

SOUTHEAST ASIAN STUDIES

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/>

<Book Review>

Ashley South

Francesco Buscemi. *Arms Politics: Becoming and Being a Weapon in the Borderlands of Myanmar*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2025.

Southeast Asian Studies, 1-5 (in press).

How to Cite:

South, Ashley. Review of *Arms Politics: Becoming and Being a Weapon in the Borderlands of Myanmar* by Francesco Buscemi. *Southeast Asian Studies*, 2026, 1-5 (in press). DOI: 10.20495/seas.br26031.

View the table of contents for this issue:

<https://englishkyoto-seas.org/2026/07/earlyview-br-ashley-south-br26031/>

Subscriptions: <https://englishkyoto-seas.org/mailling-list/>

For permissions, please send an e-mail to:

english-editorial[at]cseas.kyoto-u.ac.jp



Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

Francesco Buscemi. *Arms Politics: Becoming and Being a Weapon in the Borderlands of Myanmar*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2025.

Reviewed by Ashley South*

Arms Politics is an important and interesting study, albeit with limitations. The Ta'ang of northern Myanmar and southern China have often been ignored and marginalized within the complexities of Burmese and regional ethnic politics. Francesco Buscemi's book addresses a significant gap in the literature.

Focusing on the manifold realities of weapons in Myanmar before the February 1, 2021, coup, Buscemi tends to downplay civilian and broader ethno-nationalist politics. He also largely misses extraordinary developments in governance and services delivery within the "Ta'ang geo-polity" since the 2021 coup. Nevertheless, this fine-grained study has much to offer.

The book's subtitle is a play on Mandy Sadan's highly regarded *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma* (2013). Also an ethnographic study, this book's focus is on the circulation of weapons in the Ta'ang borderlands—including from China, Thailand, and Cambodia (pp. 64–66).

The language is sometimes rather dense and theory laden. However, there are several lively anecdotes and portraits, including "weapon biographies" (case studies, e.g., pp. 171–179), which will be of particular interest to enthusiasts.

Buscemi does not address the Ta'ang-Palaung ethnonym-exonym issue until nearly halfway through the book (p. 95; "Palaung" is a Burmese language-derived term.). Earlier, he briefly explores the Ta'ang as a "minority within a minority" (pp. 5, 82) in a historic context where Shan and other local majority (but Myanmar-wide minority) ethnic groups are understood to have marginalized and exploited non-dominant communities like the Ta'ang. Such grievances do much to explain the resurgence of Ta'ang nationalism over the past decade, the beginnings of which are covered in this book.

Buscemi does a good job framing the geopolitical significance of Ta'angland within Myanmar

* The Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Chiang Mai University
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3672-1523>

and in relation to China—Ta'ang areas being positioned between Lashio, the northern Shan State capital, and Muse on the Yunnan border; the route of China's Shweli gas and oil pipelines (p. 101). More could perhaps have been made of relations with neighboring groups, such as the Kachin and Mandarin-speaking Kokang.

Buscemi combines "assemblage thinking with biopolitical governmentality" (p. 15) and bits of complexity theory (which is not non-hierarchical, as asserted on p. 202). The complexity-systems approach is useful in describing "nested and overlapping ethnonational scales [which] are constantly reproduced via local practices" (p. 15). Buscemi explores three main "assemblages" in and of Ta'angland: frontier assemblages, governmental assemblages, and armed assemblages ("the politics of governing weapons and military means" [p. 24]). These dimensions encompass various forms of symbolic and material territorialization, including "assemblages of care" (services to communities) (p. 24). (For the relevance of assemblage theory in post-coup Myanmar, see Aung Naing [2024].)

Arms Politics is well researched and provides a thorough grounding in Ta'ang and northern Shan State political history. Buscemi's account pivots on the April 21, 2005, disarmament of the Palaung State Liberation Organization (in Manton, five years before the 2010 Border Guard Force ultimatum in Myanmar) and the subsequent launch and rearmament of the Palaung State Liberation Front-Ta'ang National Liberation Army (PSLF-TNLA). The contemporary PSLF aims for "the liberation of Ta'ang people from oppression, via the creation of a state of self-rule and autonomy inside a federal democratic union of Myanmar (p. 4).

The PSLF-TNLA was initially considered "a second class rebel movement" (p. 2), but grew stronger as the young leadership mobilized bonds with their ethnolinguistic Wa cousins. Following the logic that weapons and armed forces both produce and are productive of social and spatial relations (p. 9), Buscemi provides a detailed account of militarized biopolitics. For example, regarding military "zoning technique," he makes the following observation:

[I]n the 1990s and 2000s, the Sit-Tat [Myanmar Army] performed a double bind . . . It centralised the control over community militias . . . [while] working through territorialized networks of its bases at the scale of the borderlands to enhance command-and-control structures spanning Myanmar. (pp. 181–182)

The concept of frontiers could benefit from further elaboration:

[B]esides being related to some form of extractive process, the frontier is first and foremost a politically defined space where different conceptions, practical modalities, and standards of violence constitute and embody a sociopolitical capital in the attempted formation of a polity. (p. 18)

This approach could be developed by exploring how the frontiers of different assemblages overlap, merge into, and/or compete with each other (a job for complexity theory).

There is some coverage of socioeconomic factors. Ta'angland produces some of the best tea in Myanmar, although the industry has been under stress since before the coup (p. 34). Historically, Palaung villages also harvested opium, but the PSLF-TNLA has carried out several more or less militarized poppy eradication campaigns (pp. 26, 84–86, 113–117). Buscemi focuses particularly on the territorialization of Ta'angland through such military means, including the production, acquisition, and circulation of land mines (pp. 152–162, 186–190). He notes:

[T]he PSLF/TNLA's networked ensembles of the means of violence simultaneously operate materially and symbolically to stabilise and circulate practices of violence and control that are intertwined with a (discursive and material) calculation-cum-production of Ta'angland as a sociopolitical and territorial entity. (pp. 230–231)

Given the centrality of the military and weapons in this account, it is surprising not to hear more about securitization. As an outsider, Buscemi provides a fairly accurate account of the Free Burma Rangers (pp. 159, 190–194). However, he does not really explore the transformative Christian element in this extraordinary organization.

Some other recent books on Myanmar, the bulk of this research was conducted before the 2021 military takeover (p. 12, methodology) and so misses important dynamics over the past five years. This does not invalidate the findings and analysis, but it inevitably generates some caveats.

Arms Politics assesses the PSLF's supposedly limited governance reach or ambition in terms of "limited access orders" (p. 53). However, the focus on warlord or neo-patrimonial politics (Buscemi does not use these words) tends to obscure civil society and political agendas.

Ta'ang civil society organizations make their first appearance rather late (p. 84). In part, this reflects the relative underdevelopment of Ta'ang civil society prior to the 2021 coup. Buscemi is right in characterizing the PSLF as "negligible as a governing authority" (p. 2) before the present decade.

The expansion of political-military authority and services delivery by the PSLF-TNLA and Ta'ang civil society took off mostly after the coup. Ta'ang governance, mobilized along ethnolinguistic lines, expanded significantly through Operation 1027 in late 2023. In just a few weeks, the PSLF-TNLA and the allied ethnic Kokang Myanmar National Democratic Alliance Army liberated more than a hundred Myanmar Army positions, including nearly fifty towns. However, after two years of ambivalence, from 2023 to 2024 China increased its support for the Myanmar military junta, undermining the PSLF-TNLA and other ethnic armed organizations in the north. Consequently, TNLA battlefield victories underwent a series of reversals under pressure from

China and rival ethnic armed organizations in northern Shan State. Despite recent setbacks, the post-coup period in Ta'angland (or at least in areas under PSLF-TNLA control) has seen a major expansion of administrative authority and services delivery (e.g., in the fields of education and access to justice) provided by the PSLF in partnership with Ta'ang civil society groups.

Despite the development of a relatively inclusive political order in the midst of vicious armed conflict, intercommunal tensions were always present on the frontiers of Ta'angland. Buscemi observes that the PSLF-TNLA “drew the boundaries of a polity with its biological and geographic body—especially via the logic of ethnonationality, narcotics eradication, and humanitarian security” (p. 225). The Ta'ang leadership “repurposed the *Tayingtha* rationality [of ethnic classification in Myanmar] but without clearly drawing territorial boundaries . . . an inherently bio-geo-political process” (p. 226). In other words, the PSLF proclaimed Ta'angland without clearly defining its territorial boundaries. With so many non-Ta'ang communities coming under TNLA control, this was politically expedient.

Before the coup and the resurgence of Ta'ang governance, the PSLF provided limited civilian administration through its General Administration Department (p. 124). From 2021, political leadership shifted to a new Ta'ang Political Consultative Committee, which in March 2022 established the Ta'ang State Constitution Drafting Committee to develop interim arrangements for an autonomous Ta'angland (or, more inclusively, “Tealand”). A summit conference in June 2025, which included many non-Ta'ang participants, established the Ta'angland Council as the principal governing body in PSLF-TNLA-controlled areas.

At the height of its military expansion, the PSLF-TNLA controlled all or parts of 11 townships. Following recent setbacks, including the loss of Kutkai to Chinese-backed Kokang forces in March 2026, the PSLF-TNLA presently controls six townships in northern Shan State (the location of most of the core Ta'ang population). Despite the challenges of conflict and limited resources in the Ta'ang hills, local military and political leaders have established probably (or, at least, potentially) the most inclusive and democratic governance system in northern Myanmar. Unsurprisingly, Communist China is not impressed.

In response to Ta'ang attempts to engage with the West and develop an inclusive political administration, China has pressured the PSLF-TNLA into agreeing to a series of ceasefires with Naypyidaw and handing back territory to the junta and its allies. Although significant parts of the Ta'ang leadership still wish to pursue a democratic and rights-based political path, with limited support from the West the organization has little choice but to accept Chinese dominance.

Illustrating these challenges and tensions, on April 15, 2026, the PSLF-TNLA issued a statement congratulating Gen. Min Aung Hlaing on assuming the presidency of Myanmar. The following day, six Ta'ang civil society groups issued a statement sympathetic to the PSLF-TNLA while denouncing the message sent to Min Aung Hlaing. The PSLF-TNLA statement was a

pragmatic-Realist turn, reflecting China's position as the dominant power—in Myanmar and globally.

The stakes are high. The PSLF-TNLA is a powerful but little-understood armed group, struggling to balance the influence of China with accountable and inclusive governance in its areas of control. This book is an important contribution toward understanding Ta'ang society and (bio-)politics.

References

- Aung Naing, ed. 2024. *Assemblages and Myanmar: How Realities Are Made Up*. Chiang Mai: Regional Center for Social Science and Sustainable Development, Faculty of Social Sciences, Chiang Mai University. <https://rcsd.soc.cmu.ac.th/publications/assemblages-and-myanmar/>, accessed May 5, 2026.
- Sadan, Mandy. 2013. *Being and Becoming Kachin: Histories Beyond the State in the Borderworlds of Burma*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.



This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-4.0).