Masters of the Gift: Examining the Oligarchic Dimensions of Patronage and Philanthropy in Contemporary Myanmar

Gerard McCarthy

This seminar revisits an age-old puzzle: what do donors gain when they give away their wealth? Drawing on 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork in provincial Myanmar since 2015, the seminar examines the moral and civic power, and regressive social consequences, of private wealth redistribution. Tracing the case of a nationally-prominent tycoon who has intensified his public philanthropy since the 2011 transition from direct military rule to partial civilian governance, it theorises the categorical distinctions and overlaps between practices of patronage and philanthropy among emergent oligarchs. The paper argues that renouncing a proportion of wealth through support of public goods and projects of collective identity relies on the loyalty of patronage networks formed by earlier commercial activities. Through their contemporary public gifting tycoons are able to generate moral and social bonds of imbalanced mutual dependence with the more abstract ‘public’, rendering themselves essential to conceptions of a ‘democratic’ or ‘civic’ community. Informed by recent studies of philanthropy and the problematic civic influence it often imparts (see Silber 2001; Bornstein 2012, Kohli-Arenas 2015), I argue that philanthropy can accrue tycoons a publically-rooted form of social license which legitimizes their prior capital accumulation and shields their assets and power from scrutiny or public demands for redistribution. In the context of Myanmar public philanthropy by previously military-privileged tycoons erodes the commitment and capacity of democratically-elected state officials to resolve ongoing authoritarian-era distributive injustices, including an ongoing land-grab crisis. It also undermines the potential to collect the formal taxation revenues vital to expanding fairer, state-mediated systems of redistribution. Viewed at the macro level, I demonstrate how public philanthropy by tycoons can foreclose the redistributive potential and equitable promise of democracy by reinforcing the role of volitional and contingent giving in systems of welfare and public goods provision.

Gerard McCarthy is Visiting Fellow in the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS), Singapore and Associate Director of the Myanmar Research Centre at Australian National University (ANU). His doctoral dissertation in the ANU Department of Political and Social Change examined the historical and contemporary dynamics of market reform and state-society relations in Myanmar.

Contact socsv@nus.edu.sg for further information.