, as well as troubling acts of violence and enduring forms of misrecognition that occur through the production and preservation of bureaucratic paperwork.<sup>63</sup> This aspect of government records gives reason not to abandon, but to be more vigilant when studying the colonial state that pursued this particular form of documentary life.<sup>64</sup> I have found the administrative paperwork perplexing, especially in its often messy, onerous, and redundant forms. The pedantic tones of annual excise reports, for instance, are sometimes interrupted by odd labels, categories, and commentaries that break the placid façade of routinized paperwork. Records show that even the most seemingly blatant pursuits of domination and efficiency-driven administration had different textures. Depending on the level of administration, certain illegal and corrupt bureaucratic practices are surprisingly visible in the archives, left in plain sight. To understand why and to what effect requires looking closely at what those producing the records said they were doing and asking why they claimed to use the language, categories, and forms that they did.

To be clear, it would be a mistake to see these administrative narratives as coherent wholes. Rather I view them as amalgamating profoundly human attempts to describe and judge the lives of others, which contain and condense

the biases, mistakes, and hubris of actors who wrote them. As inner narratives of the state, they are thus valuable for a study of the administrative construction of official dangers. The records also yield many moments when authorities acknowledge non-European subordinate officials, informants, and friends of different genders and races who shaped their worldviews. I have incorporated these voices when they appear, such as in the field notes of subdistrict officers who questioned village elders about known opium addicts with the help of indigenous informants, in responses to unhappy Chambers of Commerce in Rangoon, Singapore, and Saigon and Haiphong, during “native” witness testimonies solicited by official commissions, as well as in official photographs that rendered certain types of social actors hypervisible as addicts and criminals. Of course, there was much more to the lives of opium consumers beyond how they appeared in official records, which this study attempts to convey by inquiring into why—for what reasons and upon what summons—their words were coopted in the state’s archives. However, with regards to the lived experiences of the larger universe of people who do not appear in the records, I defer to others who do proper justice to their everyday politics in the history of colonial Southeast Asia.<sup>65</sup>

In sum, this book reconstructs the small worlds of officials stationed overseas, and when possible, embeds their ideas and expressed interests within broader intellectual and political economic contexts of their day. As historical contexts in which local administrators saw and spoke of their surroundings, the three colonies I examine capture vividly a regulatory world in flux where individuals held complex positions, combining concrete tasks of managing opium market with abstract reflections on the place of morality in colonial government, the boundaries between commerce and society, as well as just reasons for assumed differences about lived experiences in Europe’s Far East.

These are narrow worlds: partial and inward looking, taking shape from what a small group of privileged British and French administrators wrote about what they did, said, and claimed to believe. Those writing were also mostly men, almost all white. The disproportionate attention I give to European administrators bears neither an apologist intent nor defense of the opium monopolies that they managed. It is more informed by a discomfort with the arrogant confidence of those who rule over others, and at the same time, a fascination with how even “the meanest of men has his theory” and must envision his own just reasons for action.<sup>66</sup>

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