

Editorial – Zomia and beyond*

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Abstract

*This editorial develops two themes. First, it discusses how historical and anthropological approaches can relate to each other, in the field of the highland margins of Asia and beyond. Second, it explores how we might further our understandings of the uplands of Asia by applying different terms such as ‘Haute-Asie’, the ‘Southeast Asian Massif’, the ‘Hindu Kush–Himalayan region’, the ‘Himalayan Massif’, and in particular ‘Zomia’, a neologism gaining popularity with the publication of James C. Scott’s latest book, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*.¹ Through a discussion of the notion of Zomia, I will reconsider certain ‘truths’ regarding highland Asian studies. In the process, I seek to contribute to disembedding minority studies from the national straitjackets that have been imposed by academic research bounded by the historical, ideological, and political limits of the nation-state.*

Introduction

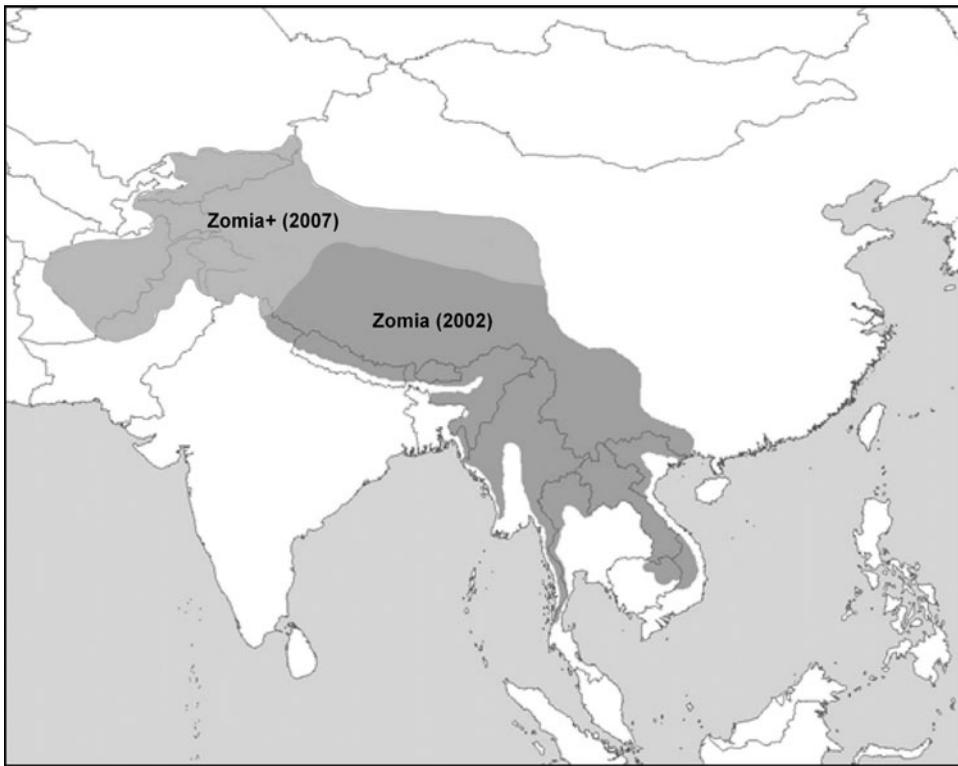
What is ‘Zomia’? A brief explanation helps to locate the object of this special issue. This exotic sounding name was coined in 2002 by the Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel in an article published in the geography journal *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*.² Van Schendel presented a macroscopic and thought-provoking analysis, in which he probed and challenged the fixed boundaries of classical ‘Area Studies’. He proposed to consider the highlands of Asia, from the western Himalayan Range through the Tibetan Plateau and all the way to the lower end of the peninsular Southeast Asian highlands, as a political and historical entity significantly distinct from the usual area divisions of Asia: Central (Inner), South, East, and Southeast. ‘Zomia’ constituted, he argued, a neglected – an invisible – transnational area, which overlapped segments of all four sub-regions without truly belonging to any of them. It is an area marked by a sparse population, historical isolation, political domination by powerful surrounding states, marginality of all kinds, and huge

* In addition to the three *JGH* anonymous readers, whose suggestions have been enlightening, colleagues have been most helpful in offering comments on drafts of this Editorial. These include in particular Sarah Turner, Magnus Fiskesjö, Sara Shneiderman, and Leif Jonsson. James C. Scott is to be thanked for putting me in touch with Magnus. As the Chief Editor of *JGH*, William Gervase Clarence-Smith has shown indefatigable support for this somewhat unusual venture, and I thank him warmly, as well as his co-editors for their scholarly inputs and collaboration.

1 James C. Scott, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009.

2 Willem van Schendel, ‘Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: jumping scale in Southeast Asia’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 20, 6, 2002, pp. 647–68.

Figure 1. Van Schendel's original Zomia (2002) and its extension north and west (2007), which I call here Zomia+. Map based in part on van Schendel, 'Geographies', p. 653.



linguistic and religious diversity. Then, in 2007, following discussions with scholars of the western Himalayas reacting to his 2002 proposition, van Schendel tentatively opted to extend Zomia further westward and northward, including southern Qinghai and Xinjiang within China, as well as a fair portion of Central Asia, encompassing the highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.³ In this way, he logically extended his gaze into the high grounds west of the Himalayas, much as he had into the east. A visual representation of this process can be seen in Figure 1. Debates over the reach of this 'new' social and geographical space are at the core of this special issue.

Combining history and anthropology

In this issue, history blends with social and, to a degree, cultural anthropology, while human geography also makes a contribution. This unusual stance for a history journal calls for an explanation. The highlands of Asia still attract little attention from historians, compared to the major kingdoms and empires that surround them. With many historians being rightfully

3 Personal communication, February 2008. To my knowledge, van Schendel has not published this expansion to his original 2002 Zomia.

busy exploring the riches of Chinese, Indian, Nepali, Burmese, Thai, or Vietnamese archives, this lack of interest in the highlands has favoured what van Schendel aptly termed a 'geography of ignorance', which in turn has led to the 'invisibility' of these upland societies.⁴ Given that the combined population of these societies is over 120 million (over 150 million if we include Zomia+), officially labelled as 'ethnic minority' individuals, such ignorance becomes less and less tolerable. Those adept at field enquiries, such as anthropologists, human geographers, and linguists, have climbed the slopes to meet and record these people's lives, languages, and practices. Perhaps historians are less fond of mountaineering. According to Scott, civilization only climbs mountains with appreciable difficulty, and this might well explain why historians have largely stayed behind too.⁵

One has to appreciate the humour of Clifford Geertz when he addressed the matter in 1990, in an article called 'History and anthropology', in which he encapsulated the misconceptions and biases that mainstream historians and anthropologists have long entertained about one another:

There seem to be some historians, their anthropological educations having ended with Malinowski or begun with Levi-Strauss, who think that anthropologists, mindless of change or hostile to it, present static pictures of immobile societies scattered about in remote corners of the inhabited world, and some anthropologists, whose idea of history is roughly that of Barbara Tuchman, who think that what historians do is tell admonitory, and-then, and-then stories about one or another episode in Western civilization.⁶

The cultural anthropologist then remarked:

Another thing the quarrel may be about is Big and Little. The penchant of historians for broad sweeps of thought and action, the Rise of Capitalism, The Decline of Rome, and of anthropologists for studies of small, well-bounded communities, the Tewa World (*which?*), The People of Alor (*who?*), leads to historians accusing anthropologists of nuancemanship, of wallowing in the details of the obscure and unimportant, and to anthropologists accusing historians of schematicism, of being out of touch with the immediacies and intricacies, 'the feel', as they like to put it, considering themselves to have it, of actual life. Muralists and miniaturists, they have a certain difficulty seeing what the other sees in contained perfections or in grand designs.⁷

In other words, Geertz believed at the time that historians and anthropologists had misjudged, and possibly mistrusted, each other for a long time. His underlying intellectual position was that the two sides had more to gain from talking to each other than from carrying on ignoring one another. He was probably right, and we can see today that such a dialogue is taking place between these two fields, as exemplified by publications such as Kalb and

4 van Schendel, 'Geographies', p. 660.

5 Scott, *Art*, ch. 1.

6 Clifford Geertz, 'History and anthropology', *New Literary History*, 21, 2, 1990, p. 321.

7 *Ibid.* pp. 321–2.

Tak's *Critical junctions* (2005).⁸ This special issue is a contribution to broadening such an interdisciplinary approach.

Nearly fifty years ago, in 1963, Keith Thomas wrote: 'There is nothing new or eccentric about the suggestion that historians might profit from an acquaintance with anthropology. Professor Tawney suggested as much in his Inaugural Lecture at the London School of Economics thirty years ago [i.e. in the 1930s] and it was not often that the advice of this most influential historian went unheeded.'⁹ Alas, Professor Tawney's advice was not heard as widely as Thomas might have hoped. In fact, until recently in the specific geographical area addressed in this issue, only tentative steps had been made from the history side to engage with the expertise of anthropologists. An example of how some historians have gone about writing the history of the region comes from Bin Yang's *Between wind and clouds* (2009).¹⁰ The chief sources of information put to use by Yang, a Western-educated Han Chinese, are written texts. When it comes to a peripheral province such as Yunnan, under the rule of the Yuan, Ming, or Qing, such texts are typically of Han origin. Yet several minority societies in Yunnan (such as the Dai, the Bai, the Naxi, or the Yi) have been literate for centuries and have produced annals and chronicles in a variety of vernacular scripts, albeit not in Chinese. Faced with the linguistic complexity of mining these local and exotic sources, combined with the assurance, in Chinese academia, that texts penned in minority languages are often of little significance, these texts have been, and still are, largely overlooked. Worse, this omission includes the oral histories that subjects living today may have embedded in their individual and collective memories. Yang's book remains devoid of local voices, as epitomized in his Chapter 7, 'Classification into the Chinese national family', where, in spite of focusing upon the second half of the twentieth century – a period that many living subjects have known first hand – oral history remains untapped.

We know that in other locales the oral history movement, based on both oral testimony and oral traditions, is a subdiscipline where historians and anthropologists have come together, particularly in the field known as ethnohistory. A case in point is the work of the historian-cum-anthropologist Jan Vansina, who pioneered the field of oral history in the early 1960s, when studying oral tradition in Africa.¹¹ In Zomia however, the use of oral histories by historians is still in its infancy. Anthropologists, in contrast, typically include such sources in their monographs, even if these are mediated through linguistic and cultural translation. To date, these anthropological texts have seldom featured prominently on historians' reading lists. All major general histories of Southeast Asia and China published in the West during the last few decades consistently show the same disinclination, from

8 D. Kalb and H. Tak, *Critical junctions: anthropology and history beyond the cultural turn*, New York: Berghahn, 2005. See also Johannes Fabian, *Anthropology with an attitude: critical essays*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001, ch. 4, 'Ethnology and history'.

9 Keith Thomas, 'History and anthropology', *Past & Present*, 24, 1963, pp. 3–24.

10 Bin Yang, *Between wind and clouds: the making of Yunnan (second century BCE to twentieth century CE)*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

11 Jan Vansina, *Oral tradition: a study in historical methodology*, trans. H. M. Wright, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965; idem, *Oral tradition as history*, Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985. See also Elizabeth Tonkin, 'Implications of oracy: an anthropological view', *Oral History*, 3, 1, 1975, pp. 41–9.

the classic works of D. G. E. Hall and Wolfram Eberhard to Jan Pluvier's historical atlas, and to Nicholas Tarling and Victor Lieberman's multi-volume compendia.¹² In such works, the marginal highlands and their inhabitants remain in the background, with the rare exception of one or two highland fiefdoms that attained some notoriety within imperial historiography. Tibet and Nan Chao are arguably the most eminent such cases in these highlands.

Of course, microhistory is neither new to historians nor ostracized by them but it has, until very recently, been less popular in some places than in others. Historians of Europe have produced scores of historical monographs, stories of a single village, or of anonymous strata in society, including ethnic minority groups, with all the materials that they could lay their hands on, such as oral histories, archaeology, visual images, linguistics, and so on. The most famous village history is possibly Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie's *Montaillou*, published in 1975.¹³ Likewise, historians of North American native societies have produced hundreds of such studies for several decades, closely followed by historians of Africa and of Melanesia. There is little doubt that microhistory is becoming a leading historical paradigm.¹⁴ However, when moving to other societies, both Western and Asian historians have proved to be less able to root their narratives in oral cultures, making little use of the oral research undertaken by scholars from other disciplines.

In the parts of Asia covered by this special issue, it seems that Geertz's assessment has not entirely lost its relevance. Consequently, when researching the highlands of Asia, with their marginal and fragmented societies living at a distance from the seats of regional and global power and often out of reach of their administrative arm, mainstream historians have been noticeably less inclined to tread the upland trails than their colleagues from neighbouring disciplines, although they have not been wholly absent, as this issue shows. Whereas the field of historical anthropology (or ethnohistory) has thrived for decades now,¹⁵ 'anthropological history' in Asian settings (with the partial exception of South Asia) is still in its infancy. As I argue elsewhere, anthropology can at times be described as a generalist social science discipline, never shy to quarry neighbouring fields for their riches.¹⁶ Anthropologists are *bricoleurs* in the Lévi-Straussian sense; they love to assemble

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- 12 D. G. E. Hall, *A history of Southeast Asia*, 4th edn, Hong Kong: MacMillan, 1981; Jan Pluvier *Historical atlas of South-east Asia*, Leiden: Brill, 1995; Wolfram Eberhard, *A history of China*, London: Routledge, 2005 (first published 1950); N. Tarling, *The Cambridge history of Southeast Asia*, 2 vols., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992; Victor Lieberman, *Strange parallels: Southeast Asia in global context c. 800–1830. Volume 1: integration on the mainland*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; and *Volume 2: mainland mirrors: Europe, Japan, China, South Asia, and the Islands*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- 13 Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie, *Montaillou, village occitan, de 1294 à 1324*, Paris: Gallimard, 1975.
- 14 Carlo Ginzburg, John Tedeschi, and Anne C. Tedeschi, 'Microhistory: two or three things that I know about it', *Critical Inquiry*, 20, 1, 1993, pp. 10–35; James F. Brooks, Chris DeCorse, and John Walton, eds., *Small worlds: method, meaning, and narrative in microhistory*, Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 2008.
- 15 A seminal contribution was certainly Bernard S. Cohn, 'History and anthropology: towards a rapprochement?', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 12, 1981, pp. 227–52. See a round-up in Nicholas Thomas, 'History and anthropology', in Alan Barnard and Jonathan Spencer, eds., *Encyclopaedia of social and cultural anthropology*, London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 273–7.
- 16 Jean Michaud, *'Incidental' ethnographers: French Catholic missions on the Tonkin–Yunnan frontier, 1880–1930*, Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill Academic Publishers, 2007, p. ix.

multiple elements, often in eccentric jigsaws that transgress disciplinary boundaries, and this has included history for some time now.¹⁷

In relation to Zomia, most societies have been little addressed by historians, apart from a recent collection of studies rooted mainly in China.¹⁸ One reason lies in the difficulty of gaining physical access to the region, and dealing with a daunting multitude of vernacular languages and scripts. However, it is also the case that the location (on the margins of colonial and imperial domains), the peoples (mountain minorities without political unity), and the texts that they produced (dispersed and very unevenly preserved), all pertain to a subsidiary universe that, some would argue, was and remains of little historical and intellectual consequence in global terms. In contrast, researchers from disciplines such as social anthropology, human geography, and linguistics have a particular methodology that values ethnography with long-term fieldwork and direct interaction with the subjects, albeit without dismissing the benefits that can be gained from exploring archives and other texts.

In fact, as Nicholas Thomas has remarked, anthropology was essentially a historical enquiry until the early twentieth century.¹⁹ This was before its hallmark research methods, including ethnography and participant observation, emerged to become part of its core constitution. Later path-breakers such as Bronislaw Malinowski and A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, though proponents of such new field methods, also insisted on maintaining strong intellectual links with history. From the 1960s onwards, with the advent of structuralism and its rival meta-narrative, historical materialism, anthropologists were keener than ever to historicize social processes. Evidence of that abounds, including Claude Lévi-Strauss' *Race et histoire* published in 1952, and E. E. Evans-Pritchard's famous lecture, 'History and anthropology', delivered in Manchester in 1961.²⁰ Then, in the 1980s, amid much rhetorical and philosophical arguing, increased engagement took place with the works of Georges W. Stocking, Eric Wolf, Marshall Sahlins, and others, leading to the deeply rooted conviction today that conceptions of history are themselves cultural and specific,²¹ and that anthropological research without historical analysis is incomplete and flawed. Historically oriented methods such as archival research, reading chronicles and annals, oral histories,

17 And in all fairness, a few historians have also started putting the notion of *bricolage* to use. Among the early contributors are K. M. Baker, 'On the problem of the ideological origins of the French Revolution', in D. LaCapra and S. L. Kaplan, eds., *Modern European intellectual history: reappraisals and new perspectives*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982, pp. 197–219; Mario Biagioli, 'Scientific revolution, bricolage and etiquette', in Roy Porter and Mikulas Teich, eds., *The scientific revolution in national context*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, pp. 11–54; Frederick Cooper, 'Conflict and connection: rethinking colonial African history', *American Historical Review*, 99, 5, 1994, pp. 1516–45.

18 C. Patterson Giersch, *Asian borderlands: the transformation of Qing China's Yunnan frontier*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006; John E. Herman, *Amid the clouds and mist: China's colonization of Guizhou, 1200–1700*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2007; Yang, *Between wind and clouds*.

19 Thomas, 'History', p. 273.

20 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race et histoire*, brochure published by Unesco, 1952; reprinted as a book in 1961; E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Anthropology and history*, Manchester: University of Manchester, the University Press, 1961. In this piece, Evans-Pritchard also boldly declared that just as anthropology would be nothing without history, history would be nothing without anthropology.

21 Valerio Valeri, "'Our ancestors spoke little": knowledge and social forms in Huauilu', in Leontine E. Visser, ed., *Halmahera and beyond: social science research in the Moluccas*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 1994, pp. 195–212.

collecting life stories, or performing mental mapping, have become mainstream in social anthropology.

So, on a journey during which their paths are crossing more and more often, historians and anthropologists of Asia would greatly benefit from increasingly acknowledging and engaging intellectually with each other. In his 1990 article, Geertz concluded with this tempting vision:

The recent surge of anthropologists' interest in not just the past (we have always been interested in that), but in historians' ways of making present sense of it, and of historians' interest not just in cultural strangeness (Herodotus had that), but in anthropologists' ways of bringing it near, is no mere fashion; it will survive the enthusiasms it generates, the fears it induces, and the confusions it causes.²²

Testing Zomia from the perspective of the Southeast Asian Massif

This special issue concerns an unusual cross-border locale at the heart of the Asian continent, covering an area comparable to Europe. Following its inception in 2002, Willem van Schendel's idea of Zomia, its magnitude, and its counter-current quality in an academic world profoundly determined by political borders and institutionally enshrined Area Studies, proved challenging enough to keep social scientists at bay for a while, triggering relatively little reaction. However, it did get noticed by scholars of the area, to whom it spoke directly, showing consistency with what they had been observing on the ground. The most prominent case of this interest is the latest book by the political scientist James C. Scott, which focuses on the eastern part of van Schendel's Zomia.²³ Further west, scholars of the Himalayas, represented in this publication by Sara Shneiderman, and to an extent by Patterson Giersch, saw relevance in this large-scale corroboration. They agreed that the populations of this high region shared a heritage that could not simply be explained by the political and cultural influence of Tibet, a rare example of a highland Asian imperial power. Others working east of the Tibetan plateau have also shown a liminal interest for a transnational approach to this area and its populations.²⁴ John McKinnon and I realized the importance of the transnational nature of minority populations in what we called the Southeast Asian Massif, and proposed to disembled social science research on peripheral societies there from intellectually binding national settings.²⁵ However, the sheer macro stance that

22 Geertz, 'History', p. 333.

23 Scott, *Art*.

24 Lim Joo Jock, *Territorial power domains, Southeast Asia, and China: the geo-strategy of an overarching massif*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1984; Gehan Wijeyewardene, *Ethnic groups across national boundaries in mainland Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1990; Grant Evans, Christopher Hutton, and Kuah Khun Eng, eds., *Where China meets Southeast Asia: social and cultural change in the border regions*, Singapore and Canberra: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies and Allen & Unwin, 2000.

25 John McKinnon and Jean Michaud, 'Presentation: montagnard domain in the South-east Asian Massif', in J. Michaud, ed., *Turbulent times and enduring peoples: the mountain minorities of the South-east Asian Massif*, Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press, 2000, pp. 1–25.

van Schendel adopted to discuss the region, and the theoretical assumptions underlying his position, have also made several of us somewhat uncomfortable.²⁶ In this thematic issue, therefore, each author in her or his own field uses grounded knowledge to provide an explanation as to how they have reacted to the term ‘Zomia’ and to the scale that it encompasses.

What makes Zomia a space of interest to global historians and social scientists alike lies not just in its transnationality, and its trans-regionality in terms of the accepted Asian sub-areas, but also in terms of a space linking neighbouring polities together in a unique way. From the foundational work of Fernand Braudel, much has been said of the Mediterranean Sea as a space of circulation and exchange of peoples, goods, and ideas. Many have rightly stressed the same phenomena in the Baltic Sea, the Indian Ocean, or the Java Sea, for instance. It is perhaps harder to apply that type of analysis to highlands, which, like deserts such as the Sahara, or the tundra, or deep forests such as Amazonia, are less easily travelled than bodies of water. Although not empty of human settlements, the relief and climate of mountains set them apart from the surrounding more densely inhabited lands, while still allowing for trade routes to develop.²⁷

It may be more productive to compare Zomia to other highlands, the Andes and the Alps for instance. To become a discrete social space, with a distinct social, political, and historical logic to it, be it one of refuge or of isolation, highlands have to be attached, even if only loosely, to the political history of a wider region. Through centuries, this inclusion generally came when a high enough concentration of population emerged, both upland and in surrounding lowlands, combined with integration through tributary relations and trade in complementary goods that benefited highland and lowland societies. Patterns of circulation of goods and people often developed through caravans and migratory routes from one heavily populated area to the next, for example between the western and eastern coasts of South America, western and southern Europe, and, in our case, India and China.²⁸ The Andes, the Alps, the Pyrenees, and the Caucasus fit this description, whereas the Rocky Mountains or the Urals fit less well, owing to a lack of human population concentration over a long period of time, both within the ranges themselves and around them.

In contrast with the Andes and its high cultures, or the Alps lying at the geographical heart of Europe, Zomia as a global region awaits scholarly attention. Like a newly spotted constellation, it has appeared on the radar only recently. Yet, features of Zomia’s history are unquestionably global. In addition to what has just been said, it can be argued that its interest as a large-scale space also lies in the global trade that contributed to link the Asian highlands together, as well as with the outside world. For centuries, trade in this region has been conducted on all scales: from one valley to the next, from one fiefdom to others around it, and at the macro scale through long-haul trade including intercontinental exchanges

26 See, in particular, Formoso, ‘Zomian or zombies? What future exists for the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif?’, in this issue, pp. 313–32.

27 Addressed by C. Patterson Giersch in ‘Across Zomia with merchants, monks, and musk: process geographies, trade networks, and the Inner-East–Southeast Asian borderlands’, in this issue, pp. 215–39.

28 See Magnus Fiskesjö, ‘Mining, history, and the anti-state Wa: the politics of autonomy between Burma and China’, in this issue, pp. 241–64; Sarah Turner, ‘Borderlands and border narratives: a longitudinal study of challenges and opportunities for local traders shaped by the Sino-Vietnamese border’, in this issue, pp. 265–87.

such as those popularly associated with the idea of the Silk Road.²⁹ Though never really central to the trade linking the Far East to South Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, these highlands have been an integral part of trading patterns, because of the caravan trails crossing them, and the provision of prized and rare items.³⁰ Such items have included hardwoods, animals and animal parts, cotton and hemp, medicinal plants, precious metals such as silver, and gemstones. Two examples, maize and opium, will suffice to make this point.³¹

Maize (*Zea mays* L.) was unknown to Asia before its introduction from America by the Iberians in the sixteenth century. It quickly became a popular crop in China's south-western mountainous periphery. It required neither rich soils nor irrigation, it could be planted on slopes, and it was perfectly suited to the temperate climate of the highlands. As a crop, maize proved extremely attractive to highlanders. Easy to grow, to harvest, and to stock, it does not deplete the thin highland soil of too many of its nutrients. Its root system helps to consolidate slopes, and it can profitably be grown on the same plot concurrently with beans, peas, or opium poppies. Ground to fine flour with portable milling stones, which practically every household historically owned a pair of, maize often became an essential element of pigs' diets, and was occasionally consumed by humans. Last but not least, maize became a favourite raw material for producing homemade distilled alcohol, consumed in large quantities in the highlands and subject to a thriving trade.³²

This particular grain has thus been instrumental in helping local highland populations to root themselves successfully in a demanding environment. Concurrently, maize has also helped the Han Chinese masses in the lowlands to deal with demographic pressure by facilitating their movement into the less fertile hills and plateaus, and settling where previously only mountain groups had dwelt. Together with excessive state infringement and relentless taxation, this invasion constituted an important cause of conflict between the Han administration and highland minorities, the latter trying to preserve their integrity vis-à-vis the imperial central government as well as regional rulers and warlords.

Opium (*Papaver somniferum*) provides an even more telling example of global integration. Owing to the marketing of large quantities in China by Europeans and Indians, a high level of consumption emerged in the nineteenth century (15 million Chinese addicts in 1870, according to McCoy).³³ This trend was significantly stimulated and skilfully maintained by the British East India Company. Early on, China's leaders became worried by the huge

29 Fiskesjö, 'Mining', pp. 241–64

30 Ann Maxwell Hill, *Merchants and migrants: ethnicity and trade among the Yunnanese Chinese in Southeast Asia*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998; William G. Clarence-Smith, 'Horse breeding in mainland Southeast Asia and its borderlands', in Peter Boomgaard and David Henley, eds., *Smallholders and stockbreeders: history of foodcrop and livestock farming in Southeast Asia*, Leiden: KITLV Press, 2004, pp. 189–210.

31 These two examples are from Jean Michaud, *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2006 (reprinted in 2009 as *A to Z of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*), pp. 149–50, 183–6.

32 See Turner, 'Borderlands', pp. 265–87

33 Alfred W. McCoy, with Cathleen B. Read, and Leonard P. Adams III, *The politics of heroin in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: Harper Torchbooks, 1989. See also Pierre-Arnaud Chouvy, *Opium: uncovering the politics of the poppy*, London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2009.

outflow of silver that the importation of thousands of tons of opium implied. Eventually, the protagonists clashed in what became known as the Opium Wars (1838–42 and 1856–58), both lost by China. By the treaty of Nanking (Nanjing) in 1842, China was forced to allow Westerners to trade almost freely with the huge Chinese market. The only option left to the Chinese to compete with the intruders was to promote and support national production of opium. The populations dwelling in areas suitable for this production – that is, the limestone mountains and plateaus of the south-west – were then encouraged to grow the poppy and produce raw opium to be sold to the government. The state, in turn, processed the raw substance and sold it on the interior market.³⁴

Many of these same producers in the south-west highlands were also courted by the British and the French, who were able to reach ‘Chinese Zomia’ through Burma and Indochina. Processed opium was thus also shipped from Saigon or Calcutta to European trading posts on the Chinese coast, and elsewhere around the world where Chinese migrants had settled. As Descours-Gatin has recently shown, so profitable was this trade, and so substantial the sums it entailed, that, between 1898 and 1922, the contribution from this industry to the total gross income of the colonial budget in French Indochina fluctuated between 25% and 42%.³⁵ Highland minorities in Zomia were thus becoming actors in a fierce international competition. The violent revolts and rebellions that shook southern China during the second half of the nineteenth century, such as the Panthay and Miao Rebellions, and the subsequent waves of migration into the highlands of the peninsula, can be linked, at least in part, to the strong urge to control the production and sale of opium.³⁶

Into the second half of the twentieth century, being in control of opium production and trade remained crucial for various belligerent groups, for whom it provided a means of financing their armed struggles. Even American forces during the Second Indochina War (1954–75) were instrumental in the transportation, storage, distribution, and consumption of opium and its derivatives, heroin and morphine. But when wars in the region subsided, national governments saw more harm than good in this peculiar trade, and started putting an official end to it. They were financially assisted by countries that now had to contain a drug-addiction problem brought home by returning troops. All countries sharing the eastern part of Zomia were eventually to sign the 1988 UN Drug Convention. Massive opium production and its train of consequences have now moved to another major war zone, sitting this time on the western edge of greater Zomia: Afghanistan and the highlands of Central Asia. The global interconnectedness of this region continues.

34 David. A. Bello, *Opium and the limits of empire: drug prohibition in the Chinese interior, 1729–1850*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Asia Center, 2005.

35 Chantal Descours-Gatin, *Quand l’opium finançait la colonisation en Indochine*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 1992; Philippe Le Failler, *Monopole et prohibition de l’opium en Indochine: le pilori des Chimères*, Paris: L’Harmattan, 2001.

36 Robert D. Jenks, *Insurgency and social disorder in Guizhou: the Miao Rebellion, 1854–1873*. Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1994.

Figure 2. Aloys Schotter (top centre) among his converts in Guizhou. Source: Archives of the Société des Missions Étrangères, Paris.



One early European view from the Asian highlands

I propose now that we enter Zomia to witness for ourselves its particularities and scope. As a first step, a local-level approach helps us begin to appreciate some of the many intricacies at play. Our field guide will be a lone colonial missionary, Aloys Schotter, who penned his observations in academic journal articles a century ago. At the beginning of the 1890s, the freshly ordained Catholic priest arrived in China with the *Société des Missions étrangères de Paris* and soon found himself posted in Hin-y-fou. This was a remote district head town located in the distant highlands of the *Kouy-tcheou* vicariate, in what is now China's Guizhou province.³⁷ For the next forty-three years, until his death at sixty-three, Schotter missionized among minority 'tribes', which he called the *Miao* and the *Y-jen*, the latter being better known as the Yi, Lolo, or Nosu.

During his tenure, Schotter showed unquestionable stamina: in addition to his already demanding religious duties, he managed to find the resources and time to write informed ethnographic descriptions of his prospective converts as he observed them daily. In 1908, then aged fifty, he published some of his observations in the journal *Anthropos*, launched only two years before by Father Wilhelm Schmidt of the Society of the

³⁷ For a more detailed account of Schotter's life and work, see Michaud, 'Incidental' *Ethnographers*, pp. 145–50.

Divine Word, a journal specializing in missionary ethnography, ethnology, and linguistics. Schotter wrote:

For the ethnographer and the philologist . . . Kouy-tcheou is like a *Jardin des Plantes* [a Botanical Garden], an ethnological museum. Its abrupt mountains and deep valleys form grandiose boxes where, classed and catalogued, grow multiple samples of tribes. These are the survivors of aboriginal races that constituted China's original population before they were pushed back by the Han Chinese invaders. These are the children of the Pre-Chinese; and our Kouy-tcheou is the pre-Chinese province *par excellence*.³⁸

The priest then explained the human and geographical layout of the region to his reader-ship: 'The Miao, like the bushes, cover everywhere the rocks of Kouy-tcheou. The Y-jen, like a mighty trunk, shoot the ramifications of their crowded villages into the fertile plains. The Chinese, like parasite mistletoe, sneak in everywhere, suck, and exploit the aboriginal populations, pretending to govern.'³⁹

Schotter's prose is valuable because it nicely encapsulates several of the most significant facets of the history in these highlands. In the first quote, he surmises what the historical hierarchy between the various occupiers of the highlands might have been like. Here he notes a particularly rugged geomorphology confined by abrupt mountains, conducive to the lasting isolation of local cultures. This mosaic of peoples is ancient, perhaps more ancient than the Han Chinese, who arrived with greater military might to drive the former from their homelands and push them farther into the mountains. In the second excerpt, we understand that, through time, distinct groups came to occupy distinct ecological niches in a functional arrangement that was at least partly based on demographic weight: relatively numerous groups such as the Y-jen occupied fertile high plains favoured for intensive irrigated rice agriculture. Broadly speaking, feudal political systems then developed; namely, unequal political relationships determined by the appropriation of land and the control of a military force by a hereditary elite to which a mass of peasants is submitted.⁴⁰ Meanwhile, other, less numerous 'tribes' such as the Miao elected to settle in the higher and more disjointed ecological niches. This differentiation points to a political hierarchy, by which the mid-altitude groups boasted more power and the higher groups less. Both these groups, however, were among the aboriginal inhabitants of the region. A third party, the Han Chinese, then emerged in contrast with these groupings, infiltrating from the outside the social space of both the Miao and the Y-jen, and taking control of resources and administration. These 'invaders' were representatives of the lowland ruling nation, a nation that was expanding its sphere of influence to extract additional wealth through tributary relations or direct taxation of weaker marginal societies on the fringes. In this case it was the Han, but it could just as well have been the Kinh (Viet), Thai, Bengali, or Burmans elsewhere in Zomia.

The purpose of this brief exposé of Schotter's observations is neither to sustain nor to promote a primordial, essential view of the peoples dwelling in these highlands, a theoretical

38 Aloys Schotter, 'Notes ethnographiques sur les tribus du Kouy-tcheou (Chine)', *Anthropos*, 3, 1908, pp. 397–8.

39 Ibid., p. 403.

40 Georges Condominas, 'Essai sur l'évolution des systèmes politiques Thais', *Ethnos*, 41, 1976, pp. 7–67.

reservation with which social scientists are in broad agreement.⁴¹ All the same, this should not impede the acknowledgement of certain facts. On the ground, people and space always intersect, especially when geographical remoteness equates to economic and political isolation. This is especially the case when such isolation becomes an instrument for the subordination of those who, throughout history, have been classified by the powers-that-be as barbarians or savages. This process has induced certain adaptive responses by those considered subordinate, which some call the 'indigenization of modernity'.⁴² Scott, as we will discuss in the next section, even boldly argues that such groups flee with the more or less conscious aim of leaving behind the very notion of the state to partake in more egalitarian political forms.⁴³

Naming and defining Zomia

Being intrinsically bounded by his ideological and personal circumstances, Schotter had no such overarching notion as Zomia in mind. What is commendable about Willem van Schendel's idea is his call to academics to pay more attention to areas and societies dwelling on the periphery of bona fide states and civilizations, which are otherwise neglected as merely peripheral, exotic, or backward. In doing so, van Schendel acknowledged the inspiration from predecessors, embodied here in Figure 3, which shows a telling representation of the highlands under the name of the 'Hindu Kush–Himalayan region'. This representation was proposed in the 1980s by a development group based in Nepal, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, whose aim in circulating this map was more informative than academic. It did not yield a great deal of scholarly discussion at the time, but it interests us here as an evident ancestor to greater Zomia.⁴⁴

Then came van Schendel with the name Zomia, which deserves an explanation. Van Schendel's own field investigations were located in the extreme north-east of India, in the small states bordering Burma and Bangladesh. The neologism 'Zomia' is embarrassingly localized, whereas the situation calls for a broader and more encompassing label. Naming is not simply a creative act. It also needs a strong logic, which should allow a reasonably convenient name to fit the broadest possible community of subjects or peoples thus named. A few points have been left out of this naming debate, possibly because the very name Zomia has proved alluring enough to be adopted uncritically. Van Schendel states that Zomia is 'derived from *zomi*, a term for highlander in a number of Chin-Mizo-Kuki

41 Stephan Fuchs, *Against essentialism: a theory of culture and society*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001; J. D. Eller and R. M. Coughlan, 'The poverty of primordialism: the demystification of ethnic attachments', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 16, 1993, pp. 181–202.

42 Marshall Sahlins, 'What is anthropological enlightenment? Some lessons of the twentieth century', *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28, 1999, pp. i–xxiii; Sally Engel Merry, 'Transnational human rights and local activism: mapping the middle', *American Anthropologist*, 108, 1, 2006, pp. 38–51.

43 Scott, *Art*.

44 Van Schendel 'Geographies', p. 655, n. 20. The ICIMOD describes itself as 'a regional knowledge development and learning centre serving the eight regional member countries of the Hindu Kush–Himalayas – Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, India, Myanmar, Nepal, and Pakistan': <http://www.icimod.org/> (consulted 31 March 2010).

Figure 3. The ‘Hindu Kush-Himalayan’ region. Map, courtesy of International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development, Nepal, www.icimod.org



languages spoken in Burma, India, and Bangladesh'.⁴⁵ These vernacular languages, chiefly spoken in a small area centred on the Chin Hills on the borderlands where western Burma, extreme eastern India, and eastern Bangladesh meet, are highly localized, and do not resonate in the rest of high Asia. No highland society outside the Chin Hills uses the terms *zo* or *zomi*, a point that Frank Lehman made in 1963.⁴⁶

Van Schendel has been astute. Zomia, like Shangri-la or Xanadu, is a catchy name and makes for a wonderfully enticing sound bite. It may well stick with media and academic publishers, who have a penchant for the scent of mystery it carries. I also suspect that we are closer every day to the creation and popularization, in generalist academic circles as well as in the informed public, of a 'new and exciting' Asian population, the Zomians (already picked up by Bernard Formoso in this issue), with 'Zomian studies' to follow.⁴⁷ But we should keep in mind that Zomia remains an awkward choice of name in relation to an enormous and vastly diverse reality. To use a North American analogy, this is the equivalent of naming the Rockies – the English-language name for a giant mountain range spreading from Central America to Alaska – from a vernacular ethnonym employed by, say, the Athabaskan of eastern Yukon. As an alternative, the notion of *Haute-Asie*, High

45 Van Schendel 'Geographies', p. 653.

46 Frank K. Lehman, *The structure of Chin society*, Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963. According to Lehman, in vernacular Chin language, *zo* means peripheral and *mi* means people; *zo mi* should thus translate as 'peripheral people' (personal communication, March 2008).

47 In time, scholars may realize the potential euphony when bringing together Zomia and Amazonia, and a number of entertaining neologisms may result.

Figure 4. James C. Scott's Zomia. Source: Scott, *The art of not being governed*, p. 17 Courtesy of Yale University Press.



Asia, widely used in French Himalayan studies circles, may have offered a more promising option. But I suppose there is no purpose in insisting that van Schendel's neologism should be perfect, and Zomia may well be here to stay. The question that really matters, as Bernard Formoso also asks in this issue, is whether the reality behind the name can bear significance for social and historical research on highland societies in Asia.

To date, the most prominent use of Zomia comes in Scott's *The art of not being governed*. In this intellectually stimulating book, Scott explicitly refers to van Schendel's work and makes Zomia the explicit locale for his analysis. However, one can immediately see from Figure 4 that the area that Scott calls Zomia differs significantly from van Schendel's proposition. As a justification for this discrepancy, Scott simply states in his preface, without further detail:

Zomia is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety. Geographically, it is also known as the Southeast Asian mainland massif.⁴⁸

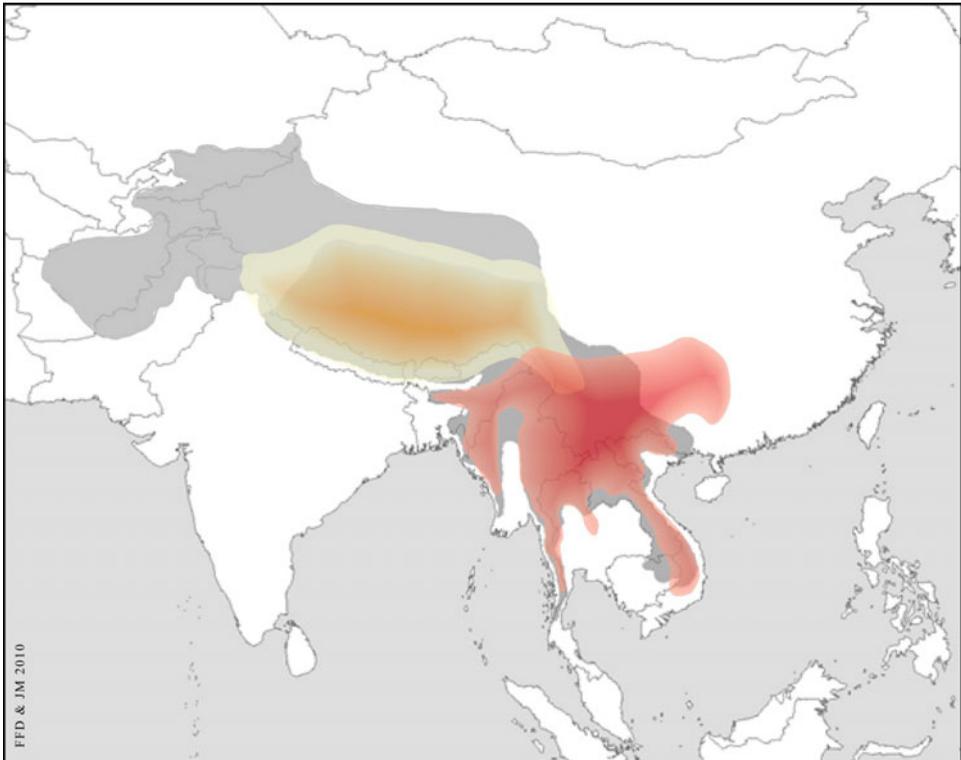
What Scott chooses to call Zomia does not match van Schendel's proposition but, as this quote points out, it fits what others call the Southeast Asian Massif, and this similarity deserves an explanation.

Perhaps a non-geographical term such as Zomia, as suggested by Scott, may seem a more suitable name for a social space than a physical name such as Southeast Asian Massif. This same predicament applies to Andean, Amazonian, Mediterranean, or Himalayan societies and civilizations, which, in spite of this concern, have widely and profitably used such names for decades. Van Schendel's Zomia remained somewhat imprecise in its geographical, cultural, or linguistic definition, as he chiefly proposed broad political criteria and no precise boundaries. In contrast, the notion of the Southeast Asian Massif has been made more operational, and its intrinsic logic defined more explicitly as I discuss below. It has been subject to debate for a little longer than van Schendel's Zomia, and has thus had the time to be characterized with some precision. Most contributors to this special issue have based their research inside the geographical limits of the south-eastern portion of the Asian landmass – the Southeast Asia Massif – underscoring its logic in various ways.

As shown in Figure 5, the locales that van Schendel's notion of Zomia and the Southeast Asian Massif mean to cover are different, with an important overlap in eastern Zomia, which is also Scott's locale. While to a certain extent I see van Schendel's reason for his greater Zomia project and the macro-geomorphologic logic to it, the magnitude of social diversity that it encompasses precludes any conclusive cultural assessment. Based on local and regional history, there is a colossal level of variation between the pastoralist Pashtun of Pakistan, the nomadic Gujar of Kashmir, the Sherpa peasants on the Nepal–China border, the nomadic herders of western Tibet, the Chin horticulturalists on the Burma–India

48 Scott, *Art*, p. ix

Figure 5. Over van Schendel's Zomia and Zomia+ (grey) are shown the Southeast Asian Massif (red) and the Himalayan Massif (yellow). This opens the door to dividing greater Zomia into an eastern portion (the Southeast Asian Massif), a central one (the Himalayan Massif), and a western one (the Central Asian Massif?), though this may not be of genuine help in the present debate.



border, the 'feudal' Yi and Bai in central Yunnan, the heavily sinicized Zhuang in the western half of Guangxi, the Hui (Chinese Muslim) merchants present among many of these societies, and the kinship-based Austronesian groups divided between southern Laos and Vietnam. This to name but a slim sample of the range of ethnicities that greater Zomia is meant to encompass. Basing my concerns on cultural factors such as language families, religious systems, forms of social organization, migration patterns, sources of outside influence, and so on, as a social anthropologist I question how operational such an idea can be in terms of providing a coherent unit for social research (see also Formoso, this issue). I also accept however, that van Schendel uses a macroscopic, historical, and political science viewpoint. He is thus not bound to be as concerned as social anthropologists or human geographers with the details of cultural distinction on the ground.

A few years ago, while researching the *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*, I had to devise a workable definition of what I encompassed within the label 'Southeast Asian Massif'. This name is derived from Lim Joo Jock's seminal *Territorial*

power domains, Southeast Asia, and China: the geo-strategy of an overarching massif. At the time, despite having used the term in articles and in my edited *Turbulent times and enduring peoples: mountain minorities in the South-east Asian Massif*,⁴⁹ neither I nor other scholars had felt the need or obligation to actually define the region. To do so for the 2006 dictionary, I decided to involve regional historical processes, political crystallization, linguistic diffusion, ethnic groupings, migrations, and geographical features.

Starting with the palpable physical dimension, it was neither realistic nor helpful to bound the area in terms of precise altitude, latitude, and longitude, with definite outside limits and internal subdivisions. This was because of both the extremely complex geomorphology of this large space and also constant population movements.⁵⁰ Broadly speaking, however, at their maximum extension, these highland groups are scattered over a domain mostly situated above an elevation of about three to five hundred metres, within an area approximately the size of western Europe. Stretching from the temperate Chang Jiang (Yangtze River) which roughly demarcates the northern boundary, it moves south to encompass the high ranges extending east and south from the Himalayas and the Tibetan Plateau, and the monsoon high country drained by the basins of the lower Brahmaputra, Irrawaddy, Salween, Chao Phraya, Mekong, Song Hong (Red River), and Zhu Jiang (Pearl River). In China, it includes extreme eastern Tibet, southern and western Sichuan, western Hunan, a small portion of western Guangdong, all of Guizhou and Yunnan, north and west Guangxi, and the highlands of Hainan Island. Spilling over the Southeast Asian peninsula, it covers most of the border areas of Burma with adjacent segments of north-eastern India and south-eastern Bangladesh, the north and west of Thailand, all of Laos above the Mekong valley, borderlands in northern and central Vietnam along the Annam Cordillera, and the north-eastern fringes of Cambodia.

Beyond the northern limit of the Massif, I do not include the Chongqing basin, because it has been colonized by the Han for more than a millennium, and the massive influx of population into this fertile 'rice bowl' of China has spilled into parts of central and western Sichuan above 500 metres. The same observation applies to highlands further north in Gansu and Shaanxi provinces, placing the northern limit of the Massif roughly along the Yangtze River. At the southern extreme, I believe that highland peninsular Malaysia should be excluded, because it is disconnected from the Massif by the Isthmus of Kra and is more intimately associated with the Malay world.⁵¹ That said, many of the indigenous highland populations of peninsular Malaysia – the Orang Asli – are Austroasiatic by language, and thus linked to groups in the Massif such as the Wa, the Khmu, the Katu, and the Bahnar.

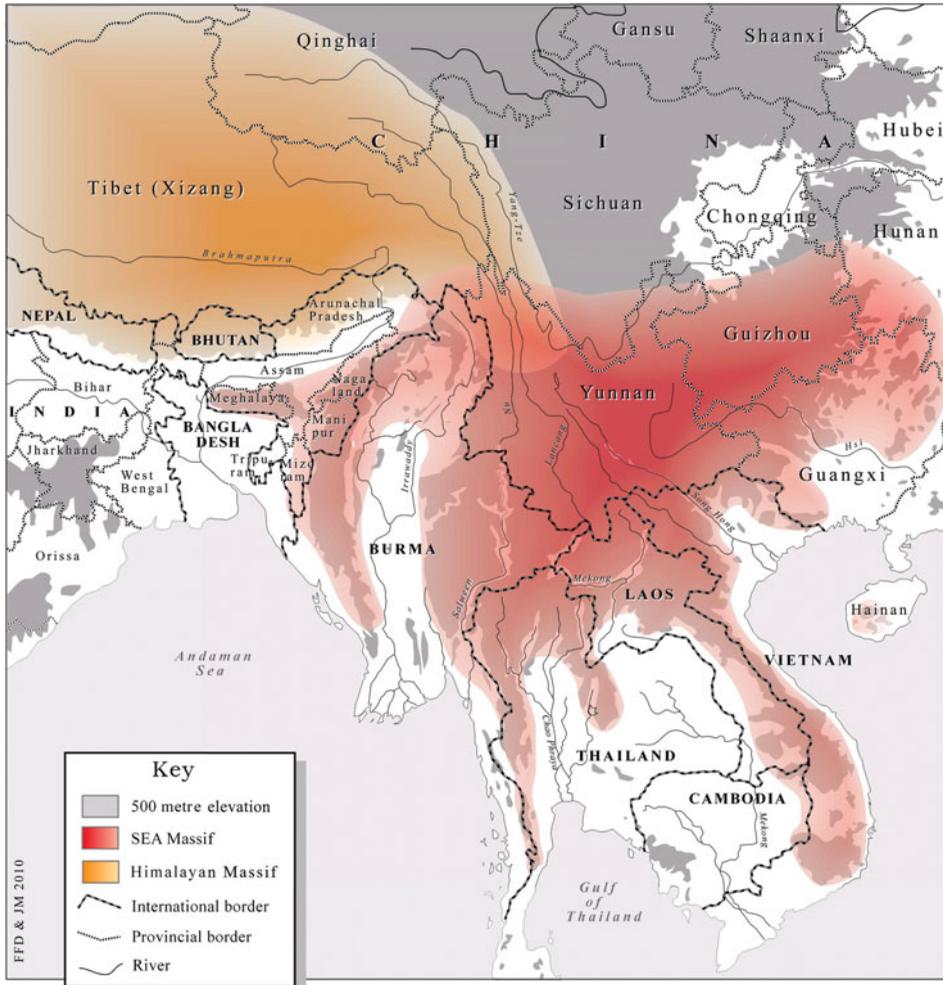
Van Schendel's original definition of Zomia was close to that of the Southeast Asian Massif, bar his significant inclusion of the Xizang (Tibet) Autonomous Region, plus adjacent

49 Jean Michaud, 'Economic transformation in a Hmong village of Thailand', *Human Organization*, 56, 2, 1997, pp. 222–32; idem, 'From south-west China into upper Indochina: an overview of Hmong (Miao) migrations', *Asia-Pacific Viewpoint*, 38, 2, 1997, pp. 119–30; idem, *Turbulent times*.

50 See for instance, on Borneo, Bernard Sellato, *Nomads of the Borneo rainforest: the economics, politics, and ideology of settling down*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994. In the Indonesian context, see Tania Murray Li, 'Marginality, power, and production: analyzing upland transformations', in Tania Murray Li, ed., *Transforming the Indonesian uplands*, Amsterdam: Harwood, 1999, pp. 1–44.

51 Hall, *History*; Tarling, *Cambridge history*.

Figure 6. The Southeast Asian Massif.



portions in the provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Sichuan, as well as upland areas in Nepal, Bhutan, and India (see Figures 5 and 6). I decided not to include that area within the Massif because, despite its irrefutable minority status within China, Tibet and the Tibetan cultural periphery are historically more appropriately conceived of as a distinct entity.⁵² The Tibetan world has its own logic: a centralized and religiously harmonized core with a long, distinctive political existence that places it in a 'feudal' and imperial category, which the societies historically associated with the Massif have rarely, if ever, developed into.⁵³ In this sense, the western limit of the Massif, then, is as much a historical and political one as it is linguistic, cultural, and religious. Again, this should not be seen as clear-cut. Many

52 See also Sara Shneiderman, 'Are the Central Himalayas in Zomia? Some scholarly and political considerations across time and space', in this issue, pp. 289–312.

53 Melvyn C. Goldstein, *A history of modern Tibet, 1913–1951: the demise of the Lamaist state*, Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1989.

societies on Tibet's periphery, such as the Khampa,⁵⁴ Naxi, Drung, or Mosuo in Yunnan, the Lopa in Nepal, or the Bhutia in Sikkim, have switched allegiances repeatedly over the centuries, moving in and out of Lhasa's orbit. Moreover, the Tibeto-Burman language family and Tibetan Buddhism have spilled over the eastern edge of the plateau. The perimeter is anything but straightforward, pertaining instead to a blending of cultural heritages.

To further qualify the particularities of the Massif, a series of core factors can be incorporated: history, of course, but also languages, religion, customary social structures, economies, and political relationships with lowland states. What makes highland societies distinct from each other may exceed what they actually share, which is a vast ecosystem, a state of marginality, and forms of subordination. The Massif is crossed by four major language families, none of which form a decisive majority. In religious terms, several groups are Animist, others are Buddhist, some are Christian, a good number share Taoist and Confucian values, the Hui are Muslim, while most societies sport a complex syncretism. Throughout history, feuds and frequent hostilities between local groups were evidence of the plurality of cultures.⁵⁵ The region has never been united politically, neither as an empire nor as a space shared among a few feuding kingdoms, nor even as a zone with harmonized political systems. Forms of distinct customary political organizations, chiefly lineage-based versus 'feudal',⁵⁶ have long existed. At the national level today, political regimes in countries sharing the region (democracies, three socialist regimes, one constitutional monarchy, and one military dictatorship) simply magnify this ancient political diversity.

Along with other transnational highlands around the Himalayas (and, indeed, around the world), the Southeast Asian Massif – let alone van Schendel's Zomia – is marginal and fragmented in historical, economic, and cultural terms. It may thus be seen as lacking the necessary significance in the larger scheme of things to be proposed as a promising area subdivision of Asian studies. However, my point here is not to become a flag bearer for such a new Area Studies subdivision but to stress that we have to rethink country-based research, addressing trans-border and marginal societies.

Careful inquiries on the ground throughout the Massif, such as those in this special issue, show that these peoples actually share a sense of being different from the majorities, a sense of geographical remoteness, and a state of marginality that is connected to political and economic distance from regional seats of power. In cultural terms, these highland societies are like a cultural mosaic with contrasting colours, rather than an integrated picture in harmonized shades – what Terry Rambo has dubbed 'a psychedelic nightmare'.⁵⁷ Yet, when observed from the necessary distance, which is precisely what van Schendel and Scott do and for which they must be given credit, that mosaic can become a distinctive and significant picture, even if an imprecise one at times.

54 Discussed in Giersch, 'Across Zomia'.

55 Herman, *Amid the clouds*; Claudine Lombard-Salmon, *Un exemple d'acculturation chinoise: la province du Guizhou au XVIIIe siècle*, Paris: Publication de l'École Française d'Extrême-Orient, vol. 84, 1972.

56 See the 'Introduction' in Michaud, *Historical dictionary*.

57 A. T. Rambo, 'Development trends in Vietnam's northern mountain region', in D. Donovan, A. T. Rambo, J. Fox, and Le Trong Cuc, eds., *Development trends in Vietnam's northern mountainous region*, Hanoi: National Political Publishing House, 1997, p. 8.

While leaving the task of discussing the Himalayan populations on the Indic and Tibetan peripheries to Sara Shneiderman and Pat Giersch,⁵⁸ let us go back to Scott's Zomia. Historically, as authors have discussed before,⁵⁹ these highlands have been used by lowland empires as reserves of resources (including slaves), and as buffer spaces between their domains. James C. Scott's argument is, precisely, that there is a unity across his Zomia regarding political forms of domination and subordination, which bonds the fates of the peoples dwelling there. Scott attempts to reflect upon Zomia using the example of the Mediterranean world:

Here [i.e. in the Mediterranean] was a society that maintained itself by the active exchange of goods, people, and ideas without a unified 'territory' or political administration in the usual sense of the term. On a somewhat smaller scale, Edward Whiting Fox argues that the Aegean of classical Greece, though never united politically, was a single, social, cultural, and economic organism, knit together by thick strands of contact and exchange over easy water.

Transferring this type of analysis to Southeast Asia, Scott adds:

The most striking historical example of this phenomenon was the Malay world – a seafaring world par excellence – whose cultural influence ran all the way from Easter Island in the Pacific to Madagascar and the coast of Southern Africa, where the Swahili spoken in the coastal ports bears its imprint. The Malay state itself, in its fifteenth- and sixteenth-century heyday, could fairly be called, like the Hanseatic League, a shifting coalition of trading ports. The elementary units of statecraft were ports like Jambi, Palembang, Johor, and Melaka, and a Malay aristocracy shuffled between them depending on political and trade advantages. Our landlocked sense of a 'kingdom' as consisting of a compact and contiguous territory makes no sense when confronted with such maritime integration across long distances.⁶⁰

This is seen by Scott as an argument in favour of looking at Zomia as a coherent social space. However, compared to relatively easily travelled oceans and seas, the Massif has not been so easily negotiable as a geographical space.⁶¹

States, borders, and agency in Zomia

Despite Scott's thesis that until about a century ago Zomia constituted a non-state space, an array of small states have in fact mushroomed there, such as the Tai-speaking *muang* of Sip Song Phan Na in Yunnan, Sip Song Chau Tai in Vietnam, Lan Xang in Laos, the Shan States

58 Schneiderman 'Are the Central Himalayas'; Giersch, 'Across Zomia'.

59 Giersch, 'Across Zomia'; Fiskesjö, 'Mining'; Lim, *Territorial power domains*; Wijeyewardene, *Ethnic groups*; Andrew Walker, *The legend of the golden boat: regulation, trade and traders in the borderlands of Laos, Thailand, China and Burma*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1999.

60 Scott, *Art*, pp. 48–9.

61 See Giersch, 'Across Zomia'.

in Burma,⁶² and the well established 'feudal' regimes of Nan Chao, and the Yi, the Dong, and the Bai in Yunnan and Guizhou. In fact, the Massif was not characterized by the lack of states; instead, it was home to a plethora of small, loosely connected states, at various stages of formalization. They subjugated egalitarian groups in their orbit, but never united, and were never totally integrated into surrounding polities. As Patterson Giersch and Magnus Fiskesjö explain in this issue, risky but operational caravan trade routes contributed to keeping these political entities economically connected, while remaining physically separated.

Before European influence took root in Southeast Asia, a *mandala* model of state administration was dominant. The outskirts of the fiefdoms and empires' cores were conceived as buffer zones, inhabited by less- or non-civilized people, with whom tributary relations generally sufficed to ensure the core's political security and stability.⁶³ In contrast, the current, widely accepted division of the large cultural continental sub-areas into South, East, Central (Inner), and Southeast Asia, is based chiefly on the European and Chinese notions of nation-state and linear borders.

Later, this crystallized into the dominant subdivisions of Asian studies within such academic entities as the American Association for Asian Studies, where panels and papers have to be located in one given sub-area. The rare non-specific panels straddling two or more sub-regions have been bundled together in a recently established 'border-crossing' section, reflecting a belated though welcome interest in trans-regional analysis.⁶⁴ Coherent with such a vision, and in a way as a consequence of it, most political scientists more or less consciously infer that, because minority policies are country based, minority issues ought to be studied in country-specific contexts. Christopher Duncan's edited volume, *Civilizing the margins* (2004)⁶⁵ – albeit important in its own right – provides an example of this position, with each country being allocated one chapter with a roughly equal share of pages. No room is allowed for neighbouring segments of China or India, or for trans-border analyses.

However, the category of 'minority' and its corollaries – remoteness and marginality – only makes sense from a lowland perspective. It works when referring to one or several national cores that produce authoritative knowledge about such peripheries, from the occasional depictions in ancient annals to recent studies of the exotic other – or antique self – within.⁶⁶ Studying highland social groups within the restrictive frame of one given

62 Condominas, 'Essai'; J. Rispaud, 'Les noms à éléments numériques des principautés tai', *Journal of the Siam Society*, 29, 2, 1937, pp. 77–122.

63 O. W. Wolters, *History, Culture and Region in Southeast Asian perspectives*, revised edn, Ithaca, NY, and Singapore: Cornell Southeast Asia Programme and Institute for Southeast Asian Studies, 1999; Thonchai Winichakul, *Siam mapped: a history of the geo-body of a nation*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994; Michel Bruneau, 'Évolution des étagements ethnopolitiques dans les montagnes sino-indochinoises', *Hérodote*, 10, 4, 2002, pp. 89–117.

64 AAS website, <http://www.aasianst.org/> (consulted February 2010).

65 Christopher R. Duncan, ed., *Civilizing the margins: Southeast Asian government policies for the development of minorities*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004.

66 For instance Ma Touan Lin, *Ethnographie des peuples étrangers à la Chine: ouvrage composé au XIIIe siècle ... traduit ... du chinois avec un commentaire perpétuel par le Marquis d'Hervey de Saint-Denys*, Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1883; Zhang Tan, 'Zhai men' qian di shi men kan: Jidu jiao wen hua yu Chuan Dian Qian bian Miao zu she hui (*The stone threshold in front of the 'narrow door': Christian culture and Miao people's society of the border regions of Sichuan, Yunnan and Guizhou provinces*), Kunming: Yunnan jiao yu chu ban she Yunnan sheng Xin hua shu dian jing xiao, 1992.

nation-state moves them from coherent cultural entities to binaries of majority–minority, modern–ancient, civilized–barbarian. Pre-set labels are applied uncritically, such as ‘national minorities’ and ‘minority nationalities’. Scores of country-based studies produced throughout the Massif and Zomia for over a century, in an array of disciplines, provide telling examples of how national factors curb, and sometimes erase, dimensions that otherwise concern an entire trans-border society. The same applies elsewhere: one can think of the Kurds, the Gypsies, the Inuit, the Nuer, the !Kung, the Dayak, and many others. Borders, by their very political nature, artificially break up the historical social and cultural fabric of trans-border subjects and reduce the validity of country-based findings to what applies to a splinter group, with the larger entity often disappearing beyond the nation’s borders.⁶⁷

Without denying in any way the importance of the national context and its implications, social anthropologists argue that ethnic groups divided by international borders should also be studied in their cultural integrity in a transnational way, and not solely as part of one nation-state. Scholarly consideration of Zomia and the Massif as a transnational social space helps do just that. In this issue, Sarah Turner shows how some Hmong make good use of family and trading networks across the Sino-Vietnamese border, while Magnus Fiskesjö (and to a degree Bernard Formoso) discusses how the Wa take advantage of the Burma–China frontier.⁶⁸ On a larger scale, trans-border studies contribute to raising the international level of awareness about a more than significant portion of the world population that otherwise has consistently ended up, throughout history, being misrepresented and thus disempowered.

In this regard, Scott’s book contributes a great deal to reappraising that history, and to assigning agency to highland dwellers. Using a bird’s-eye view familiar to political scientists, Scott draws a chart of human settlements and political relationships over (his definition of) Zomia. His thesis is:

Zomia is the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not yet been fully incorporated into nation-states. Its days are numbered. Not so very long ago, however, such self-governing peoples were the great majority of humankind. Today, they are seen from the valley kingdoms as ‘our living ancestors,’ ‘what we were like before we discovered wet-rice cultivation, Buddhism, and civilization.’ On the contrary, I argue that hill peoples are best understood as runaway, fugitive, maroon communities who have, over the course of two millennia, been fleeing the oppressions of state-making projects in the valleys – slavery, conscription, taxes, corvée labor, epidemics, and warfare. Most of the areas in which they reside may be aptly called shatter zones or zones of refuge.⁶⁹

67 Thailand, in this regard, is exemplary, with hundreds of monographs having been produced from the 1960s to the 1990s on ‘the Hmong’, ‘the Karen’, or ‘the Akha’, while the number of representatives of each group there amounts in each case to a few per cent of the whole. See, for example, Gordon Young, *The hill tribes of northern Thailand*, Bangkok: The Siam Society, 1962; Inga Lill Hansson, *A folktale of Akha in northern Thailand*, Copenhagen: University of Copenhagen, 1984; Paul E. Durrenberger, ‘Misfortune and therapy among the Lisu of northern Thailand’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 52, 4, 1979, pp. 204–10; Robert G. Cooper, ‘Sexual inequality among the Hmong’, in John McKinnon and Wanat Bhruksasri, eds., *Highlanders of Thailand*, Kuala Lumpur and New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.

68 For similar case studies in Zomia/the Massif, see also Michaud, *Turbulent times*; Jean Michaud and Tim Forsyth, eds., *Moving mountains: highland livelihoods and ethnicity in China, Vietnam and Laos*, Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2010.

69 Scott, *Art*, p. ix.

While this bold thesis had not yet been proposed in such a thorough, forceful, and documented way, ideas compatible with Scott's point have been debated before. More often than not, it has been anthropologists who have started the debates, thanks to investigations on the ground with actors displaying such avoidance strategies. Working among various groups in the northern Amazon basin in the 1960s, the French anthropologist Pierre Clastres published in 1974 a short polemical essay entitled *La société contre l'état* (Society against the state).⁷⁰ His argument was that the absence of a complex stratified social organization among many so-called primitive societies in the pre-Columbian Americas did not mean that they had not 'yet' discovered social stratification. Instead, Clastres surmised that these societies had developed through time a capacity to keep it at bay and refuse its promises. To him, so-called primitive societies were built to avoid the emergence of the state among them. At the time, Clastres' thesis triggered ferocious debates in France. Most forcefully, he was accused of romanticizing the 'noble savage' in his splendid resistance against the evils of modernity, a critique that some may feel compelled to extend to Scott.

Scott acknowledges his debt to Pierre Clastres 'whose daring interpretation of state-evading and state-preventing native peoples in post-Conquest South America ... has come, in the wake of subsequent evidence, to seem clairvoyant'.⁷¹ He also salutes Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán's seminal analysis of what the Mexican anthropologist termed 'regions of refuge'.⁷² And he cites others who explored situations around the globe where subjugated societies seemed to have wanted to isolate themselves, ignoring or rejecting the state. Ernest Gellner recognized such patterns in the Maghreb, where he assessed that Animist Berbers preferred to remain nomadic in order to keep their distance from settled Muslim Arabs and the latter's overriding civilizational push.⁷³ Schwartz and Solomon documented attempts by Catholic missionaries in Brazil, at the time of the European conquest, to sedentarize and convert native Indian populations, an initiative that triggered an ancient pattern of withdrawal among the Jivaro and the Zaparo, reflecting older forms of resistance to Inca imperialism.⁷⁴ Interestingly in this latter case, when compared with the situation in Zomia, the dominant Inca society lived in the highlands, while the peripheral groups were relegated to the low, tropical, and disease-infested rainforest areas. This underlines the point that one must avoid assigning too much primordial potency to altitude as a societal marker.

Scott also notes that Richard White has shown how, further north and a century later, an array of Amerindian groups used the Great Lakes as a refuge to keep English and French colonists at bay.⁷⁵ In Europe, Scott points to Gypsies (Roma) on the run from various states,

70 Pierre Clastres, *La société contre l'état*, Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1974 (trans. by Robert Hurley as *Society against the state: essays in political anthropology*, New York: Zone, 1987).

71 Scott, *Art*, p. xiii.

72 Gonzalo Aguirre Beltrán, *Regions of refuge*, Washington, DC: Society for Applied Anthropology (Mon. Ser. No. 12), 1979.

73 Ernest Gellner, *Saints of the atlas*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1969.

74 Stuart Schwartz and Frank Solomon, 'New Peoples and new kinds of people: adaptation, adjustment, and ethnogenesis in South American indigenous societies (colonial era)', in Stuart Schwartz and Frank Solomon, eds., *The Cambridge history of native peoples of the Americas*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 443–501.

75 Richard White, *The middle ground: Indians, empires, and republics in the Great Lakes region, 1650–1815*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

galley slaves, and runaway Russian serfs fleeing to the Cossack frontier in the fifteenth century. In Asia, he uses Owen Lattimore's study (1962) of south-west China's small societies running up the mountains to evade Han assimilation; Robert Hefner's work (1985) on the highlands of Java, where the Hindu Tenggeri sheltered themselves from the powerful Muslim states controlling the island; and Keesing's conclusions (1976) about the Ifugao of the Northern Cordillera area of Luzon in the Philippines. Scott also makes great use of Edmund Leach's influential analysis (1954) of highland Burma, where Kachin egalitarian social organization could oscillate, according to circumstances and strategic objectives, between their kinship-based form of local power and the more centralized political organization of their feudal neighbours, the Shan.⁷⁶ To this already convincing list, one could add Patterson Giersch's detailed study of how Qing China gradually took political control over Sip Song Phan Na (today's Xishuangbanna) in Yunnan. Or, again, there are Bernard Sellato and Jérôme Rousseau's rich studies of highland Borneo, an area very comparable to Zomia, in which both observed that Punan nomads kept their distance from Dayak farmers, precisely to avoid being subjected to them. Similarly, Alain Testart states that the mobility of enclaved hunter-gatherer societies all over the world reflects their desire to distance themselves from the domination of peasants surrounding them.⁷⁷

A fertile element of Scott's analysis pertains to what he calls the 'friction of terrain'.⁷⁸ For him, this notion is part of the explanation of why small societies in Zomia elected remote highlands as refuge. A difficult and poorly accessible terrain provided a degree of safety, and landscape could also be socially engineered to amplify friction. Conversely, for the enterprising state wishing to reach and control such populations, the friction of terrain can be reduced by an array of 'distance-demolishing technologies': 'bridges, all-weather roads, forest-felling, accurate maps, and the telegraph. The advanced techniques of defoliation, helicopters, airplanes, and modern satellite photography further diminish that friction. Friction is thus not simply "there" in some mechanical way; it is constantly being sculpted for one purpose or another.' Logically, Scott observes that, for those wishing to maximize the friction of terrain as a strategy to counteract the state's controlling actions, 'a host of countervailing strategies are available: destroying bridges, ambushing or booby-trapping passes and defiles, felling trees along roads, cutting telephone and telegraph wires,

76 Owen Lattimore, 'The frontier in history', in *Studies in frontier history: collected papers, 1928–58*, London: Oxford University Press, 1962; Robert W. Hefner, *Hindu Javanese: Tengger tradition and Islam*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985; Felix M. Keesing, *The ethnohistory of northern Luzon*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1976; Edmund Leach, *The political systems of highland Burma: a study of Kachin social structure*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1954. On Leach, see also Jonathan Friedman, *System, structure and contradiction in the evolution of 'Asiatic' social formations*, Walnut Creek, CA: Altamira-Sage, 1998; and Mandy Sadan and François Robinne, eds., *Social dynamics in the highlands of South East Asia: reconsidering Political systems of highland Burma by E. R. Leach*, Leiden: Brill, 2007.

77 Giersch, *Asian borderlands*; Bernard Sellato, *Nomads of the Borneo rainforest; the economics, politics, and ideology of settling down*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1994; Jérôme Rousseau, *Central Borneo: ethnic identity and social life in a stratified society*. Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990; Alain Testart, *Le communisme primitif, vol. 1: économie et idéologie*, Paris, Editions de la Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, 1985.

78 Scott, *Art*, ch. 2.

and so forth. A great part of the literature on guerrilla warfare (that part that is not about techniques for gaining intelligence) is about efforts to manage the landscape to one's advantage.⁷⁹

Thus, the inhabitants of Zomia are not just passive subjects but can also perform as agents. As Nicholas Tapp recently stated in his review of *The art of not being governed*,

Scott is concerned to lend agency to those who have been thought to be without it, to see conscious political choices and strategising in the historical practice of swidden agriculture, segmentary kinship structures, and oral traditions. . . . This is a strikingly different picture from the generally accepted [one] of these people as reluctant, hapless victims of state agency, losers in history, robbed of productive lands, or fossilised relics of some pre-historic past.⁸⁰

What James Scott is trying to tell us about these 'barbarians by design'⁸¹ is that they receive outside prescriptions, try to indigenize them as best they can with regard to their particular circumstances, and craft tailored responses in creative, culture-specific ways that may not be easily decipherable by outside observers.

Conclusion: Zomia and beyond

It was agreed to call this special issue 'Zomia and beyond' for several reasons. We chose to use the name Zomia because, in spite of its lack of precision and contested definitions, the very term appears capable of generating debate. Moreover, it has the invaluable quality of attracting international attention for an amalgam of distinct societies and little-researched histories that richly deserve to be better known. We used 'beyond' because it highlights the fact that every author in this issue has agreed to test the Zomia proposal against reality, through grounded research in locations and during time periods on which each has expertise. This test is done in a specialist history journal, although authors come from a range of disciplines, contributing to weighing up the relevance of the Zomia scheme beyond any specific intellectual coterie. All the authors involved in this exercise share a degree of reservation towards the Zomia idea, conceived and expressed here in ways that were probably not foreseen by its creator(s). The results push the intellectual boundaries of scholarship on this notion, as well as on the peoples that it is meant to encompass.

One question arising from this collection has yet to be addressed: who exactly needs a notion such as Zomia? I surmise that it is probably not the nation-states sharing these highlands. If a variety of vernacular terms in national languages in each of the countries sharing Zomia does exist to designate the highlands within national borders, to the best of my knowledge none of these countries has produced a functional term to talk about the uplands beyond their own borders.

We can also suppose that notions such as Zomia, the Southeast Asian Massif, the Himalayan Massif, or *Haute-Asie*, have never been needed by the subjects themselves. Up in the

79 Ibid., p. 166.

80 Nicholas Tapp, 'Review of James C. Scott's "The art of not being governed"', *ASEASUK News*, 47, 2010.

81 Scott, *Art*, p. 8.

mountains, hundreds of vernacular languages have terms labelling the local habitat, sometimes referring explicitly to a specific element of topography. But I suspect that such an overarching notion as Zomia has never been proposed locally by any of the societies dwelling there customarily. Most specialists of one or another of these highland groups can confirm that that scale of things simply does not make sense, either practical or symbolic, for highlanders.

Characteristically, social anthropologists (but also linguists and indeed 'incidental' ethnographers⁸² such as the missionary Aloys Schotter) will have specialized on one particular highland group, not several, and often within the limits of one country. Hundreds of dissertations and monographs on the Lisu, the Naga, the Bhutia, the Yao, the Mnong, the Dai, the Hani, the Dong, the Buyi, and many more prove this trend.⁸³ I also suspect that many of these locally rooted scholars would be of the opinion that the general notion of Zomia is defined on an overly macroscopic scale, rather than constituting an operational object in their disciplines.

While neither the highlanders themselves, nor their national rulers, nor academic specialists are likely to require a notion such as Zomia, it will appeal to international organizations and academics who want to articulate their thoughts on 'High Asia' and its peoples at a macroscopic level, for institutional, intellectual, research, or teaching purposes. Other transnational labels have recently appeared in this way, such as Circumpolar Studies, for indigenous societies around the Arctic Circle.⁸⁴ Amazonian Studies, referring to a similar venture on the forested transnational margins of central South America, are also established. These underline a need for a macroscopic vision of large portions of humanity spreading over vast territories, but also of a desire to transcend political borders and disciplinary boundaries, in order to assess the current and future state of local societies differently.

In Asia in the long term, the relevance for history and for the social sciences in general of the notion of Zomia and similar terms is open to speculation. Despite its current appeal, it could prove to be short-lived. An increasing density of road and rail networks crossing these uplands, a near complete coverage by technologies of communication (television, mobile phone, internet), massive internal migrations, and the gradual opening up of borders to trade and tourism may soon erase the 'friction of terrain'. This would fuse these populations into wider Asia and, in time, into a globalized world.

Multitudes of highland people have left the rural settings where their ancestors tilled the land, and now reside in lowlands and urban areas in and all around Zomia. The range this movement covers is impressive. Karen and Lahu farmers have become peri-urban unskilled labours in Bangkok. Tay, Thai, and Nung men and women represent their constituencies in the People's Assembly in Hanoi. Sherpa operate tourist businesses in cities in northern India. Educated Naxi, Bai, and Yi work as civil servants in Kunming or Chengdu. Yao, Dong, and Buyi academics teach in Guiyang. Zhuang computer programmers promote their skills in Nanning and Hong Kong. Miao men are busy in the taxi industry in Shanghai. Ethnic pop stars occasionally top the charts in various parts of Zomia.

82 Michaud, *'Incidental' ethnographers*, p. 67.

83 Jean Michaud, 'Bibliography', in *Historical dictionary*, pp. 273–355.

84 See the map by the Makivik Cartographic Services, 2000, Canada, <http://www.makivik.org/en/media-centre/nunavik-maps> (consulted 1 April 2010). The University of the Arctic now offers an undergraduate degree in Circumpolar Studies.

In the opposite direction, each of the countries sharing Zomia has promoted, or is still promoting, a relocation policy for lowland dwellers to pursue their economic dreams in the highlands, where demographic pressure on the land is below national averages. This ranges from the New Economic Zones scheme in Vietnam in the 1960s, to the Go West scheme in south-west China in recent years. A typical highland town has thus evolved over the last hundred years or so, from being a mainly indigenous entity to becoming the seat of vast cultural hybridization. Indigenous highland societies in Zomia may sooner or later be integrated or overtaken by populations with outside origins, making this distinct social space less relevant. The Chinese provinces of Tibet and Xinjiang offer telling examples of this trend.

However, contemporary connections may just as well refashion Zomia once again, rather than efface it.⁸⁵ Tourists demand difference, not sameness. The majority of upland populations still live and work in the countryside and are much less directly touched by migration from the lowlands, be it of people, technologies, or ideas. As a consequence, highland zones are still largely ethnically distinct from the lowlands, and diverse ethnicities will persist in the region for many years to come. Whether flight, refuge, and resistance to assimilation will still be high on the agenda remains to be seen. Faced with this modernization dilemma, James C. Scott thought it prudent to specify, in *The art of not being governed*, that his reading of the situation could only be considered valid until roughly the first half of the twentieth century. Yet, his own earlier works on ‘infrapolitics’ and everyday resistance strongly suggest that this modernization process might also proceed less effectively than its proponents forecast.⁸⁶

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85 See Formoso, ‘Zomian or zombies?’

86 James C. Scott, *Weapons of the weak: everyday forms of peasant resistance*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1985; idem, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*, New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1990. See also Benedict J. Tria Kerkvliet, ‘Everyday politics in peasant societies (and ours)’, *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 36, 1, 2009, pp. 227–43.