

What's (written) history for?

On James C. Scott's *Zomia*, especially Chapter 6½

JEAN MICHAUD

The author is a professor at Université Laval. His email is Jean.Michaud@ant.ulaval.ca.

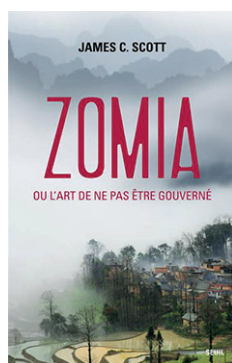
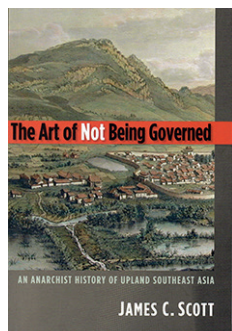


Fig. 1. Front cover of James C. Scott, 2009. The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009.

Fig. 2. Front cover of the French translation of James C. Scott's ZOMIA ou l'art de n'être pas gouverné. Paris: Seuil, 2013.

Fig. 3. Characteristic Zomian landscape with maize growing on dry terraces. Maguan County, Wenshan Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China, 2009.

Fig. 4. Van Schendel's Zomia (2002) and its 2007 extension, with Scott's Zomia (2009). By F. Fortin Deschênes and J. Michaud.



JEAN MICHAUD

Zomia. It sounds like a skin disease or some alarming bacteria.

As it turns out, Zomia is a recently named space in Asia. As referred to in this article, Zomia encompasses the highlands of northeast India, Burma (Myanmar), Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, Vietnam, and southwest China. Within these countries resides a combined population of over 100 million individuals officially registered as 'national minorities' by each respective government.

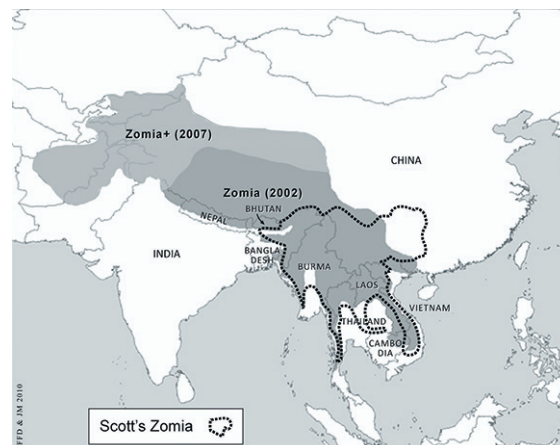
For anthropologists who might have spent the last few years on a solitary digging trip to North Korea or foraging for tasty ontologies in Amazonia, let me start by teasing apart the term Zomia a little more, before I weigh in further on the Zomia debate. For a small population of 80,000 individuals on the hilly borderlands where Burma, India, and Bangladesh hug each other, Zomi is an endonym. The Zomi, however, neither called their land Zomia nor labelled themselves Zomians. Academic creativity played a part in designing this fresh tag: Dutch social scientist Willem van Schendel coined the term Zomia in 2002, adding the final 'a' to shape a space out of an ethnonym.

In his initial analysis of highland Asia, van Schendel (2002: 647) aimed to 'explore how areas are imagined and how area knowledge is structured to construct area "heartlands" as well as area "border-lands"'. He denounced the 'geographies of ignorance' on the 'fringes of Southeast Asia' resulting from global conventions dividing the Asian continent into the fixed subregions of South, East, Central, and Southeast. This administrative but also symbolic partition, he proposed, was performed to the detriment of the populations living in the artificially divided highland fringes, turning ancient shared cultural grounds into national peripheries and ultimately 'an area of no concern' (2002: 651).

Seven years later, Yale political scientist James C. Scott (2009) published his book *The art of not being governed:*

An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia, focusing specifically on the part of high Asia extending south and eastwards from Tibet towards mainland Southeast Asia. Scott also called this Zomia. A degree of confusion thus developed as to what the name might cover exactly (Fig. 4).

Scott's thesis had a swift impact on scholarly debates regarding this high region – and beyond. Scott studies the five centuries or so when, he says, the upland populations of Asia were fleeing the lowland powers surrounding them, which he reads as a rejection of domination and a will to dodge 'being governed'. He also proposes that these 'runaways', or 'barbarians by design' (2009: 8), sought to ensure that the very notion of 'the state' along with inegalitarian social hierarchies did not emerge within. To Scott, these highlands became a major 'zone of refuge, a "shatter zone"' (ibid.: 143) where populations astutely practised forms of 'non-confiscatable' (ibid.: 196) 'escape agriculture' (ibid.: 187) based on root crops and swiddening, as well as practised nomadism. Encroached on by the increasing pace of states' territorial control, Scott



I express my thanks to James C. Scott, Sarah Turner, Pierre Petit, Gábor Vargyas, Marie-Andrée Couillard, Mathieu Poulin-Lamarre, Thomas Ketting and AT's anonymous reviewers.

1. There is no census available to account exactly for the population in Scott's Zomia. This figure refers to the 'Southeast Asian Massif' (Michaud 2016) which encompasses Zomia plus the highlands in a few more Chinese provinces as well as those in Taiwan, eastern Bangladesh, and Peninsular Malaysia.

2. Personal communication with van Schendel and Scott, 2009.

3. For instance, myths of lost or stolen scripts have been recorded among Zomian groups such as the Akha, Lahu, Wa, Karen, Khmu, Mien, Bru, and Chin.

4. I use the ethnonym Hmong for harmony with the international literature on this group. Lately, Mong ([H]Mong) has also become popular, and members of the group who took refuge in the United States, France, and Australia at the end of the Vietnam War have contributed to promoting the Romanized Popular Alphabet versions: Hmoob/Moob. Each Asian country in which Hmong live has its own way(s) of writing the ethnonym.

5. In 1953, Linwood Barney and William Smalley, both linked to the American Bible Society, with the assistance of French Catholic missionary Yves Bertrais, designed the Romanized Popular Alphabet, offering a clever and simple way to write the language with its eight tones compatible with standard English language typewriters and, later, keyboards and mobile phones.

6. For instance, at the Fourth Hmong Studies Consortium International Conference held in Chiang Mai in January of this year, a Hmong man escorted by two dozen disciples all dressed alike pronounced the birth of a new 'modern Hmong religion' called Kav Meej.

7. At the 2016 Hmong studies conference, two Hmong speakers on the same panel each proposed a 'new universal Hmong writing system'.

8. And by association, Claude Lévi-Strauss's oft-quoted anecdote on writing and authority among the Nambikwara in *Tristes tropiques* (1955: 352): 'L'écriture avait donc fait son apparition chez les Nambikwara; mais non point, comme on aurait pu l'imaginer, au terme d'un apprentissage laborieux. Son symbole avait été emprunté tandis que sa réalité demeurait étrangère. Et cela, en vue d'une fin sociologique plutôt qu'intellectuelle. Il ne s'agissait pas de connaître, de retenir ou de comprendre, mais d'accroître le prestige et l'autorité d'un individu – ou d'une fonction – aux dépens d'autrui'.

estimates that Zomia became in fact 'the last great enclosure' (ibid.: 4) the world has known, one where the 'friction of terrain' (ibid.: 40) was unrelentingly eroded by 'distance demolishing technologies' (ibid.: 11) such as infrastructure, administrative annexation, in-migration of lowlanders, connection to the national electrical grid, or satellite coverage.

Scott's stance has been criticized for its generalizations and methodological shortcuts. To start with, there is the naming confusion, though one can hardly blame Scott for falling for a tag as captivating as Zomia. The publisher of the French edition of Scott's book (Seuil, 2013) even titled it ZOMIA in 3-inch-tall red letters (and intriguingly, assigned a feminine gender to it). But more to the heart of the matter, anthropologists have blamed Scott for oversimplifying situations on the ground that are more intricate than his template suggests. Typically, their protests start with something like 'Yes, but in the case of *my* people', going on to stress distinctions, particularisms, and singularities that challenge the general model. Historians, in turn, have criticized Scott for his rather selective use of historical facts. Victor Lieberman (2010: 336) said that the book's 'evidential base is often too weak to support its theoretical superstructure'. One particularly sore point raised by many is that 'the state' had long sprouted in the heart of Zomia in the form of a variety of thriving endogenous feudal kingdoms, such as the Dian, Nanzhao, Dali, and Ahom kingdoms; the Yi, Dong and Zhuang feudal organizations; and the Sip Song Panna and Sip Song Chau Tai *muang*, to name just a few.

In 2006, in the first edition of my *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*, I presented the land and societies of precisely that same space (duly acknowledged by Scott, 2009: xv). With the publication of *The art*, I thus felt compelled to edit a special issue of the *Journal of Global History* (Michaud 2010) that drew anthropologists, geographers, linguists, archaeologists, and historians into a cross-disciplinary conversation on the region, pointing to both the strong points and faults in Scott's thesis. In the following years, more scholars tested it – indeed, according to Google Scholar, the book has been cited 1,700 times so far. For instance, J. Wouters (2012) and B.J. Karlsson (2013) applied Scott's thesis profitably to northeast India, J.P. Hayes (2014) underlined its validity in relation to the opium trade in the Sino-Tibetan borderlands of northern Sichuan, and Mandy Sadan (2013) supported it with her historical analysis of the Kachin in Burma.

Sarah Turner, Christine Bonnin, and I (2015) also saw the relevance of the 'keeping the state at a distance' proposition with regards to our work in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. Enthusiasts such as Sanford F. Schram (2012: 537) held the view that 'Scott's analysis of Zomia is not just good scholarship, it is scholarship that comes with a politics, and it offers potent political lessons even for the citizens of highly organized political systems today'. Detractors such as T. Brass (2012) called it 'a populist post-modern history of nowhere', while H. Jonsson (2010: 192) first saw Zomia as a 'concept-metaphor [meaning that] the term may invent the reality that it supposedly only describes', adding that 'the case for Zomia is in many ways a very educated white bourgeois US American theory regarding what happens across difference' (2014: 22).

To me, Scott's proposition remains intellectually engaging and insightful: flawed certainly, yet elegant and above all, relevant. As was the case with van Schendel's suggestion, it offers a dramatic change in scale that shows the ground from high above, revealing a picture rarely seen before. It is the fruition of years of pondering by a scholar unapologetically sympathetic to the plight of the outranked populations of Zomia and a testimony to their

political savvy. I could not agree more with Lieberman's (2010: 336) encapsulation of the book's merits: 'Scott's central achievement, then, is to bring hill peoples into the mainstream of regional history by uncovering their relation to lowland states and societies ... Scott has rescued hill peoples from assumptions of stasis, primitivism, essentialism, and isolation. He has given them voice, agency, and rationality'. James C. Scott has performed a geography of acknowledgement as it were, echoing in upland Asia the feat of his earlier works (1985, 1990) in which he reassessed subjugated peasants, slaves, and runaways as careful tacticians.

Chapter 6½

Harold Brookfield (2011: 489) declared that: 'James Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed* is likely to rival Leach's *Political Systems of Highland Burma* for the distinction of being the most influential title on history and society in the uplands of Southeast Asia'. Clearly, there is enough food for thought here to nurture a worthwhile anthropological debate. To avoid reiterating what has already been said however, I would like to propose a reading involving perhaps the most controversial chapter of Scott's and – in comparison with the rest of the book – the one mostly left aside by critics.

Scott acknowledges that the most fragile part of his book might be Chapter 6½, titled 'Orality, writing, and texts', a 17-page side trip he hesitated even to include (Scott 2009: 230). In this chapter, Scott starts from the premise that 'a diagnostic feature of the condition of barbarism is, for lowland elites, nonliteracy' (ibid.: 220). He adds: 'There is no place in any of the standard civilizational narratives for the loss or abandonment of literacy' (ibid.: 224).

But what if many peoples, on a long view, are not *preliterate*, but ... *postliterate*? What if, as a consequence of flight, of changes in social structure and subsistence routines, they left texts and writing behind? And what if, to raise the most radical possibility, there was an active or strategic dimension to this abandonment of the world of texts and literacy? (ibid.: 220, emphasis in original)

Here, Scott means to say that the absence of literacy among certain societies could result from a preference rather than a deficiency. True, the possibility that non-literate peoples may simply shun becoming literate holds a degree of plausibility that many anthropologists familiar with oral societies might recognize. But stating that people may consciously have abandoned literacy out of strategic thinking is a tougher sell, one that perhaps takes the stories and myths passed through generations in these highlands too literally.³ It is a bold thesis, possibly a chancy one, so leaving aside this latter part of his argument, let us focus on the former element: non-literacy as a preference.

Scott (2009: 235) muses: 'How much "history" does a people need or want?' especially when they have no claim at legitimizing a long genealogy or ensuring a historical grip on land and resources or imposing a precedence of rights over competitors. He sees tactical value in 'not having a [written] history' (ibid.: 234). Expanding laterally to other spheres of social life, Scott addresses the association between civilization and text and considers functional connections between the absence of text and political plasticity:

Thus oral traditions are to written traditions more or less what swidden agriculture is to irrigated wet-rice agriculture or what small, dispersed kin groups are to settled, concentrated societies. They are the 'jellyfish,' shapeshifting, pliable form of custom, history, and law. They permit a certain 'drift' in content and emphasis over time – a strategic and interested readjustment of, say, a group history in which certain events are now omitted and others given stronger emphasis, and still others 'remembered.' Should a group with a common background split into two or more subgroups, each of which finds itself

Fig. 5. First steps in the implementation of 'distance demolishing technologies': caravan track near Mengzi (Mong-Tzeu), southern Yunnan, China, c. 1900.

Fig. 6. Early forms of a feudal state in Zomia: a White Thai lord with his five wives, children, and retinue. Black River, northwest Tonkin (Vietnam), c. 1920.

Abadie, M. 1924. *Les races du Haut Tonkin de Phong Tho à Lang-Son*. Paris: Société d'éditions géographiques, maritimes et coloniales.

Blaser, M. 2004. Life projects: indigenous people's agency and development. In M. Blaser et al. (eds). *In the way of development: Indigenous peoples, life projects, and globalization*. Ottawa: Zed/IDRC, pp. 26-44.

Brass, T. 2012. Scott's Zomia: Or a populist post-modern history of nowhere. *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 42(1): 123-133.

Brookfield, H. 2011. Scott and others on history in the Southeast Asian uplands: A review essay. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 12(5): 489-494.

Clastres, P. (1974) 1977. *Society against the state*. Oxford: Mole Editions, Basil Blackwell

Duffy, J.M. 2007. *Writing from these roots: Literacy in a Hmong-American community*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press.

Enwall, J. (ed.) 1994. *Outstretched leaves on his bamboo staff: Studies in honour of Göran Malmqvist on his 70th birthday*. Stockholm: Association of Oriental Studies.

Hayes, J.P. 2014. *A change in worlds on the Sino-Tibetan borderlands: Politics, economics, and environments in northern Sichuan*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Jonsson, H. 2010. Above and beyond: Zomia and the ethnographic challenge of/for regional history. *History and Anthropology* 21(2): 191-212.

— 2014. *Slow anthropology: Negotiating difference with the Lu Mien*. Studies on Southeast Asia series, No. 64. Ithaca, NY: Southeast Asia Program Publications, Cornell University.

Karlsson, B.G. 2013. Evading the state: Ethnicity in northeast India through the lens of James Scott. *Asian Ethnology* 72(2): 321-331

Leach, E. 1954. *Political systems of Highland Burma: A study of Kachin social structure*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP.

Lévi-Strauss, C. 1955. *Tristes tropiques*. Paris: Plon.

in a materially different setting, one imagines that their oral histories will diverge accordingly. As the different oral traditions drift imperceptibly apart, there can be no reference point – which a shared written text would provide – by which to gauge how far and in what ways each tradition had diverged from the once common account. Because oral traditions survive only through retelling, they accumulate interpretations as they are transmitted. Each telling forcibly reflects current interests, current power relations, and current views of neighboring societies and kin groups. (ibid.: 230-31)

From this, Scott proceeds to his intended conclusion: that tactically speaking, 'relatively powerless hill peoples ... may well find it to their advantage to avoid written traditions and fixed texts, or even to abandon them altogether, in order to maximize their room for cultural maneuver' (ibid.: 235).

Hmong as Zomians?

Let's see. One of the several Asian upland societies Scott recruits to make his case are the Hmong.⁴ Claiming a degree of familiarity with this group, I will draw on it to test Scott's argument.

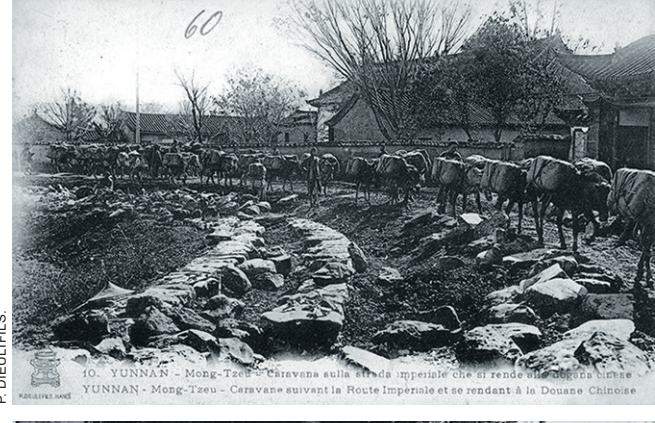
In a nutshell, the Hmong are an acephalous, lineage-based society numbering approximately 4.5 million in Asia, where they reside in six of the countries sharing Scott's Zomia. Their point of origin lies somewhere in southwest China, where 60 per cent still live, while migratory movements south into mainland Southeast Asia occurred over the last three centuries (now totalling 1.7 million), with a significant diasporic movement to the West after 1975 involving around 300,000 individuals.

Feeding into Scott's thesis, there are stories of a lost or stolen script in Hmong mythology (Enwall 1994: 45-58; Tapp 1989: 124-72, 2010: 96). However, no Hmong endogenous script has ever been noted by any Western witness since the beginning of observations of the group *in situ*, and no written document in any Asian archive has ever come up that could irrefutably be attributed to the group – though it is also conceivable that these might have been destroyed. Thus, the evidence is missing to prove a hypothesis of 'regression' from the literate to non-literate condition for the Hmong.

This absence of a script – be it their own or borrowed – has been so complete that upon encountering the Hmong at the turn of the 20th century, Christian missionaries such as François Savina (1916) and Samuel Pollard (1919) thought it imperative to devise ways to write the Hmong language(s). To summarize a complex situation, let us simply say that a baffling variety of scripts have been invented to write Hmong – 14 prior to 1990 according to Smalley et al. (1990: 149; see also Duffy 2007: Appendix 3) and growing – some Romanized, some ideographic, and some Pali/Brahmi-based. Barney and Smalley's Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA)⁵ is the most popular, having taken off in the West thanks to its early adoption by Christianized Hmong in Laos, where the vast majority of diasporic Hmong in the West come from.

The script travelled with them, and now thanks to CDs, DVDs, the internet and social media, it has come full circle to infuse literate Hmong society back in Asia. However, despite this success, RPA still remains alien to the majority of Hmong speakers in Zomia who are either illiterate or have been directed at school to write their language in the national script. To this day, though RPA tends to act as a bridge script, there is no standard version of written Hmong acknowledged by a majority of speakers, and the language is also short of both a single authoritative dictionary and grammar.

A century of linguistic efforts to rein in and rationalize Hmong language has been hampered by objective factors such as the existence of several sublanguages within the Hmong/Mong/Miao subfamily, with each of the occasional dictionaries and grammars addressing one, or at most two,



particular dialectal forms while ignoring the rest. This is a complex issue. Barbara Niederer (2004) shows that the proto-history of Hmongic languages is still in debate, the only certainty being that Hmong languages are to be paired with Yao (Mien) languages in a Miao-Yao (Hmong-Mien) language family.

On the ground meanwhile, there is an absence of a strong centralizing movement within the group handing power and decision-making leverage to a particular segment inside their society, an elite capable of enforcing the adoption of one such language and script. Diversity reigns from one country to the next – as well as between provinces, valleys, villages, and even within the walls of individual households – due to the constant blend caused by clanic exogamy.

So, does this disorder surrounding language and script standardization make the Hmong a Zomian society in Scott's sense?

Acephality and orality as core Zomian characteristics.

In Chapter 6½, James C. Scott (2009: 220) claims:

If swiddening and dispersal are subsistence strategies that impede appropriation; if social fragmentation and acephaly hinder state incorporation; then, by the same token, the absence of writing and texts provides a freedom of maneuver in history, genealogy, and legibility that frustrates state routines. If swiddening and egalitarian, mobile settlement represent elusive 'jellyfish' economic and social forms, orality may be seen as a similarly fugitive jellyfish variant of culture.

The idea that some societies, through time, waver in their will to adopt the manners of more socially stratified neighbours – including adopting literacy – is not new. Edmund Leach (1954), with his *gumsa-gumlao* oscillation, reasoned that the Kachin of Burma were doing something of the sort in the mid-20th century on a recurrent basis. Scott himself mentions Greek and Roman antiquity and Chinese imperial history as having yielded such cases in the course of wars of expansion and conquests. In Zomia, he surmises, there must have been cases of vanquished societies who saw wisdom in fleeing while '[I]eaving behind the lowland centres meant stripping down the complexity of social structure in the interest of mobility' (Scott 2009: 226).

Lieberman, V. 2010. Review article: A zone of refuge in Southeast Asia? Reconceptualizing interior spaces. *Journal of Global History* 5(2): 333-346.

Linwood, B.G. & W.A. Smalley 1953. *Third report on Meo (Miao): Orthography and grammar*. (Mimeo).

Merry, S.E. 2006. Transnational human rights and local activism: Mapping the middle. *American Anthropologist* 108(1): 38-51.

Michaud, J. 2006. *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press.

— 2010. Editorial: Zomia and beyond. *Journal of Global History* 5(2): 187-214.

— 2012. Hmong infrapolitics: A view from Vietnam. *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 35(11): 1853-1873.

— 2016. Seeing the forest for the trees: Scale, magnitude, and range in the Southeast Asian Massif. In J. Michaud et al. *Historical dictionary of the peoples of the Southeast Asian Massif*. (Second edition). Lanham, New York: Rowman & Littlefield.

Niederer, B. 2004. Pa-hng and the classification of the Hmong-Mien languages. In N. Tapp et al. (eds) *Hmong/Miao in Asia*, 129-146.

Chiang Mai: Silkworm.

Ortner, S.B. 2006. *Anthropology and social theory: Culture, power, and the acting subject*. Durham, NC: Duke UP.

Patriquin, L. 2011. Review of Scott's 'The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia'. *Socialist Studies/Études socialistes* 7(1/2): 333-335.

Pollard, S. 1919. *The story of the Miao*. London: Henry Hooks.

Rey, P. 1975. The lineage mode of production. *Critique of Anthropology* 3: 17-79.

Sadan, M. 2013. *Being and becoming Kachin: Histories beyond the state in the borderworlds of Burma*. Oxford: Oxford UP.

Sahlins, M. 1999. What is anthropological enlightenment? Some lessons of the twentieth century. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28: i-xxiii.

Savina, F.M. 1916. Dictionnaire miao-tseu-français, précédé d'un précis de grammaire miao-tseu et suivi d'un vocabulaire français-miao-tseu. *Bulletin de l'École française d'Extrême-Orient* 16(1): 1-246.

Schram, S.F. 2012. The artful study of not being governed: Better political science for a better world. *Common Knowledge* 18(2): 528-537.

Scott, J.C. 1976. *The moral economy of the peasant: Rebellion and subsistence in Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale UP.

— 1985. *Weapons of the weak: Everyday forms of peasant resistance*. New Haven: Yale UP.

To see this abandonment of forms of state-linked social organization and possibly writing as the result of a (conscious?) strategy of global refusal confers agency to the subjects of such oscillation. Leach himself suggested that the Kachin knew what they were doing in tangoing in this way with the Shan. But he did not suggest that they were altogether refusing the more complex ways of the Shan. The Kachin simply adopted them tactically – Sahlins (1999) would say they indigenized them and Merry (2006) that they vernacularized them.

Scott, in fact, describes a project to refuse state formation and stick, temporarily or for the long term, to a more egalitarian society, as being one of 'the manifest advantages of flexibility and adaptation that an oral tradition has over a written tradition' (Scott 2009: 226). He adds: 'Oral communication, even by "official" bards, is by definition limited to the size of the face-to-face audience assembled to hear it ... Oral culture exists and is sustained only through each unique performance at a particular time and place for an interested audience' (ibid.: 230).

Scott has a very good point: one consequence of the Hmong egalitarian social organization is that no one in particular speaks for the whole group (or subgroup, or clan, or lineage), and therefore anyone is entitled to speak publicly if they so wish. A striking outcome of this freedom can be seen on the internet today, with a plethora of websites set up by Hmong individuals (rarely groups), living chiefly in the USA, making authoritative yet often unscientific or contradictory pronouncements on a variety of topics including history, religion, culture, language, and script.⁶ The pitfall for outside observers would be to misunderstand Hmong power structure and believe such self-styled authority too readily, while in reality, the speakers know very well that they do not represent anyone but themselves.

In such circumstances, quite conveniently, the truth is pliable, adjustable, and never universal, while public rebuke by a hypothetical higher authority simply does not exist. Consensus is lacking even in something as fundamental as Hmong clan names (patronyms), with some clans also relishing in multiple names (Yang 2004).

When Scott writes: 'To refuse or to abandon writing and literacy is one *strategy* among many for remaining out of reach of the state' (2009: 229, emphasis added), the predicament of intentionality becomes salient. Is the current confusion of Hmong scripts and language(s) the result of intention or rather of broader sociohistorical processes? Is there, somewhere, nurtured by someone, a will to maintain this confusion? Non-literacy in anything else than the national language and script is still widespread among Hmong communities in Asia. And fascinatingly, Western-educated Hmong have now had 40 years or so to bring order to this disorder. But they have not. Divergent and unrepentant statements on language still proliferate within the overseas Hmong community, even regarding something as vital as a common script, and new experimental Hmong scripts are continually being designed from within the community (Ntawv Cher Ze, New Mong, Ntawv Neej Hmoob, Ntawv Paj Ntaub, Qauv Ntaub Qauv Ntawv).⁷

Might this stalemate merely be the result of an oversight? A lack of linguistic ability? A sense that RPA has already become the common script, as many Hmong of the diaspora would like to believe? Or might a lack of interest simply be symptomatic of something else – perhaps an intention? It is very tempting (but tangential) to bring into this discussion the notion of a powerful hidden transcript (Scott 1990).

Topography, or culture?

I suspect that one source of frustration for critics of the Zomia thesis has come from Scott's reliance on describing

the core features of Zomia from a physical stance (*a place* with boundaries, above 300 metres, hills and mountains, on the fringes, away from the core), with a shared history (subordination, marginality), in which people behaved uniformly (runaways fleeing the predation of the state). So many exceptions to this narrative have been brought up that Scott's main argument ends up looking severely wounded. I propose that a shift from topographic determinism to an analysis putting forward sociocultural differentiation might be beneficial; otherwise, one is left with serious reservations regarding the relevance of any physical approach to Zomia. Moreover, if state and non-state societies turn out to be equally endogenous in Zomia, what then is the added value of Scott's argument for understanding this region and its population?

In spite of such uncertainties, I believe that Scott's intuition remains germane when approached from a cultural angle, and that it can still make a solid case for a Zomia-type analysis. Marshall Sahlins spoke of the resistance of culture as opposed to a culture of resistance. He explained (1999: xvi): 'Involving the assimilation of the foreign in the logics of the familiar – a change in the contexts of the foreign forms or forces, which also changes their values – cultural subversion is in the nature of intercultural relations'. Indeed, the very cultural elements that best support Scott's argument come to the fore in Chapter 6½: that is, Zomians all share a form of social organization based on orality and egalitarianism. The objection mentioned above – that the Zomia space has also, over centuries, given birth to a number of endogenous states and feudal regimes – would not counter Scott's central claims nearly as powerfully if his thesis was framed around a cultural core instead of a geographical or a historical one.

From a cultural angle, Scott's idea of societies refusing to abandon exclusive orality for a civilization based on text suddenly acquires a more universal scope. Scott sensed this when, in Chapter 6½, he selected examples outside Zomia to sustain his point. Among these, Pierre Clastres' work⁸ stands out. In his short essay *Society against the state* ([1974] 1977), this French anthropologist remarked, like Scott, that archaic societies were nearly always catalogued negatively, under categories of 'lacking': *Stateless* societies, societies *without* literacy, societies *without* history. For Clastres, not only did 'primitive' societies not have a state, they were also classless in the Marxist sense of the term, which constituted his response to a contemporary undercurrent of French anthropology proposing a strict Marxian analysis of kinship-based social systems (Rey 1975; Terray 1972). In opposition to the dominant discourse which sees these societies as *deprived* of something – as *incomplete* – Clastres proposed that Amazonian societies had instead developed a cultural resistance to the very emergence of inequality – and unsurprisingly, then as now, this bold thesis was suspect of romanticizing the Noble Savage. Scott also knocked on that door in his conclusion (2009: 334):

Here it is worth recalling that most foragers and nomadic peoples – and perhaps swiddeners as well – were not aboriginal survivals but were rather adaptations created in the shadow of states. Just as Pierre Clastres supposed, the societies of many acephalous foragers and swiddeners are admirably designed to take advantage of agro-ecological niches in trading with nearby states yet manage to avoid subordination as subjects.

But for fear of accusations of social evolutionism or cultural determinism – while still exposed to determinism of a geographical sort – Scott hesitated, unlike Clastres, to take the next step that from an anthropological viewpoint makes so much sense: namely, to acknowledge that lineage societies throughout the world, whatever the geography and local history, and as long as they can afford to do so without imperilling their very existence, are not merely

Fig. 7. Religious resilience: Hmong shamanic ritual in preparation for the New Year in which a piglet is sacrificed and the paper altar is burned and renewed. Sa Pa District, Lao Cai Province, Vietnam, 2016.

Fig. 8. Resilience of the oral tradition: once a week, Hmong men gather at the periodic market in Meo Vac, Ha Giang Province, Vietnam, to share a drink, socialize face to face and exchange views on the latest news, 2016.

Fig. 9. In Zomia, the Yi are a rare case, having produced an indigenous script, originally pictographic and still partially in use today. Naxi Dongba Culture Museum, Lijiang City and Prefecture, Yunnan Province, China.

Fig. 10. Hmong Pahawh, one of several recent alternative alphabets, and one much less manageable for standard keyboards. <http://www.getlinkyoutube.com/watch?v=78pzLYS99Q>.

Fig. 11. Communist propaganda imagery intended for minority viewers. Lao Cai city, Vietnam, 2016.

— 1990. *Domination and the arts of resistance: Hidden transcripts*. New Haven: Yale UP.

— 1998. *Seeing like a state: How certain schemes to improve the human condition have failed*. New Haven: Yale UP.

— 2009. *The art of not being governed: An anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. New Haven: Yale UP.

Smalley, W.A. et al. 1990. *Mother of writing: The origin and development of a Hmong messianic script*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Tapp, N. 1989. *Sovereignty and rebellion: The White Hmong of northern Thailand*. London: Oxford UP.

— 2010. *The impossibility of self: An essay on the Hmong diaspora*. Münster: Lit Verlag.

Terray, E. 1972. *Marxism and primitive societies: Two studies*. New York: Monthly Review Press.

Turner, S. et al. 2015. *Frontier livelihoods: Hmong in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

Van Schendel, W. 2002. Geographies of knowing, geographies of ignorance: Southeast Asia from the fringes. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 20(6): 647-668.

Wouters, J.J.P. 2012. Keeping the hill tribes at bay: A critique from India's northeast of James C. Scott's paradigm of state evasion. *European Bulletin of Himalayan Research* 39: 41-65.

Yang, K.L. 2004. Problems in the interpretation of Hmong clan surnames. In N. Tapp et al. (2004).

victims of their own primitivism in the midst of a modernized world, but instead compose with it and make sure that what comes from the outside is duly synchronized with their own worldviews. As Wouters (2012: 60) put it: 'Scott's account of deliberate state evasion is in line with a widespread theoretical disposition in the anthropological literature on state and resistance'.

It appears that Scott might have confined himself unnecessarily to the case study he was working on, possibly for fear of being confronted for his overly macroscopic stance. Had Scott developed his Zomia proposition into a kinship-based societies argument, his conclusions would have been less embedded within one specific locale and less subjected to a confined historical framework. Instead, as if it were an afterthought when the book neared completion, Scott tried to disentangle himself from his prospective critics by claiming that his core hypotheses were no longer valid after World War II (ibid.: xiii). The state won, he claims; the friction of terrain has been reduced to shreds by relentless distance demolishing technologies, frontier societies are now being educated in national languages, and the world's last great enclosure has come to its predictable end. In a recent conversation (March 2016), he further proposed to me:

The biggest post-war shift throughout Southeast Asia and China, it seems to me, is 'engulfment' of the hills by moving land-hungry, demographically crowded, valley peoples, usually with state-help and capitalist financing for plantations, logging, mining – making 'hill peoples' a minority in the hills and at the frontiers. For the state this engulfment also amounts to substituting a presumptively 'loyal' population for a culturally/politically alien population and substituting a population that produces cash crops, foreign exchange, and taxes for a population which, from the state's perspective, is fiscally sterile.

This might very well be the case if we are thinking of Zomia as a place. But it becomes significantly less so if we look at it from a cultural perspective. Marginal peoples have always displeased the state and topography is only one dimension of that marginality; culture is a more fundamental element of division. My experience tells me that beyond a particular locale, it is still as difficult as ever to get verifiable historical information out of Hmong informants *anywhere*; the design of a common writing system is still impaired by individualism, linguistic fragmentation and irreducible plurinationality; and learning Hmong vernacular(s) is still an uphill battle for anyone looking at this culture from the outside.

As for who 'the Hmong' might be exactly, competing endogenous voices are constantly heard, none winning the day. Meanwhile, as former Hmong refugees in the USA become academics, politicians, doctors, and scientists, many are reaching back to the 95 per cent of their group who never left Asia, to empower them behind the state's back with information about themselves not tainted by immediate national interests – though clearly passing on the diaspora's political and religious subjectivities. What I mean to say here is that migrating beyond the locale of Zomia does not seem to have significantly altered the core of Hmong culture in the diaspora, and the subversive dimension of their *habitus* and agency appears to travel remarkably well. And this in itself is remarkable.

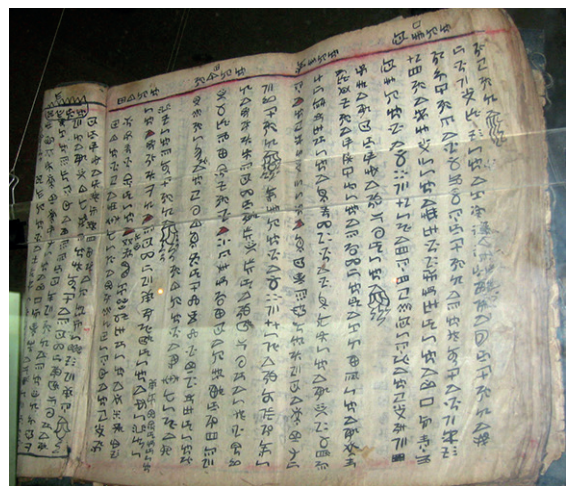
Larry Patriquin, in a review of Scott's *The art of not being governed*, declared that the book inspired him 'to investigate more deeply the *types of societies* examined by Scott' (2011: 335, emphasis added). It all makes sense. If Zomia is not so much a place as it is a stance, a state of mind, and a life project (Blaser 2004: 26; Ortnor 2006) travelling along as non-literate and kinship-based social organizations migrate, the particular place the subjects live in might turn out not to be that foundational after all. ●



JEAN MICHAUD



JEAN MICHAUD



JEAN MICHAUD



HONG VONG YOUNG EDUCATION CENTRE



JEAN MICHAUD