

Zomia and beyond¹

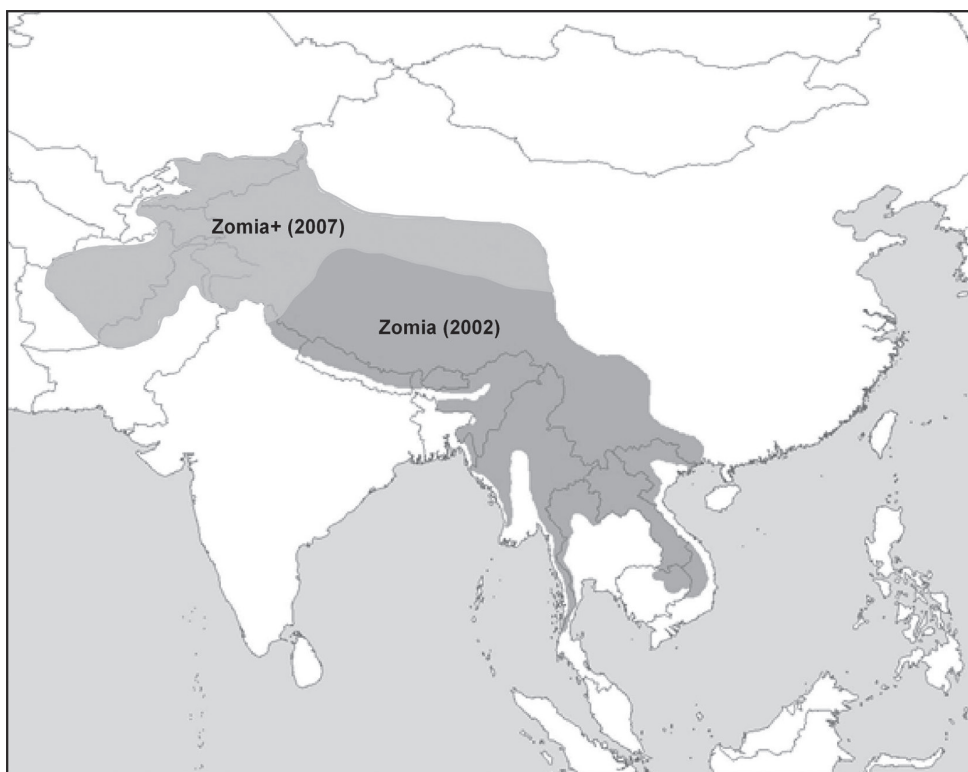
Jean Michaud

Introduction

What is 'Zomia'? A brief explanation helps locate the object of this chapter. This exotic sounding name was coined in 2002 by Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel. 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 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 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 further extend Zomia westward and northward, including southern Qinghai and Xinjiang within China, as well as a fair portion of Central Asia, encompassing highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan.² In this way, van Schendel 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 Map 5.1.

Testing Zomia from the perspective of the Southeast Asian Massif

This chapter 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 countercurrent quality to 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 political scientist James C. Scott, which focuses on the eastern part of van Schendel's Zomia (Scott 2009). Further west, scholars of the Himalayas saw relevance in this large



Map 5.1 Van Schendel's original Zomia (2002) and its extension North and West (2007), which I call here Zomia+ (Michaud 2010: 188)³

scale corroboration. Some 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 (Lim 1984; Wijeyewardene 1990; Evans et al. 2000). 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 disembed social science research on peripheral societies there from intellectually binding national settings (McKinnon and Michaud 2000).

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. 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. It can be argued that its interest as a large-scale space lies in part 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 in shapes such as those popularized by intercontinental notions such as the Silk Road. 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, due to caravan trails crossing them, and the provision of prized and rare items (Hill 1998; Clarence-Smith 2004). 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 (Michaud 2006: 149–150, 183–186).

Maize (*Zea mays* L.) was unknown to Asia before its introduction from America by the Iberians in the 16th century. It quickly became a popular crop in China's southwestern 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 much 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. Grounded 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 to produce homemade distilled alcohol, consumed in large quantities in the highlands and subject to a thriving trade.

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 been dwelling. 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. Due to the marketing of large quantities in China by Europeans and Indians, a high level of consumption emerged in the 19th century (McCoy et al. 1989; Chouvy 2009). This trend was significantly stimulated and skillfully maintained by the British East India Company. Early on, China's leaders became worried by the huge outflow of silver that the importation of thousands of tons of opium implied. 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 southwest, 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 (Bello 2005).

Many of these same producers in the southwest 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 (Descours-Gatin 1992; Le Failler 2001). 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 19th 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.

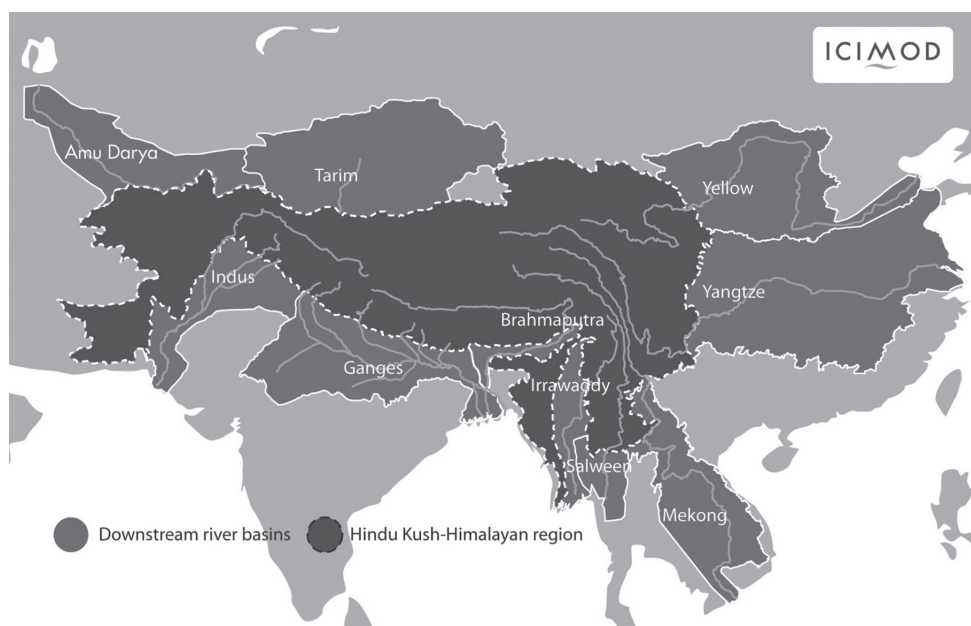
Then, into the second half of the 20th century, being in control of opium production and trade remained crucial for various belligerent groups, for whom it provided a means of financing their armed struggles. Even American forces during the Second Indochina War (1954–1975) were instrumental in the transportation, 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.

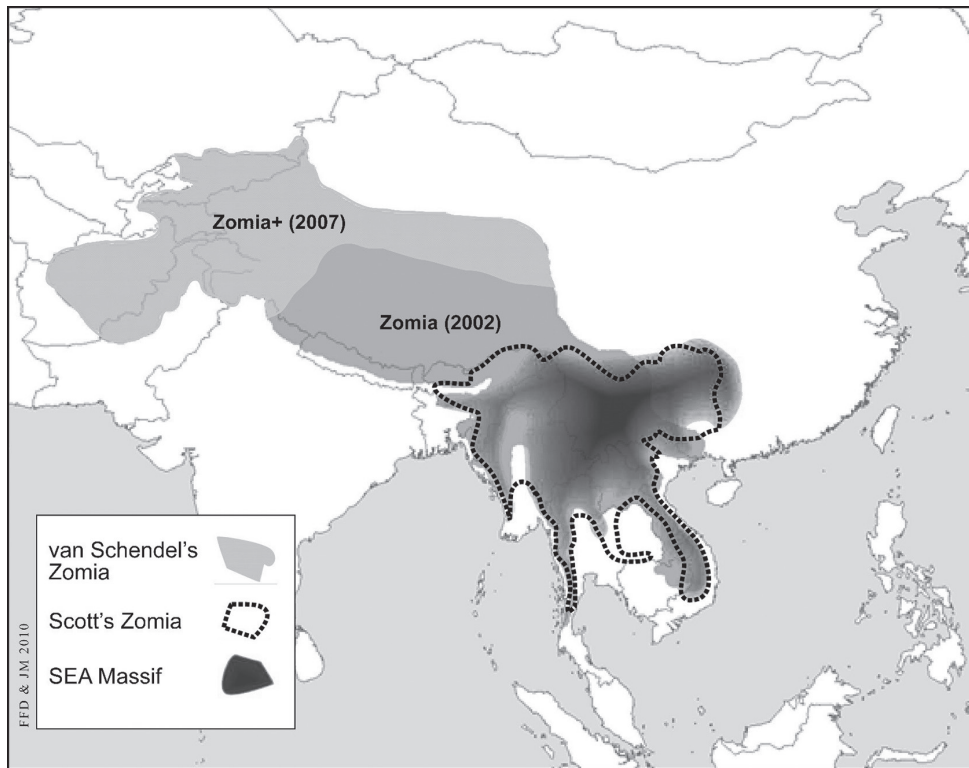
Naming and defining Zomia

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 in Map 5.2 here, 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 (van Schendel 2002: 655).⁴

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 with 'Zomian studies' to follow.



Map 5.2 The 'Hindu Kush-Himalayan' region (International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, Nepal)



Map 5.3 Over van Schendel's Zomia and Zomia+, are shown the Southeast Asian Massif (with abroad indication in darker shades of where the concentration of population is), and Scott's Zomia. Map by Jean Michaud 2017

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 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 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 James C. Scott's 2009 book, *The Art of not being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Scott explicitly refers to van Schendel's work and makes Zomia the locale for his analysis. However, one can immediately see from Map 5.3 that the area 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.

(Scott 2009: ix)

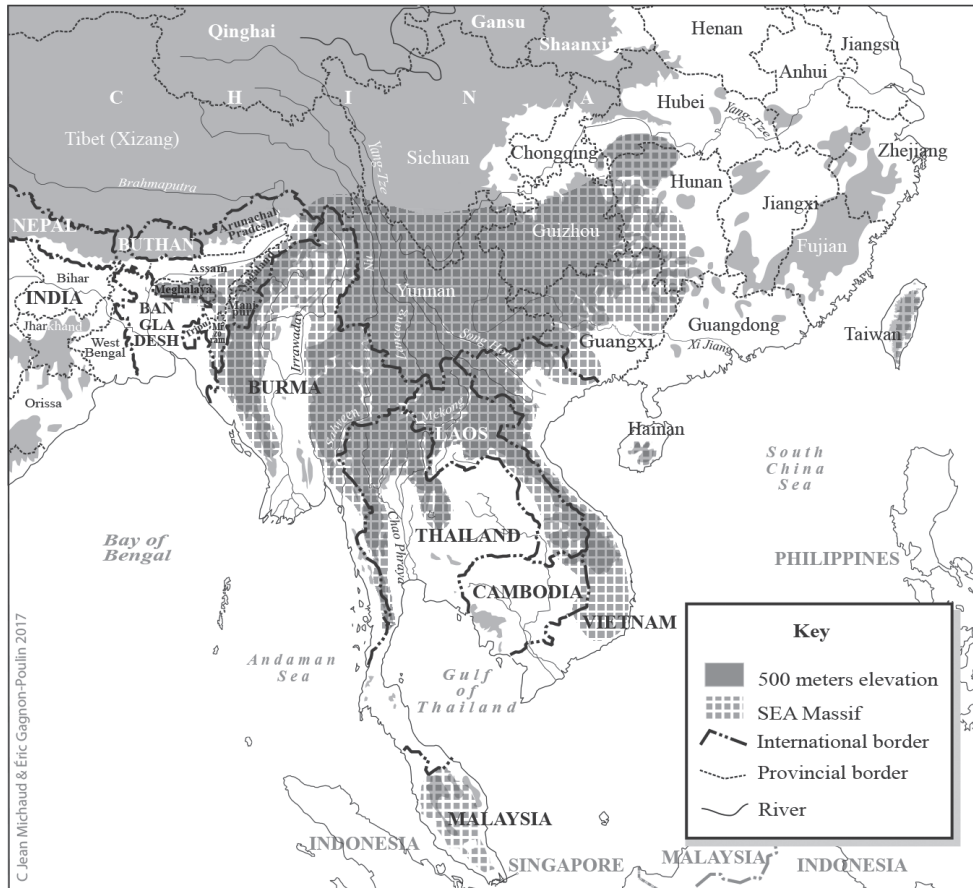
What Scott chooses to call Zomia does not match van Schendel's proposition, but as this quote points out, it fits what others call the Southeast Asian Massif, and this similarity deserves an explanation.

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. 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.

As shown on Map 5.3, 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 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 Gujjar of Kashmir, the Sherpa peasants on the Nepal-China border, the nomadic herders of Western Tibet, the Chin horticulturalists on the Burma-India 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 amongst 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. Based 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. 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 first edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* (Michaud 2006), I had to devise a workable definition of what I encompassed within the label 'Southeast Asian Massif' (Map 5.4). This name is derived from Lim Joo Jock's seminal *Territorial Power Domains, Southeast Asia, and China: The Geo-strategy of an Overarching Massif* (Lim 1984). 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* (Michaud 1997a, 1997b, 2000), neither myself nor other scholars had felt the need or obligation to actually define the region. To do so for the dictionary (Michaud 2006), 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 due to the extremely complex geomorphology of this large space, and to constant population movements.⁵ Broadly speaking, however, at their maximum extension,



Map 5.4 The Southeast Asian Massif. Map by Jean Michaud 2017

these highland groups are scattered over a domain mostly situated above an elevation of about three to 500 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 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 Tibeto-Burman speaking segments of Northeast India and southeastern 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 northeastern 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 over one 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, 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, or the Bahnar. Likewise on Taiwan where Austronesian highlanders can arguably be counted in too.⁶

Van Schendel's original 2002 definition of Zomia was close to that of the Southeast Asian Massif, bar his significant inclusion of the Xizang (Tibet) Autonomous Region plus adjacent portions in the provinces of Xinjiang, Qinghai, and Sichuan, as well as upland areas in Nepal, Bhutan, and India. 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. 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 only rarely developed into (Goldstein 1989). 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 societies on Tibet's periphery, such as the Khampa, 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 distinguishes highland societies may exceed what they have in common: a vast ecosystem, a state of marginality, and forms of subordination. The Massif is crossed by six 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 (Lombard-Salmon 1972; Jenks 1994; Herman 2007). The region has never been united politically, not as an empire, nor as a space shared among a few feuding kingdoms, not even as a zone with harmonized political systems. Forms of distinct customary political organizations, chiefly lineage based versus 'feudal,'⁷ 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, as well as 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 transborder and marginal societies.

Careful inquiries on the ground throughout the Massif 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' (Rambo 1997: 8). Yet, when observed from the necessary distance, which is precisely what van Schendel and Scott do and must be given credit for, that mosaic can become a distinctive and significant picture, even if an imprecise one at times.

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 in Burma (Rispaud 1937; Condominas 1976), or the well-established 'feudal' regimes of Dian and Nan Chao, and those of 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, weak, 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. 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 (Winichakul 1994; Wolters 1999; Bruneau 2002). 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 the 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 transregional analysis. 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: Southeast Asian Government Policies for the Development of Minorities* (Duncan 2004) – 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 transborder 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.⁸ Studying highland social groups within the restrictive frame of one given nation state moves them from coherent cultural entities to binaries of majority-minority, modern-ancient, and 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 transborder 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 transborder subjects and reduce the validity of country-based findings to what applies to a splinter group, with the larger entity disappearing beyond the nation's borders.⁹

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

(Michaud 2000; Michaud and Forsyth 2011). On a larger scale, transborder 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, James C. 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 relationship 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.

(Scott 2009: 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 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, French anthropologist Pierre Clastres published in 1974 a short polemical essay entitled *La société contre l'État* (society against the state) (Clastres 1974). His argument was that the absence of a complex stratified social organization amongst many so-called primitive societies in the pre-Columbian Americas did not mean they had not 'yet' discovered social stratification. Instead, Clastres surmised that these societies had developed through time a capacity to refuse its promises and keep it at bay. 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. Most forcefully, he was accused of romanticizing the Noble Savage in his splendid resistance against the evils of modernity, a critique that some 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' (Scott 2009: xiii). Scott also notes Owen Lattimore's study (1962) of southwest 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. He 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 (Sadan and Robinne 2007). To this already convincing list, one could add Patterson Giersch's detailed study (2006) of how Qing China gradually took political control over Sip Song Phan Na (today Xishuangbanna) in Yunnan. Or again, there are Bernard Sellato (1994) and Jérôme Rousseau's (1990) 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 (1985) states that the mobility of enclaved hunting-gathering societies all over the world reflects their desire to distance themselves from the domination of peasants surrounding them.

A fertile element of Scott's analysis pertains to what he calls the 'friction of terrain' (Scott 2009: chapter 2). For Scott, 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.

(Scott 2009: 166)

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, 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.

(Scott 2009: 166)

Thus, the inhabitants of Zomia are not just passive subjects, they can also perform as agents. As Nicholas Tapp 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.

(Tapp 2010: 12)

What James Scott is trying to tell us about these 'barbarians by design' (Scott 2009: 8) is that they receive outside prescriptions, try to indigenize them as best they can with regards 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

I call this chapter 'Zomia and Beyond' for several reasons. I 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. It has the invaluable quality of attracting international attention for an

amalgam of distinct societies and little researched histories which richly deserve to be better known. I used 'beyond' because it highlights the fact that many authors have now tested the Zomia proposal against reality, through grounded research in locations and during time periods each has expertise on. Such authors come from a range of disciplines, contributing to weighing up the relevance of the Zomia scheme beyond any specific intellectual coterie. Most share a degree of reservation towards the Zomia idea, conceived and expressed in ways that were probably not foreseen by its creator(s). The result pushes the intellectual boundaries of scholarship on this notion, as well as on the peoples that it is meant to encompass.

One question 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 do 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 High Asia, have never been needed by the subjects themselves. Up in the mountains, vernacular languages have hundreds of terms labelling the local habitat, sometimes referring explicitly to a specific element of topography. But I suspect 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' ethnographers (Michaud 2007: 67), 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 Zhuang, the Yao, the Mngong, the Dai, the Hani, the Dong, the Buyi, and many, many more prove this trend. I also suspect that most 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 like 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.¹⁰ 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. Conversely, 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. Naga 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.

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 southwest 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.

However, contemporary connections may just as well refashion Zomia once again, rather than efface it. 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 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 seamlessly than its proponents forecast (Scott 1985, 1990; see also Kerkvliet 2009).

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a version, shortened and lightly edited, to fit the needs of this collection, of the original article “Editorial. Zomia and Beyond” (Michaud 2010).
- 2 Personal communication, February 2008. To my knowledge van Schendel has not published this expansion to his original 2002 Zomia.
- 3 I drew this map based in part on van Schendel’s schematic map in his ‘Geographies of Knowing, Geographies of Ignorance,’ p. 653.
- 4 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.’ (Accessed online at: <http://www.icimod.org/>).
- 5 See for instance, on Borneo, Bernard Sellato, *Nomads of the Borneo Rainforest. The Economics, Politics, and Ideology of Settling Down* (1994). In the Indonesian context Tania Murray Li, ‘Marginality, power, and production: analyzing upland transformations (1999).
- 6 See the extended definition of the Southeast Asian Massif in the second edition of the *Historical Dictionary of the Peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif* (Michaud 2016).
- 7 See the Introduction in Michaud (2006).
- 8 For instance Ma Touan Lin, *Ethnographie des peuples étrangers à la Chine. XIIIe siècle, traduit du chinois et commenté par le Marquis d’Hervey de Saint-Denis* (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] (1992).
- 9 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 percent of the whole group. See for instance Gordon

- Young, *The Hill Tribes of Northern Thailand* (1962), Inga Lill Hansson, *A Folktale of Akha in Northern Thailand* (1984), Paul E. Durrenberger, *Misfortune and Therapy among the Lisu of Northern Thailand* (1979), Robert G. Cooper, *Sexual Inequality among the Hmong* (1983).
- 10 See the map by the Makivik Cartographic Services, 2000, Canada, at: <http://www.makivik.org/>. The University of the Arctic now offers an undergraduate degree in Circumpolar Studies.

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