



Highland Asia as a field of anthropological study

Jelle J P Wouters
Royal University of Bhutan

Zomia, in the sense exulted by James C. Scott (2009) as an abode of purposeful political anarchy and anti-stateism, is not an emic conceptualisation, not a particular place or an incantation of a collective identity referred to or professed by particular populations of humans. As a spatial and social reality, or as a word-concept, *Zomia* then appears an exercise in scholarly magical realism (evidence is ‘thin’, ‘limited’, and ‘ambiguous’, as Victor Lieberman (2010: 339) puts it more discreetly). It is a form of geographical and historical imagination that nevertheless has begun to ‘escape’ the narrow corridors of the academy and into public discourse where it now lives a life of its own. It is an original imagination no doubt – an optic that stimulates fresh scholarship – but simultaneously one cannot escape that *Zomia*-disciples are letting their imagination run away with them.

While I greatly admire James Scott’s ever incisive scholarship and ever lucid prose, like several others I feel that his *Zomia*-thesis dangerously straddles the border between history and fiction (Wouters 2011). What I do find useful, however, is his, or rather Willem van Schendel’s (2002), configuration of a trans-national Asian upland space that transcends the boundaries of several nation-states. In studying these uplands, I propose we change the dialectic from the hill-valley, or upland-lowland, comparison that is the focus of James Scott and his followers, to valuing anthropological comparisons internal to the region. To think and talk about this region, I prefer the term Highland Asia (if only because ‘*Zomia*’ has turned into a theoretical ideology) and which closely corresponds to the term ‘Haute-Asie’, or High Asia, now popular in French Himalayan studies (Michaud 2010: 202). But of course Highland Asia, too, is necessarily a construction. It has its own problems of definition and its contested edges, while equally I have not come across anyone identifying himself or herself as a Highland Asian. Yet, as an amalgam, it does appear to resonate somewhat better with actually existing places and peoples. This argument about nomenclature, while of relevance, should, however, not distract us from a more important discussion, which is why and how this conceptualisation of a trans-national Asian upland space might be used and useful.

What kind of a place is Highland Asia? And who are Highland Asians? These are hardly simple and straightforward questions. Highland Asia, after all, is a huge rugged swathe, covering the entire Southeast Asian Massif in Scott’s definition and extending much farther west according to several other scholars (e.g. Shneiderman 2010), possibly even including the entire Hindu Kush Himalayan region (Michaud 2010), and inhabited by no less than 120

million people (depending, of course, on where one wishes to propose its boundaries) that live an extraordinary diversity of lives. Considering the range of ethnographic differences internal to Highland Asia – divergent historical experiences, political arrangements, cultural lifeworlds, language families, livelihoods, religious traditions, cosmologies and ontologies, and so on (see Michaud (2016) for a snapshot of this diversity) – the unity a thing called ‘Highland Asia’, its status as a single region, may seem doubtful.

One may indeed question whether historical and ethnographic contexts as different as between, say, the highlands of Pakistan, Nepal and Vietnam are greatly illuminated by treating them as examples of a generic Highland Asian-ness. Even if one adopts a solely altitudinal approach of Highland Asia, referring, plain and simple, to Asian uplands, one can doubt the extent to which residents of, say, the frosted Tibetan plateau and the undulating, forest-clad and much lower Himalayan offshoots of Meghalaya in Northeast India share meaningful geographical sameness. And if one wishes to agree with James Scott’s treatise that the defining trait of Highland Asia (Zomia) is its peoples’ prolonged nonstate existence and their commitment to being ungoverned, any contemporary approach to Highland Asia must recognise an alteration in the political climate: its inhabitants, after all, have now been adapted into distinct nation-states with dissimilar historical trajectories of government and governance, political institutions, development programmes and policies, and politics of recognition. It must also account for the fact that most Highland Asians, akin to people in postcolonial settings elsewhere, ‘are no longer content to view the state as necessary evil. Increasingly they make demands of it and expect it to act positively to improve their lives’ (Gellner 2013: 3). It must be added here that Scott (2009: 11) himself qualified his thesis of deliberate statelessness saying that it holds purchase only up until the 1950s, after which ‘modern conceptions of national sovereignty and the resource needs of mature capitalism have brought the final enclosure into view.’

Despite such and other international diversities and historical transformations, there now appears to be a trend that talks of Highland Asia (usually in the frame of Zomia) in terms of distinctive uniqueness; as a singular geography with a singular history and shared contemporary conundrums. What is emphasised – or essentialised – in these discussions about Highland Asia, and its place in the world, is that the region for long remained outside (and deliberately so) the immediate purview of both the state and the capitalist market, and is inhabited by ethnic, tribal and indigenous minorities that refuse to be moulded into the ‘mainstream’ political and cultural frameworks of national folds. In pursuing this viewpoint, recent scholarship has found in Highland Asia an inverted image of historical progress, state-making and nation-building, and a denunciation of the iron cage of civilisation; a radical other, that is, from popular conceptions about progress, development, and modernity. As James Scott (2009: x-xi) frames his treatise on *The Art of Not Being Governed*:

My argument is a deconstruction of Chinese and other civilizational discourses about the “barbarian”, the “raw”, the “primitive.” On close inspection those terms, practically, mean ungoverned, not-yet-incorporated. Civilizational

discourses never entertain the possibility of people voluntarily going over to the barbarians, hence such status are stigmatized and ethnicized.

In broad strokes, it is in this (political) sense that Highland Asia has (re)entered knowledge and historical imagination; in relation, that is, to the full presence of lowland states and societies, of which it culturally and politically exists apart.

Today, for all that has changed, Highland Asia seems increasingly viewed in terms of ‘collective difference’ from lowland states and societies which are taken as their unit of natural comparison. It is imagined as a geography near innately recalcitrant to modes of governance, patriotism, and identification on terms dictated by modern nation-states. There are of course justifiable reasons for this. Ted Gurr (2000: 286), in his comparative study on ethno-political conflicts, refers to, what he calls, the Central Asian uplands – an area stretching from the hills of Bangladesh, Assam, and Burma to Tibet, and China’s Xinjiang province – as having ‘the largest number of ongoing and prospective ethnic wars anywhere in the world.’ The form and character of these ethnic insurgencies, however, have changed significantly in recent decades, particularly in relation to the imbrications of state-led development (Wouters 2018) and (trans-)national capital (Woods 2011). In terms of ‘collective difference’ it is also true that Highland Asians appear to have in common that they – be they the ‘Jummas’ of southern Bangladesh (Van Schendel 1992), hill minorities in Burma (Gravers 2007), the Miao uplanders of China (Schein 2000) or tribal communities in Northeast India (Wouters and Subba 2013) – claim cultural distance from (and are often distanced by) national ‘mainstreams’. This difference has led, in whole or in parts, to their uneven, hesitant or haphazard accommodation into the nation-state (Van Schendel 2002). In the aftermath of James Scott’s treatise, a still expanding body of scholarship now emphasises this highland distinctiveness, both in its historical and contemporary manifestations, and this has made us all think more critically about the form and meaning of upland-lowland divides.

In this brief and broad reflection, however, I propose that the future of the anthropology of Highland Asia should not primarily concern itself with defining the cultural and historical region of ‘Highland Asia’ in relation to lowland states, and subsequently to identify traits and features of that history and culture to establish definitely the region’s and its peoples’ character and place in the world. What is more fruitful analytically, I suggest, is a shift in the unit of analysis from that between the highlands and the lowlands to ethnographic and anthropological comparisons within. To frame this argument for internal comparison, I suggest we unearth, if only for a moment, the pioneering insights of the Dutch anthropologist J.P.B. De Josselin de Jong who proposed, already long ago, that the Malay Archipelago is best analysed as a ‘Field of Ethnological Study’ (1935), later recast by his nephew and successor at Leiden University P.E. De Josselin de Jong as a ‘Field of Anthropological Study’ (1984). Fields of Ethnological Study, De Josselin de Jong (1980[1935]: 167-8) explained:

are certain areas on the earth’s surface with a population whose culture appears to be sufficiently homogenous and unique to form a separate object of

ethnological study, and which at the same time apparently reveals sufficient local shades of difference to make internal comparative research worth while.

In proposing thus, J.P.B. De Josselin de Jong was an early critic of the ‘universal comparison’ of Radcliffe-Brown, and foreshadowed Eggan’s (1954: 747) proposal, later endorsed by Evans-Pritchard (1965), for ‘controlled comparisons’, that advocated comparisons to be drawn ‘on a smaller scale’ and ‘with as much control over the frame of comparison as it is possible to secure’, or ‘the comparison of the comparable’, as P.E. De Josselin de Jong (1980: 320) framed this. Such intra-regional comparison has, at the level of anthropology, long proven fruitful to understand the intricacies of social life and to capture commonalities and differences, specificities and generalities.

While Anthropology has moved on from identifying the ‘structural core’, or cultural matrix or grammar, which the Leiden School of Anthropology envisaged as the ultimate purpose of demarcating fields of ethnological study, De Josselin de Jong’s early insight that fields of ethnological study exist irrespective of political boundaries remains a crucial intervention. It was an insight, however, that soon found itself discarded by the postcolonial preoccupation with studying nation-states as enclosed culturally, as well as by the more ambitious frame of ‘area studies’ whose boundaries became demarcated not on ethnographic but along political lines. To approach Highland Asia as a ‘Field of Anthropological Study’ holds a number of promises. Pivotal among these is precisely the dispelling of lingering constraints of both ‘methodological nationalism’ (see Gellner 2012) and the more than arbitrary delineation of area studies (Van Schendel 2002) that have so long, and so misleadingly, curbed scholarly worlds to political conventions. What is needed, as Van Schendel (2002: 651) so influentially highlighted, is a reconsideration and refashioning of ‘the contexts, boundaries, and types of knowledge associated with the scramble for the area [studies]’, and a focus on ‘interregional linkages rather than regional identities’ (ibid.: 661) and the subsequent setting and evaluation of these regional identities one against the other.

Take the Naga, a trans-border community that sprawls across the Indo-Myanmar border. Contemporary scholarship, however, situates the Naga either in relation to India or Myanmar states and societies, and I am not aware of any work that relates, compares and contrasts the social and political lives of Naga communities residing on both sides of the border. This equally applies to the Mizo, Kuki, and several other trans-border communities, and is so a symptom of a wider scholarly divide. (A welcome, recent and rich exception in the wider region is Sara Shneiderman’s (2015) ethnography of the relationships between mobility, ethnicity, and ritual action among the Thangmi, who straddle the border between Nepal and India). If this amounts to poor scholarship it is because these peoples’ own cultural and cosmological lifeworlds, social bonds, flows of ideas and ideologies, ritual languages, understandings of history, and a host of other affinities do not allow for any clear-cut epistemic or political boundaries between them, even as their incorporation into distinct nation-states undoubtedly affect (and afflict) their lives. More broadly, Farralley (2013: 194) writes: ‘It is a peculiar feature of contemporary scholarship on the regions that we habitually know as “South Asia” and “Southeast Asia” that there is little traffic between their respective epistemic cohorts.’

The analytical promise of Highland Asia, as a field of anthropological study, is to transform this present-day 'little traffic' (and not just between India and Myanmar, South Asia and Southeast Asia) into sustained and comparative scholarship. This does not mean the enactment of a new 'area' with new and high academic boundary walls, complete with the jagged shards of broken glass that long characterized the 'old' area studies, or to argue that ways of living and 'being' in the region are formed and sustained in primordial isolation from adjacent lowlands, but to recognise that Highland Asian studies has considerable potential and relevance beyond the existence of lowland states and societies.

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