

The Highlander: an introduction to Highland Asia

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In 2012, the Japanese Suomi satellite captured images of Asia at night. Apart from the splashes of light from sprawling metropolitan areas, perhaps the most striking features of the resultant mosaic are the lighted pathways of the Trans-Siberian railway and China's 'New Silk Road'. Below these, there is a conspicuous corridor of darkness dominated by the Tibetan plateau, and a downward bend - a dragonhead that seemingly divides India and China into two separate

mass segments of electrified insomnia. Willem van Schendel (2002) suggested that much of this vast ‘cross-cutting’ ethno-scape might be called ‘Zomia’, a neologism inspired by the term *zomi* or ‘mountain people’ in the indigenous Kuki-Mizo-Chin language. James C. Scott (2009), on the other hand, described this space as a ‘negative region’, a region ‘out of control’, standing apart from and, in many ways, appearing as a ‘blackout’; an antithetical formation to the homogenising power grid fossil-fuelled by the sovereign aspirations of Asia’s two colossal states.

Yet, how might this highland corridor constitute a new space in an age of increasingly militarised nation-state borders, fastidious national cartographies, and sophisticated satellite imagery? For roughly a decade, especially given the attention generated by Scott’s provocative book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009), some of these assumptions, particularly about the relative ‘fixed-ness’ of the modern geopolitical world, have been disrupted. Beyond placing the spotlight back on important debates about the need to challenge prevailing state-centred approaches to the study of minority ethnic communities, ‘Zomia’ has developed a life of its own. It has aroused interest in the possibilities entailed in the notion that highlanders, seemingly anywhere, and for millennia, have developed strategies for keeping valley states away from interfering influences beyond their control.

The ways in which ideas about ‘Zomia’ have provoked, inspired, jostled and indeed riled, are certainly intriguing. That these ideas have inspired many to think in new ways, and to see their own research through a new lens, whether in Asia or further afield is, in our minds, sufficient reason to create a new platform that brings these ideas together, and allows a wider audience to engage with them.¹ Just as ‘Zomia’ brings into focus an area of peripheries marginalised in much previous scholarship, our intention is to create a unique Journal that allows previously scattered ideas to be brought into productive encounter. We have decided to call our own effort: *The Highlander: Journal of Highland Asia*, an academic peer reviewed online Journal which we are very proud to introduce as fully Open Access. Published with support from the University of Edinburgh Library, the Journal will be broadly concerned with the study of highland communities in Asia that are historically situated at the margins of the state. The Journal’s two annual issues will therefore focus on similarities and differences, generalities and particularities of the myriad histories, languages, cultures, politics and religions, involving ethnic minorities living in the upland terrains linking Nepal and the Tibetan plateau with Northeast India, the Pamirs, Western China, and the highland communities of Southeast Asia – a vast, congruous region sometimes referred to as ‘Zomia’, or indeed ‘Zomia+’. Bringing together current debates, both among senior as well as early career researchers, we are especially keen to provide a platform for a new generation of scholars working, living, and studying in the Asian Highlands. *The Highlander*, in the articles it publishes, and in its methodological ethos, will seek to create a space that privileges ideas and empirical enquiry seeking always to foster openness, and to promote debate across material, language, epistemological, and perhaps most critically, imagined boundaries.

¹ We wholeheartedly acknowledge the invaluable contribution of the *Highland Asia Research Group* led by Martin Saxer, which has been an inspiration – helping us and a great many scholars to recalibrate the way they see and conceptualise this vast highland space (see www.highlandasia.net)

In this introduction we develop these ideas and debates further and, while many excellent summaries, critiques, and theoretical developments are readily accessible (e.g., Michaud 2017, 2010; Jonsson 2010; Hickman 2013; and Hammond 2011), our inspiration comes primarily from the contributions of two of the chief architects of 'Zomia', namely Willem van Schendel and James C. Scott.

Geographies of Knowing

The term *Zomia* was coined by Willem van Schendel in his article 'Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia' (2002). As the title suggests, van Schendel's aim was to highlight the ways the attention of area studies works to privilege certain areas, often from the vantage point of heartlands, while ignoring their peripheries. While van Schendel shone light on ignored regions within established area studies between South Asia/Southeast Asia/East Asia, he also made the case for directing our focus to 'borderlands' as sites of creativity, flows, tensions, and encounters, thus bringing alive the complex geographical algorithms of *Zomia* (e.g. van Schendel and de Maaker 2014)

As mentioned above, *Zomia* is derived from *zomi*, a term for 'mountain people' or indeed 'highlander', common amongst a number of the Chin/Kuki/Mizo Tibeto-Burman language groups stretching from the top of the Himalayan belt, near Pakistan, to Vietnam (van Schendel 2002: 653). With its Tibeto-Burman roots, the neologism 'Zomia' (with the added 'a') not only has sonic resonance, but attempts to push forward the study and understanding of a region, long marginalised, into new frontiers and into new conceptual terrain.

Van Schendel developed *Zomia* as a counter-example in his critique of area studies as overly 'heartland'-focused. Using Southeast Asia to illustrate his point, van Schendel argued that whereas the geographical areas of area studies are marked by water bodies, or have a distinct shape and feel to their geopolitical locations, Southeast Asia in contrast is an amorphous physical space that questions neat geographical markers. Quoting Charles Keyes, an anthropologist of Thailand, van Schendel emphasised that Southeast Asia is a region comprising the 'people living east of India and south of China and north of Australia' (Keyes 2000: 8; van Schendel 2002: 649). It is therefore very much a physical space. It is also a symbolic space, a site for knowledge production, rather than merely an 'object of specialist knowledge' (2002: 649). We need therefore to ask how is knowledge produced, consumed, and disseminated to diverse audiences through teaching, research, and through methods and theories; and what the comparative value is of such a regional focus to other areas.

Van Schendel suggested that Southeast Asia is also an institutional space. Universities, organisations, funders, lobbyists, and gatekeepers, keep area studies vibrant and are 'both a global mutual-support society and a network for protecting, promoting, and validating particular kinds of expertise' (2002: 650). Perhaps these key features, or 'structures of area studies' are common models applicable to other geographical units within area studies too, which sadly, according to van Schendel, are caught up in 'academic politics of scale' (2002: 647). Areas like *Zomia* lack a strong gravitational centre like Java or the Ganges valley due to the region always appearing on the fringes, or sliced up, in atlases.

For instance, within the established geography of area studies – areas such as South Asia or Southeast Asia in this case – the heartlands are clearly visible while the peripheries appear awkwardly positioned. This visualisation is not simply a matter of function, or of stylistic decisions made by atlas makers to elide certain areas and privilege others due to, for example, the page format available to publishers. Rather, this ‘cartographic convenience reinforces a hierarchical spatial awareness, highlighting certain areas of the globe and pushing others into the shadows’ (2002: 652). Van Schendel pointed to the borderland regions of Zomia, at the intersections of Burma, Northeast India, Bangladesh, and neighbouring parts of China, as visibly absent in the larger cartographic imagination of South and Southeast maps. This region is, he argued, a ‘victim of cartographic surgery’ (2002: 652). There is no one reason for this malady, but he explored three central ones.

First is the *geopolitics of the Cold War*. Being sandwiched between the capitalist and communist spheres of influence diminishes the significance of Zomia because this is a region that straddles different nation-states, which are often the focus in area studies. Since this positioning confuses a normative picture of these competing ideologies Zomia has garnered very little political attention.

Second, Zomia ‘did not cover important states but only politically *marginal regions of states*’ (2002: 655). Area studies, van Schendel argued, is largely statist, and shaped by national frames obsessed by political state boundaries, which shaped much of the ideology of nation-states. The criss-crossing of cultural, religious and economic flows across borders throws into relief the challenge for order, calculation, and efficiency, which most nation states tend to champion. Moreover, since Zomia is largely a non-state space, it eludes dominant national frames of state-making.

Finally, Zomia *lacked the support of two influential university-based groups*. These groups, on the one hand, were ‘colonial experts’, who after the collapse of the European Empires, repackaged themselves as intellectuals, policy advisors, and area specialists who, based on their years of service in the colonial governments, were now in a position to train other civil servants, academics, and students. The other group were ‘civilisational specialists’, who were ‘Indologists, Islamologists, Sinologists, or, more generally, Orientalists’ (2002: 656). Since these experts were interested in ‘non-Western civilisations’ their focus was primarily textual, based on established canons of law, tradition, and languages. The two groups’ spread tended to be idiosyncratic – South Asia and the Middle East tended to be dominated by both colonial and civilisational specialists, while Southeast Asia leaned towards colonial specialists and East Asia civilisational specialists. These experts not only emphasised the strong regional centres as representatives of their expertise, but they also constructed a certain kind of knowledge. In the case of Southeast Asia, quoting C.J Reynolds, van Schendel maintained that the region ‘has been mostly a Euro-Japanese construct’ (Reynolds 1995: 420; van Schendel 2002: 657).

Van Schendel is quite clear about how Zomia, as a serious area of historical enquiry, has been ignored in scholarly analysis, as these various explorations make clear. What sort of area studies did van Schendel envisage in his seminal article? Much of what we know of area studies, particularly since the Second World War, has been shaped by the dynamics of old colonial regimes, where certain power structures still played a role in terms of how these areas relate to a

larger centre that gravitates towards the ‘West’. Perhaps ideas of ‘remoteness’, ‘civilisations’, ‘wildness’ influenced these exotic conceptions of Zomia. Modern technology and the ability to communicate better has ushered in a new era of possibility that perhaps was not imaginable a few decades ago. As van Schendel pointed out, ‘Distance is no longer understood primarily in geographical and cultural terms. It is increasingly seen as a social attribute: certain groups of people have better access to technologies to overcome distance than others’ (2002: 660). These media forms and the larger transnational flows they enact have meant that traditional area studies are ill equipped to deal with ‘human relations spilling over area boundaries’ (2002: 660). So how should we envision a new scale, a new way of looking at these interstices of boundaries, borders, and crossings to capture human relations and connections across nation-states? Van Schendel argued that we need new perspectives to capture these unpredictable, challenging, and yet rich understandings of these peripheral areas. He suggested looking at borderlands and flows of objects, peoples, and ideas.

The notion of ‘borderlands’ envisages a particular idea and practice where heartlands and peripheries dissipate into zones of creative encounters between humans, ideas, material artefacts, and economies. Citing Lewis and Wigen (1997: 188, 203), van Schendel suggested that borderlands can thus be conceived as ‘interstitial zones’ that function ‘almost like hybrid regions in their own right’ (2002: 662). Closely related to this idea is that of flows – of arms, technology, trade, migration, drugs, animals, human organs, works of art - and how state and non-state actors navigate, negotiate and accommodate these transactions. As these flows implicate multiple national boundaries, expertise from different parts of area studies can be immensely useful. One could also look at the value of, and need for, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary collaboration amongst different scholars, activists, and policy makers to understand the rich tapestry of these movements. However, the key question that we, along with van Schendel, ask is who will find these ‘problematiques’ useful? If area studies with their traditional agendas and establish frameworks already have set paradigms that they deal with, who benefits from looking at Zomian spaces as legitimate grounds to develop questions, theories, and concepts that can be used not only for wider scholarship but also to benefit fellow ‘Zomianists’, to build a ‘Zomia perspective’ (2002: 654).

Countering the still dominant ‘heartland’-oriented approach, van Schendel was instrumental in organising the *Asian Borderlands Research Network* (ABRN), an academic network now led by a partnership between the University of Amsterdam, Leiden University and the International Institute for Asian Studies, and involving researchers from across the globe. Since 2008, ABRN has organized biannual conferences in a number of Asian countries. Their mission statement reads:

The Asian Borderlands Research Network has been developed in order to recognise the links, both historical and contemporary, that connect people in these borderlands, focusing on the border regions between South Asia, Central Asia,

East Asia, and Southeast Asia, where the prevailing notions of area studies have been particularly limiting.²

Along with colleagues van Schendel has also launched a book series with Amsterdam University Press entitled 'Asian Borderlands' bringing to print the collective energies of scholars reflecting on borderlands as particular points of contact, encounter and resistance, and elucidating broader state-making processes and their consequent marginalities. His work has inspired many younger scholars working in the region to rethink area studies but has also given colour to this marginalised region with striking hues. Indeed, this Journal is indebted to van Schendel's vision in many ways that will be evident – the title *The Highlander* for one – but we also want to push the limits of what van Schendel envisioned. Beyond the critique that 'Asian Borderlands' offers, what does it mean to constitute (at least intellectually) a new space – indeed a new 'area' such as 'Zomia' – and what kinds of new dynamics, social ideas, and political inflections, does this generate? To find some answers, we can turn to the work of James C. Scott.

The Art of Not Being Governed

James C. Scott published *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast* in 2009. As the title suggests, Scott was primarily concerned about state and non-state relations through the larger framework of anarchy and marginality. The starting quote in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, taken from the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres' work amongst the Amerindian societies of South America, *Society Against the State*, is homage to how Scott approaches the central theme of his book:

It is said that the history of the peoples who have a history is the history of class struggle. It might be said with at least as much truthfulness, that the history of peoples without history is a history of their struggle against the state.

While van Schendel's Zomia covers a huge expanse of highland territory from Southeast Asia, Northeast India, the Himalayas and up to Afghanistan and beyond, Scott restricts his area of investigation to the highland regions of South/Southeast Asia encompassing the Naga and Mizo Hills in Northeast India, the Chittagong Hill Tracts of Bangladesh, and a significant part of China's Yunnan province. This region straddles a contact zone between eight nation-states: Bangladesh, India, China, Burma, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam. According to Scott, this region is one of the largest, if not the largest, remaining non-state spaces in the world. Roughly the size of Europe, this vast upland expanse, which he, following van Schendel, calls Zomia, sprawls across 2.5 million square kilometres, with a population of around 80 to 100 million, consisting of hundreds of ethnic groups, with at least five language families spoken.

Scott's central argument revolves around the question of why the people of Zomia did not develop state-like institutions, and why for much of its history this vast highland Asian space

² Available online: <https://asianborderlands.net/about-asian-borderlands-research-network> (accessed 20/10/2019).

remained a non-state space. Marginality, in Scott's view, was in a sense by choice. It was shaped by reaction to the adverse effects of state-making projects in the valleys, enforced through 'slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare' (2009: ix). To keep the state at arm's length and to flee state-making projects, Zomians were often marooned and fugitive communities who resided in shatter zones, or zones of refuge, characterised by hilly, inaccessible terrain.

To evade state appropriation, Zomians constructed strategies of resistance that has made them resilient to the power and reach of the state. Everything about their livelihoods, Scott argued, can be read as a strategy to avoid state incorporation: Their physical dispersion in rugged terrain, their mobility, their cropping practices, their kinship structures, their pliable ethnic identities, and their devotion to prophetic, millenarian leaders effectively serve to avoid incorporation into states and to prevent states from springing up among them (2009: x).

Scott demonstrated through eight chapters the centrality of these themes, unpacking them in detailed discussions. At the heart of his analysis is the hill-valley binary and the manner in which it represents two ecological systems based around swidden or shifting cultivation and sedentary agriculture. This raises questions about why hill and valley peoples have adopted these specific modes of livelihood. Scott argued that the emergence of the 'state' in the valleys arose in conjunction with the development of extensive arable cultivation, associated with concentrated grain production dependent on a considerable pool of slave and captive labour routinely extracted from the hills (Chapter 3). These developments gradually gave rise to two oppositional forces. On the one hand, they encouraged a centripetal movement towards centralisation, associated with the adoption of wet-rice agriculture, literacy, taxation and world religions. In Scott's words, the valleys were made 'legible' and became states. On the other hand, reaction to state appropriation stimulated centrifugal movements, leading to the development of non-state spaces characterised by population dispersal and fragmented social structures based on shifting cultivation (Chapter 3), pliable ethnic identities (Chapter 7), illiteracy, local religions and latterly Christianity, with a fervent millenarian emphasis (Chapter 8). In Scott's vision, the valley and the hills are a binary that represent zones of statemaking or state evading. To develop his argument he drew on the work of Ernest Gellner on the Atlas Mountains of North Africa, *Saints of the Atlas*, to suggest that there is a similarity in structural resistance to state power across the Maghreb and Zomia. Gellner applied the term marginal tribalism to emphasise that resistance and marginality are political strategies:

Until the advent of the modern state, they were dissident and self-consciously so... "Marginal" tribalism...[is] the type of tribal society which exists at the edge of non-tribal societies. It arises from the fact that the inconveniences of submission make it attractive to withdraw from political authority and the balance of power, the nature of the mountainous or desert terrain make it feasible. Such tribalism is politically marginal. It knows what it rejects (quoted in Scott 2009: 30).

Scott argued that the Zomians knew what they were rejecting and were in a sense tribalising themselves; their evasive movements and subsistence techniques can be viewed as designs to fend off state incorporation. As Scott argued, constructions of state and non-state

spaces are symbiotic; transaction and flow between the two systems are fluid. Many valley people are ex-hill people and many hill people are ex-valley people, with constant motion between two competing eco-political systems.

What relevance does Scott's thesis on Zomia have for Highland Asia? Some dimensions of his work highlight different overlapping spatial constellations: South/South-east Asia (macro), Zomia (meso) and particular ethnic communities (micro). Scott's work not only highlights the marginality of defined spaces within the different existing 'area studies', but also charts a common cultural denominator characterised by Zomia. Here, both Scott and van Schendel seem to be making the same emphatic point: that attempts at understanding Zomia are about ushering in a new way of thinking about 'area studies'. In Scott's own words:

The concept of "Zomia" marks an attempt to explore a new genre of "area" studies, in which the justification for designating the area has nothing to do with national boundaries (for example, Laos) or strategic conceptions (for example, Southeast Asia) but is rather based on certain ecological regularities and structural relationships that do not hesitate to cross national frontiers. If we have our way, the example of "Zomia studies" will inspire others to follow this experiment elsewhere and improve on it (2009: 26).

This conceptualisation is indicative of the kind of direction that future comparative Zomia studies must take. *The Highlander* is a step towards putting it into practice.

The analytical framework of Scott's model of marginal spaces, particularly the interaction between ethnic, cultural and religious forces and the construction of a national identity, can be really useful for the exploration of contemporary issues vis-à-vis the dominant nation-state in which marginal communities reside. A post-1950 analysis of Zomia areas has thus more significant implications and currency than Scott himself allowed.

Scott was quite clear about the historical timeframe he was referencing, pre-1950. This timeframe is useful, he argued, because national states were either non-existent or were in formative stages, and 'many hill people continued to conduct their cross-border lives as if the state didn't exist' (2009: 26). He argued that after the Second World War his analysis largely ceases to be useful. This is because Zomia as an 'enclosure' gave way to 'engulfment' by sovereign nation-states primarily due to the diminished friction of distance enabled by 'railroads, all-weather roads, telephone, telegraph, airpower, helicopters, and now information technology' (2009: xii). These technologies and the further need for states to encompass peripheries and non-state spaces for their expanding economies and resource hungry clienteles meant that Zomia is being crystallised as a governable, fertile space for the state to exert control, slowly eliminating the last enclosure.

Scott's work provides numerous fresh insights, and is one of the most comprehensive treatments of what he called 'deliberate and reactive statelessness' (2009: x). He reverses, challenges, and gives power to hill peoples to overturn common misrepresentations, stigmas and prejudices, and asks us to appreciate their 'location at the margins, their physical mobility, their swidden agriculture, their flexible social structure, their religious heterodoxy, their egalitarianism, and even the nonliterate, oral cultures' (2009: 9). These characteristics are not

marks of primitivism, but must be viewed as flexible and adaptive strategies vis-à-vis states that are both alluring and threatening to Zomian spaces and peoples. By reimagining Zomia, Scott (and van Schendel) challenged us to rethink the pervasive model of seeing spaces through national boundaries and by default framing the world. Zomia helps us to view a part of the world, largely considered a periphery, in a logical way that opposes the depiction of a people as invisible and opaque in modern historical writing. Not only must they now be taken seriously as a people with agency but also as a people who have the capacity to cultivate hope in a time when the threat of national states and the global order is far reaching.

The response to Zomia

A Google search for the term 'Zomia' yields 90,700 results (as of 5.09.2019), and the top results are not merely academic. Among these, the Boston Globe, in a December 2009 piece titled "The mystery of Zomia" immediately picked up on Scott's intentionally provocative discussions about 'non-state' spaces. The piece states: "In the lawless mountain realms of Asia, a Yale professor finds a case against civilization". Similarly, in an opinion piece in the New York Times titled "The Undiscovered Country" (14 Feb 2012), Frank Jacobs, author of "Strange Maps: An Atlas of Cartographic Curiosities" offered up a short history of 'refuges, sanctuaries, freetowns, zones of no control', adding the surprising discovery of 'Zomia' to this mix. Beginning his piece with some insight about the kinds of borders that we take for granted, Jacob suggested that,

there exists another type of border, one that doesn't reflect back our image. In vampiric asymmetry, it offers only the void...The world as we know it – reciprocal even across national borders – ends here. One thinks of the American West in the mid-19th century, or parts of Brazil into the 20th. The borderline does not merely separate two territories, but two paradigms: law and order from anarchy, progress from primitivism. Or perhaps, seen from the other side: freedom from oppression, purity from decadence.

In Germany, a caravan park calling itself "Wagenplatz Zomia" has also drawn inspiration from Scott and van Schendel as the community protests against high rents in Hamburg and other cities across the country. Moving from abandoned lot to abandoned lot, community members face eviction from what they identify as equally hostile and inept municipalities that spend millions of Euros building commercial centres that end up derelict and empty as they fail to attract businesses. The authorities are also seen as utterly resistant to providing affordable housing for low income residents.³ Here, Zomia encapsulates protest against the state, represented by the neo-liberal economic vision of progress.

Generally speaking, the debate generated, particularly by Scott's emphasis on Zomia as an intentional 'non-state' space, has been significant and largely positive, and it continues to unfold in surprising ways. Surprising because, on the one hand, it has entered the mainstream, aided by the growth of online social media coincident with Scott's 2009 publication, becoming

³ <http://zomia.blogspot.eu/>

a favourite topic in academic debate and symposia;⁴ but also inspiring all manner of offshoots. An interesting example is ‘The Zomia Centre’ which “[seeks] to enlarge our understanding of spaces that effectively remain outside the international state system”. A think-tank that brings together researchers working in Syria, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan, the centre has as a primary goal the open exchange of ideas among humanitarian communities working in areas largely inaccessible due to conflict.⁵

On the other hand, scholars not necessarily working in highland Asia but inspired by the emphasis on indigenous agency, namely that communities ‘chose to place themselves out of the reach of the state’ (Scott 2009: 22), have found ways to incorporate these ideas in their own research. Economists Benjamin Powell and Malvika Nair (2012), for example, have incorporated many of these ideas while engaging in comparative studies between a 19th century South Indian banking castes and modern day Somalia. Thus, as a ‘heuristic of resistance’, Zomia has stimulated considerations of applicability in historically state dominated spaces both within and beyond highland Asia. Perhaps the best example is Caroline Humphrey’s exploration of Zomia as an idea in Inner Asian studies. She wrote (2015: 105):

Thinking in terms of Zomia allows a looking outwards from peripheral area as at the impositions of states and empires. It becomes clear that the ‘friction of terrain’, the very difficulty or remoteness of these zones, has given an advantage to the native inhabitants, who know the local passageways, the hideouts, the hidden desert wells, and so forth in a way that no outsider can do, while at the same time rendering tax-collection, military conscription, etc. - not to speak of direct conquest - difficult enough to be hardly worth the effort for a pre-modern state apparatus. With this strategic advantage, Zomia-like areas could maintain a certain independence and freedom of actions for their inhabitants. At the same time, their relative inaccessibility was the very reason why these zones became refuges for repeated waves of runaways, migrants, deserters and bandits, and also, in some cases, sites of millenarian resistance to colonialism.

The concept of ‘Northern South Asia’ posited by David Gellner et al (2013) brings contemporary South Asian ‘Zomia-like’ areas into sharp focus. With India looming large, looking outward from its borderlands allows new insights in the study of nation-state power, the ‘idea’ of the state, and the often contradictory and generally ambivalent character of borderland citizenship and belonging. Sara Shneiderman (2010) suggests that Scott’s notion of political intentionality is relevant across the Central Himalayas, which Scott oddly excludes from van Schendel’s original, much larger geography of Zomia. Here, Shneiderman posits a ‘Himalayan Massif’ as a productive comparative counterpoint to the ‘Southeast Asian Massif’

⁴ For example, Michael Dove, Hjorleifur Jonsson and Michael Aung-Thwin debate Scott’s notion of ‘escaping the state’, though unfortunately without a response from Scott (and lamented by the editor). This debate is published in *Bijdragen tot de Taal, Land- en Volkenkunde*, Vol. 167, No. 1 (2011), pp. 86-99. An example of symposia is the Zomia Study Group at Kyoto University’s Centre for Southeast Asia Studies, which has organised as many as 34 separate workshops on the topic as of September 2019.

⁵ www.zomiacentre.org

(coined by Jean Michaud in 1997) where Scott's Zomia resides. These linkages, arbitrarily missing from Scott's analysis are, according to Shneiderman, well established. Scholars such as Stuart Blackburn (2007), for example, have explored the shared oral narratives across the eastern Himalayan cultures spreading throughout present-day Northeast India, northern Myanmar, northern Bangladesh, and south-west China. Linguists have also long pointed out the linkages between Tibetan societies and Tibeto-Burman speaking cultures that extend from Nepal into Southeast Asia (e.g. Geoffrey Samuel 2005; Mark Turin 2006).

Aside from Scott and van Schendel, Jean Michaud has engaged with Zomia over the longest time and most thoroughly. His further geographical expansion of van Schendel's Zomia, namely 'Zomia+', is in our estimation one of his most enduring insights, the geographical expanse of which we embrace as our starting point. Michaud's early conception of the 'Southeast Asian Massif' (in his *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*) provides an exact geographical blueprint for Scott's own version of Zomia. His editorial (and accompanying contributions) in the special issue 'Zomia and Beyond' in the *Journal of Global History* (2010: 187-214), is in many ways a response to Scott, providing a lengthy critique, although ultimately offering a vindicating appraisal. There is an extrinsic purpose in the editorial, however, and this is clear: "to contribute to disembedding minority studies from the national straightjackets that have been imposed by academic research bounded by the historical, ideological, and political limits of the nation-state" (2010: 187). Michaud's sustained engagement, with his latest publication in 2017 aimed at one of Scott's most controversial claims - namely that non-literate peoples may have been so by choice, or in Scott's own word 'postliterate' - is very telling. Here, he finds Scott cornering himself with ideas that he cannot suitably substantiate. For one, intentionality (to remain illiterate), Michaud argues, entails some degree of consensus. What happens when you are speaking of communities - like the Hmong - that, at their core, seem decidedly against consensus? But Michaud offers Scott a way out, and this has been his fundamental contribution in sustaining the ultimate relevance for the Zomia idea a decade on. With regards to Scott's notion of postliterate peoples, Michaud suggested (2017: 9):

So many exceptions to this narrative have been brought up that Scott's main argument ends up looking severely wounded. I propose that a shift from topographic determinism to an analysis putting forward sociocultural differentiation might be beneficial; otherwise, one is left with serious reservations regarding the relevance of any physical approach to Zomia. Moreover, if state and non-state societies turn out to be equally endogenous in Zomia, what then is the added value of Scott's argument for understanding this region and its population? In spite of such uncertainties, I believe that Scott's intuition remains germane when approached from a cultural angle, and that it can still make a solid case for a Zomiatype analysis.

In many regards, Scott has benefitted greatly from scholars like Michaud that have understood the importance of the ideas behind Zomia, and have taken it upon themselves to

defend him against his most ardent detractors, with Scott largely watching these discussions unfold from the sidelines. A thorough discussion of these arguments is beyond the scope of this introduction (for a good review of critiques see Schram [2012]), but we offer here a brief summary of the main critiques.

Tom Brass, in his piece “Scott’s “Zomia”, or a Populist Postmodern History of Nowhere,” (2012: 125) suggested that Scott’s Zomia project resembles Subaltern Studies (e.g. Brass 2000a and 2000b) in that it follows a trend of ‘resurgent populist historiography’ that orientalises the agency of people living at the margins, a trend that has ‘colonised academic journals’ (Brass 2017: 142.). Hjørleifur Jonsson (2014, 2010) similarly sees Scott and many of his followers as failing to recognise how the notion of everyday resistance as a kind of cultural trait essentialises a great multitude of complex peoples that are anything but the nostalgic anthropologist’s ‘pure’ and ‘unpolluted’ small-scale societies. This problem of representation locks into place a ‘concept metaphor’ that distorts our reading of important historical and social dynamics. Jonsson argued, for example, that Scott ‘does not entertain the possibility that the state is as historically contingent or as much a selective representation as are ethnicities or nations’ (2010: 208)

Sanford Schram, on the other hand, has suggested that the myriad forms that resistance and evasion from state interference engendered in Scott’s account point to a very important, context-specific insight, thus, on those grounds alone, meriting further exploration (2012: 534). He stated, for example that,

Whether these practices were the result of conscious decisions to resist seems actually secondary. That these practices evolved, given the structured circumstances in which people found themselves, implies that they were at best constrained choices of varying degrees of conscious political calculation. What is important, however, is that these practices made state incorporation less likely; that people did not challenge, but rather participated in, them; and that, as Scott effectively documents, the people helped to sustain them (Schram 2012: 534).

Scott’s methodology has also been subject to debate. David Latin, for instance, suggested that Scott consistently lacks a coherent systematic approach when setting up his case comparisons, rendering his analyses inconclusive, and thus ‘unscientific’. On this point, Schram suggested that Scott is not pursuing a ‘causal analysis’ at all, but rather promoting a way of seeing that is ‘experiential’, ‘of how top-down strategies fail to account for local knowledge’ (Schram 2012: 529). The ‘interpretive’ approach that Scott uses, Schram argued, is intended to draw his readers into the inner workings ‘rather than to arbitrate among the possible factors involved in why’ (2012: 529).

Schram suggested that many of Scott’s detractors are caught up in ‘methodism’. Referencing Sheldon Wolin (1969), he indicated that this continues to haunt the social and political sciences to paralysing effect. *The Art of Not Being Governed*, Schram states,

has methodological significance not because of its technical sophistication, but because it powerfully reminds us that the idea behind a work of scholarship is more

important than its method, especially if the scholarship is intended to be politically and socially pertinent. It is increasingly recognized, within and without the academy, that social scientists have become preoccupied with method at the expense of substance and that, as a result, social science has diminished its ability to conduct research in ways that people can use to better understand and do something about what is happening in their society and economy (2012: 530).

Finally, Mandy Sadan, in her widely circulated review of Scott's book (available online at <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/903#t2>), drawing on her own research in Southeast Asia, and particularly Myanmar, suggested three main problems with Scott's Zomia thesis: firstly, his heavy reliance on Edmund Leach, whose influential book *Political Systems of Highland Burma* (1954) is not sufficiently problematized – Sadan stating 'with Leach, there was undoubtedly a shaping of evidence to fit a theory'; secondly, his privileging of state resistance over many other important socio-political and historical dynamics shaping highland societies; and thirdly, his leaving 'the State' undefined, despite huge variations across the region, and from classical, through early modern, and colonial histories. Like Leach, Sadan states that in Scott's project 'so much nuance and detail is elided or omitted, with difficult, conflicting information being dispensed with as 'exceptions' ...that the historical itself becomes a malleable form with no roots in time or place around which knowledge can gravitate and be tested' (Ibid.). However, acknowledging that 'blending the anthropological with the meta-vision of the political scientist' is Scott's characteristic approach, she concluded that Scott's theory can be useful, but 'only...if we subject it to a most rigorous form of interrogation' (Ibid.).

Scott's Zomia project has sparked widespread interest among scholars, activists, and policy makers alike, because it conjures the age-old but important idea about human aspirations and capacities for freedom. Unsurprisingly, in an age of increasingly authoritarian regimes, unfettered global capitalism, and increasingly unregulated state and private surveillance, the idea of a large swath of Asia existing beyond state control, indeed 'ungoverned' for perhaps millennia, is very attractive. Critics have been clear about the fact that we mustn't essentialise this space. Indeed, as Alessandro Ripa has suggested, 'if there is something striking around many of Asia's highlands today it is the fact of local demand for 'more' state rather than less'⁶. Nevertheless, questions surrounding this relationship between Zomia, or Zomia-like spaces, and state-making processes, remain central, and indeed move us beyond Scott's pre-1950s project. Connected to this are questions about what is possible outside the state, and whether such non-state spaces exist today, or remain an aspiration for at least some.

Zomian sensorium

The 'future as cultural fact', to borrow a phrase from Arjun Appadurai (2013), is very much about possibilities as the human imagination expands geographical horizons into uncharted territories. While Scott's work is primarily shaped by the 'lens of pastness' (Appadurai 2013: 285), the future implications of his conceptualisation of Zomia can be useful in trying to understand the region. What this Journal is interested in is how this region augments and

⁶ Personal correspondence (17/09/2019)

enhances the past, present and future capacity to conceive new geo-political horizons. The semantic immensity through which the term Zomia is deployed suggests a way of anticipating the future as cultural fact in both its verdant imagination and actuality.

Both Willem van Schendel and James Scott envisage an ‘area studies’ that is characterised by Zomian structures, perspectives, and sensibilities, tempered by nation-states, globalisation, new technologies, and the ever changing socio-economic situations in which Zomians find themselves. Both remind us that seeing the present, and potential futures, of this region must be contextualised over the *longue durée* where Zomia is characterised by cultural refusal of lowland patterns, an area of refuge, without neglecting the symbiotic relationship through which state and non-state actors constantly move between borderlands. How do these influences, cultural patterns, political structures, ecological habitat, carry over into present day Zomia? How can we envisage a future of Zomia when the past and present seem precarious enough? There are indeed many ways to answer these complex questions.

The future of the region we call Zomia merits sustained attention not least because of its geo-political location between several nation-states. It is also important because issues around climate change, environmental degradation, resource extraction, developmental acceleration through roads, railway links, airports, mining and dams, migration and land, proliferation of ethnic and religious competition, and the far reaches of the state in militarising these border areas to protect the edges of the nation, is growing exponentially. One can turn to recent headlines carried by several media, reporting that the Chinese have discovered around \$60 billion worth of precious minerals such as rare-earth along the disputed border between India and China. The aim of the Chinese state is to accelerate development, rapidly build a vast infrastructure and mine the area for these minerals, while creating a sovereign enclave akin to the South China Sea where China’s naval activities and artificial island underpin its claim to the waters. A similar strategy is afoot in the Himalayas that could see large investments, developmental projects, and the peopling of these remote spaces.⁷ Indian response has been quieter, but *The Hindu* reported that the Arunachal Government has asked the Geological Survey of India to survey the region along the Indo-China border for minerals, and to promote ‘geo-tourism’.⁸ These sorts of activities, happening all over Zomia, provoke pressing questions about the future and the role research, education, and activism can play. By highlighting local lived realities, and critically examining geo-political languages of development, conquest, and economic progress engagement with Zomia can provide contrast to the shared, transnational relations, often minimised for these sensational news bites. How might we contextualise some of these anxieties, potential, and relations across Zomia?

Van Schendel’s call for a new conceptualisation of ‘area studies’, and Scott’s exploration on statelessness are significant forerunners to the way Zomia has been understood. This Journal builds on their work by pushing the boundaries of how we might think about an ‘area studies’ that is not dogmatically enclosed within traditional frameworks and also broadens our

⁷ <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/society/article/2146296/how-chinese-mining-himalayas-may-create-new-military-flashpoint>

⁸ <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/other-states/drill-for-minerals-on-china-border-arunachal-pradesh-togsi/article27138624.ece>

understanding of Zomia. Here, we draw on Arjun Appadurai's idea of the imagination, aspiration, and anticipation (2013) to begin to develop some of these ideas and give direction to what we hope will be lively ongoing debates.

Zomia as a cultural fact

Zomia is a cultural fact, a fact that is not only future-making, but one that is also very much shaped by historical forces. By summarizing the impact of how imagination, aspiration and anticipation play out in the production of everyday life, Arjun Appadurai suggested that for many of the world's population where poverty, suffering, displacement, violence, environmental crises are rife, the way people conceive of the future has to have a reverberating impact. For those in such situations, the future can simply be seen as a result, or continuation, of the impact of the present. Therefore, hope becomes eroded and replaced by anger and fear. Yet there is a need for us to articulate the concept of future-making for peoples living in the condition of 'bare life'. By recognising this crisis, it must be acknowledged, Appadurai claimed, that the future is not a neutral space and, in fact, can only be understood properly if we are to consider the idea that future is a cultural fact and as such is a space for democratic design. This is true for Zomia as it is for many parts of the world.

If we look at maps of the world today, indigenous nations are invisible. If, however, we can see past the configured spaces of nation-states, on closer inspection, and together - and we want to emphasise this in the strongest way - indigenous spaces and places are of paramount significance. So, let us imagine that we are entering a 21st Century world that is vastly different, configured differently, and pulling and tugging differently than the world we have grown accustomed to - a world we experience every day, and largely take for granted.

Looking at the Japanese Suomi satellite images of Asia at night, one may wonder whether the centralised generators of China and India have not in fact exhausted their capacity to 'enlighten' Zomia. On the other hand, the power may simply be 'turned off' by its elongated cluster of highland 'village republics'. Certainly, it is a mixed picture, and the ambiguities produced by the symbolic and geographic distance between the modernising urban masses and the marginal highlands is also reflected in the continuous production of the dark corridor's discursive alterity in the imaginaries of these majority populations.

It is a mistake, however, to assume that Zomia is dormant, off the grid, or existing in some other time. And in this new journal, we are concerned with the ongoing construction of this space in relation to Asia and the wider world. Because it appears blacked out, Zomia disorients the orderliness of mainstream currents, and finds ways to exploit the ambiguities produced in the state's encounter with its vast, inter-locked marginal domains. In this scattering, Zomia seems to maintain the state's sovereign reaches at arm's length, and persistently disrupts state planning, and often deliberately. Not surprisingly, research into the region also resists tidy description. There is something decidedly untidy about the jagged forms of non-compliance one observes here, and the mainlands often dismissively attribute them not to conscious objection, but discursively to strange, pre-modern, mythical forces. We should not, however, simply dismiss these notions. As with, for instance, the urban villages of metropolitan Chinese and Indian cities, Asia's highlanders mobilise these imaginaries to their

own advantage. When frustrations of non-compliance with the state come to a boil, words turn to technologies of force, and as with clashes between Chinese police and young Tibetan protestors or Indian security forces and Naga nationalists, or indeed metropolitan police raids into the urbanised villages in Shenzhen, state militarism penetrates - though rarely with the intended effect.

The Highlander

When reflecting on this Journal's remit, we resolved that it should emphasise both the production of the everyday and of the locality in how researchers frame questions of the imagination, the capacity to aspire, and anticipation that can be universally recognisable. Whether it is to do with war, conflict, disease, natural disasters, migration, competition over resources, environmental degradation, gender equality, religious conversions, dreaming, development, and technological innovations, attention should be paid to how these forces affect the lives of ordinary people that are material, cognitive, and spiritual, and which are also personal, communal, bureaucratic, and governmental.

We invite contributions to the *The Highlander* that develop these themes further, and continue to explore this new region in new and creative ways. Geographically, we are interested in contributions that explore nooks, margins and contours, taking as our starting point 'Zomia+'. As a new generation of scholars living, working, and studying in Highland Asia has emerged, making their important mark on such debates, we are particularly keen to promote their scholarship, and to become an open and welcoming platform for debate across East and West, North and South academic spectrums.

As a Journal, we are committed to a platform that is collective, a collaboration bringing together different people from all over Zomia to work together. We want to think beyond disciplines and to fashion an inter- and multi-disciplinary model of scholarship that reflects the best voices. Because it is Open Access, *The Highlander* will reach diverse audiences and also access hard to reach places. This is what makes the project a vital one. We look forward to the day when we can organise the first International Zomia Studies Conference, fulfilling the dreams of our trailblazers. We hope that this Journal is the first step.

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