

Stilled to silence at 500 metres: making sense of historical change in Southeast Asia

The dialectical relationship between the nation state and zones of relative autonomy is not unique to mainland Southeast Asia, but it is of particular salience there, demarcating the social cleavage that shapes much of the region's history: that divide between hill people and valley people. It led to a process of state formation in valleys and peopling of hills, and left the latter largely absent from the historical record.

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Non-state spaces' are where the state has difficulty establishing its authority: mountains, swamps, mangrove coasts, deserts, and river deltas. Such places have often served as havens of refuge for people resisting or fleeing the state. Only the modern state possesses the resources to bring non-state spaces and people to heel; in Southeast Asia it represents the last great effort to integrate people, land and resources of the periphery and make them contributors to the gross national product. The state might dub it 'development', 'economic progress', 'literacy', 'social integration', but the real objective is to make the economic activity of peripheral societies taxable and assessable – to make it serve the state – by, for example, obliging nomads or swidden cultivators to settle in permanent villages, concentrating manpower and foodstuffs.

Thus the padi-state was an 'enclosure' of previously stateless peoples: irrigated rice agriculture on permanent fields helped create the state's strategic and military advantage. In fact, the permanent association of the state and sedentary agriculture is at the centre of this story (a story by no means confined to Southeast Asia, which this article targets). The vast 'barbarian' periphery became a vital resource: human captives formed a successful state's working capital. Avoiding the state used to be a real option. Today it is quickly vanishing.

Zomia: stateless highlanders

Southeast Asia's non-state spaces are much diminished, yet one of the world's largest is the vast Southeast Asian *massif*. Sprawling 2.5 million square kilometres across mainland Southeast Asia, China, India and Bangladesh, it is home to 80 million people,¹ hundreds of ethnic identities and at least five language families. It occupies altitudes of 200 to 4,000 metres and can be thought of as a Southeast Asian Switzerland, except that it is not a *nation*; it lies far from major population centres and is marginal in almost every respect. Willem van Schendel argues that these cumulative nation state 'shards' merit consideration as a distinctive region, calling it 'Zomia', a term for 'highlander' common to several Tibeto-Burman languages.² It seems an unlikely candidate for region status. Its complex ethnic and linguistic mosaic has presented a puzzle for ethnographers and historians, not to mention would-be rulers.

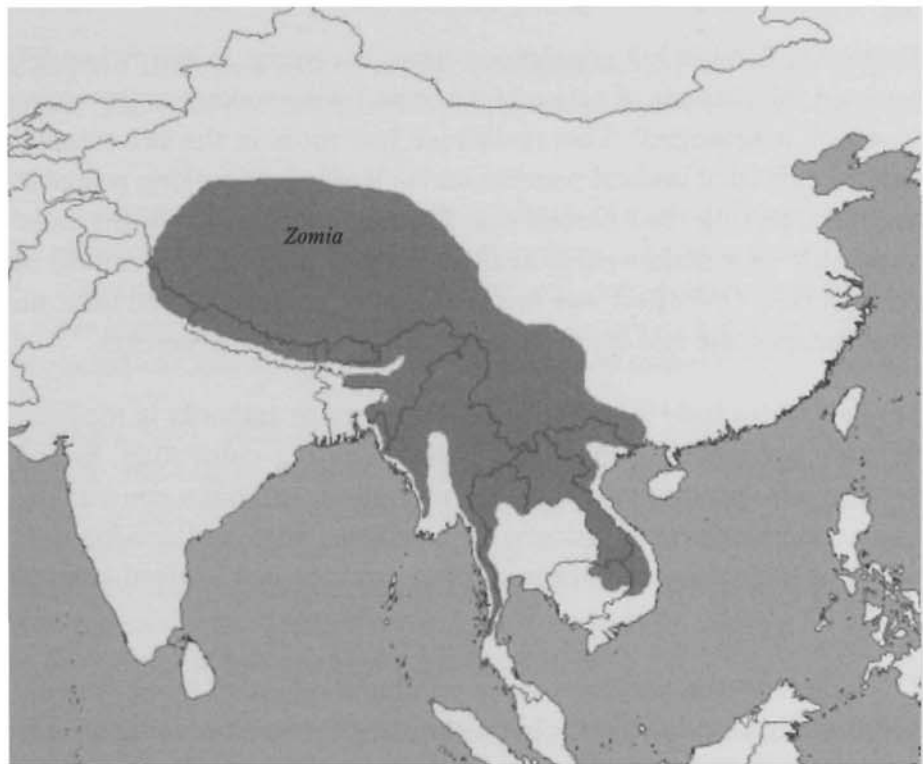
Yet it is impossible to provide a satisfactory account of the valley states without understanding the central role played by Zomia in their formation and collapse. This co-evolution of hill and valley as antagonistic but connected is essential to making sense of historical change in Southeast Asia.

Hill populations are far more dispersed and culturally diverse than valley populations, as if the terrain and isolation encourage a 'speciation' of languages, dialects and cultural practices. Forest resources and open, if steep, land allows more diverse subsistence practices than in the valleys, where wet rice mono-cropping often prevails. Swiddening (slash-and-burn agriculture), which requires more land, clearing new fields and shifting settlement sites, is far more common in the hills. Social structure is more flexible and egalitarian than in the hierarchical, codified valley societies. Hybrid identities, movement and social fluidity are common.

Early colonial officials were confused to encounter hill hamlets with several multi-lingual 'peoples' living side-by-side, and both individuals and groups whose ethnic identity had shifted, sometimes within a single generation. Territorial administrators were constantly frustrated by peoples who refused to stay put.

But one factor brought order to what seemed to the outsider an 'anarchy' of identity: altitude. As Edmond Leach suggested, looking at Zomia in terms of lateral slices through the topography elucidates a certain order.³ Many groups settled at a particular altitude range and exploit the agro-economic possibilities within that range. The Hmong settled at high altitudes (1,000-2,000 metres) and plant the maize, opium and millet that thrive there.

From overhead or on a map, groups appear randomly scattered because they occupy mountaintops and leave mid-slopes and valleys to others. Specialisation by altitude and niche led to this scattering, but travel, marriage alliances, similar subsistence patterns and cultural continuity fostered coherent identities across considerable distances. The Akha along the Yunnan-Thai border and the Hani in northern Vietnam are recognisably the same culture though separated by more



*Map courtesy of
Willem van Schendel*

than 1,000 kilometres, having more in common with each other than either has with valley people 50 kilometres away. Thus, Zomia coheres as a region not by political unity, which it utterly lacks, but by

comparable patterns of diverse hill agriculture, dispersal, mobility and egalitarianism.

What most distinguishes Zomia from bordering lowland regions is its relative *statelessness*. While state-making projects have abounded there, few have come to fruition. Hill peoples, unlike valley peoples, have neither paid taxes to monarchs nor tithes to a permanent religious establishment, constituting a relatively free, stateless population of foragers and farmers.

Zomia's location at nation state frontiers has contributed to its isolation and thus to its autonomy, inviting smuggling, contraband and opium production, and spawning 'small border powers' that maintain a tenuous quasi-independence.⁴

Resistance, refusal, refuge

Politically, Zomia's hill populations have, according to van Schendel, 'resisted the projects of nation-building and state-making of the states to which it belonged'. This resistance has roots in the pre-colonial cultural refusal of lowland patterns and in lowlanders seeking refuge in the hills. During the colonial era, Europeans underwrote the hills' autonomy as a makeweight against lowland majorities resentful of colonial rule. One effect was that hill peoples typically played little, no or an antagonistic role in anti-colonial independence movements.

Lowland states have therefore sought to exercise authority in the hills: military occupation, campaigns against shifting cultivation, forced settlements, promoting lowlander migration, religious conversion, space-conquering roads, bridges and telephone lines, and development schemes that project government administration and lowland cultural styles.

The hills, however, are also a space of cultural refusal. If it were merely a matter of political authority, hill society might resemble valley society culturally except for the former's terrain-imposed dispersed settlement. But hill populations don't generally resemble valley centres culturally, religiously or linguistically. Zomia's languages, while exceptionally diverse, are distinct from those of the plains. Hill people

tend to be animists who do not follow the 'great tradition' salvation religions of lowland peoples. When they do, however, it is likely either different from (e.g. Christianity) or a distinctly heterodox variant of lowland religions (e.g. Karen or Lahu millenarian Buddhism). The absence of large, permanent religious and political establishments makes for a flat, local sociological pyramid compared to valley society where status and wealth distinctions tend to be supra-local and enduring, while in the hills they are confined and unstable.

But something more fundamental is at work. Fernand Braudel cites an unbridgeable cultural gap between plains and mountains:

'The mountains are as a rule a world apart from civilizations which are an urban and lowland achievement. Their history is to have none, to remain always on the fringes of the great waves of civilization...which may spread over great distances in the horizontal plane but are powerless to move vertically when faced with an obstacle of several hundred metres'.⁵



*An Akha woman
Photo: Thorpi Hennar*

Compare Braudel's assertion that civilisations can not climb hills to Oliver Wolters's nearly identical assertion about pre-colonial Southeast Asia:

'...many people lived in the distant highlands and were beyond the reach of the centers where records survive. The mandalas [i.e. court centres of civilisation and power] were a phenomenon of the lowlands... Paul Wheatley puts it well when he notes that "the Sanskrit tongue was stilled to silence at 500 metres"'.⁶

Scholars have been struck by the limits the terrain, particularly altitude, has placed on cultural or political influence. Paul Mus noted, of the spread of the Vietnamese and their culture, that '...this ethnic adventure stopped at the foot of the high country's buttresses'.⁷ Owen Lattimore also remarked that Indian and Chinese civilisations travelled well across plains – 'where concentrated agriculture and big cities are to be found' – but stopped cold at rugged hills.⁸

Such hills also helped make Zomia a *region of refuge*.⁹ Far from being 'left-behind' by the valleys' progress of civilisation, hill peoples have chosen to place themselves out of state reach, finding freedom from taxes, corvée labour, conscription, and the epidemics and crop failures associated with population concentration and mono-cropping.

They have practiced '*escape agriculture*': cultivation designed to thwart state appropriation.

Even their social structure could be called 'escape social structure' in its design to aid dispersal and autonomy, and ward off subordination. Hill peoples are generally not remnants of 'ab'-original peoples but 'runaways' from lowland state-making. Their agricultural and social practices are techniques to make good on this evasion.

When the nation state was born, many hill people continued to conduct their cross-border lives as before. The concept of 'Zomia' marks an attempt to explore a new genre of 'area' studies in which the justification for designating the area has nothing to do with national boundaries (e.g. Laos) or strategic conceptions (e.g. Southeast Asia) but is rather based on ecological regularities and structural relationships that cross national frontiers.

The symbiotic history of hills and valleys

Examining lowland societies as self-contained entities adopts the hermetic view of culture that lowland elites wish to project. In reality, lowland states have existed in symbiosis with hill society, thus it is impossible to write a coherent history of one that ignores the other.



A Hmong village

Many valley people are 'ex-hill people' and many hill people are 'ex-valley people'. Movement in one direction or the other did not preclude subsequent moves. Groups have disengaged from a state and later re-affiliated themselves or been seized by the same or another state; a century or two later they might again be beyond state grasp. Such changes were often accompanied by shifts in ethnic identity.

Facets of either society have often been an effect of the other. The so-called hill tribes of mainland Southeast Asia are best understood as a fugitive population that came to the hills over the past millennium and a half not only from the Burman, Tai, and Siamese states but especially from the Han Empire when the Tang, Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties pressed into southwest China. Their location in the hills and many of their economic and cultural practices could be termed a 'state-effect'. This is radically at odds with older prevailing assumptions of a primeval hill population abandoned by those who moved downhill and developed civilisations. Meanwhile, the valley centres of wet-rice cultivation may be seen as a 'hill-effect' because, historically speaking, the valley states are new structures, dating back to the middle of the first millennium C.E.; because they were formed from an earlier ingathering of diverse peoples not previously part of an established state; and because early *mandala* states were less a military conquest than a cultural space available to those who wished to conform to its religious, linguistic and cultural format. Perhaps because such identities were newly conected from many cultural shards, the resulting valley self-representations were at pains to distinguish their culture from populations outside the state. Thus, if hill society could be termed a 'state-effect', valley culture could be seen as a 'hill-effect'.

Despite this symbiosis, including a centuries-old, brisk traffic in people, goods and culture between hills and valleys, the cultural divide remains stark and durable. Both populations generally have an essentialist understanding of their differences that appears at odds with historical evidence.

How can we make sense of this paradox? First, by emphasising that their symbiotic relationship is also contemporaneous and quasi-oppositional. Older understandings and popular folklore about hill 'tribes' portray them as 'our living ancestors', 'what we were like before

we discovered wet-rice agriculture, learned to write, developed the arts and adopted Buddhism'. This grossly distorts the historical record. Hill societies have always been in touch with imperial states in the valleys or via maritime trade routes. Valley states have always been in touch with the non-state periphery – what Deleuze and Guattari call 'the local mechanisms of bands, margins, minorities, which continue to affirm the rights of segmentary societies in opposition to the organs of state power'. Such states are, in fact, 'inconceivable independent of that relationship'.¹⁰

Griaznov made the same case for the Central Asian steppes: the most ancient nomads had abandoned cultivation for political and demographic reasons.¹¹

Lattimore insisted that pastoral nomadism arises *after* farming, drawing grassland-edge cultivators who 'had detached themselves from farming communities'.

Far from being stages in social evolution, such states and nomadic peoples are born simultaneously and joined in a sometimes rancorous but unavoidable embrace of paired symbiosis and opposition.

Ernest Gellner offered a long overdue corrective to 'the view from the valley' or 'the view from the state centre' which deems the 'barbarian periphery' a diminishing remnant drawn sooner or later into 'civilisation'.

Political autonomy is, Gellner insists, a choice, applying the term 'marginal tribalism' to emphasise how marginality can be a political stance:

*'...“marginal” tribalism...[is]...the type of tribal society which exists at the edge of non-tribal societies...the inconveniences of submission make it attractive to withdraw from political authority and the balance of power, the nature of the mountainous or desert terrain make it feasible. Such tribalism is politically marginal. It knows what it rejects.'*¹²

But in Southeast Asia, the view from the valley gains credibility because the modern nation state has, since the Second World War,



Irrigated rice agriculture

increasingly occupied the ungoverned periphery. Before that, however, the valley view is at least half wrong, as life outside the state was more available and attractive.

Oscillation, not one-way traffic, was the rule. This largely untold story has been obscured by the hegemonic civilisational narrative, despite its historical importance, mainly because of how history gets written.

Toward an anarchist history

Though Southeast Asia has been marked by the relative absence of states, histories of states persistently insinuated themselves in place of histories of *peoples*, because state centres, and their characteristic sedentary agricultural settlements, are the political units that leave the most physical evidence. The more rubble you leave behind, the larger your place in the historical record. Dispersed, mobile, egalitarian societies, regardless of sophistication, and despite being more populous, are relatively invisible in the record because they spread their debris widely. The same logic applies regarding the written record.

In a truly even-handed chronology of pre-colonial, mainland Southeast Asia, most of the pages would be blank. Are we to pretend that because there was no dynasty in control there was no history? Moreover, official *mandala* histories systematically exaggerate the dynasty's power, coherence and majesty (as Indrani Chatterjee pointed out to me, such chronicles thus do the symbolic work of the state). If we take them as fact, we risk, as Richard O'Connor noted, 'impos[ing] the imperial imaginings of a few great courts on the rest of the region'.¹³

What if we replaced these 'imperial imaginings' with a view of history as dominated by long periods of *normative and normalised* statelessness, punctuated by short-lived dynastic states which left in their wake a new deposit of imperial imaginings? Anthony Day points us in this direction:

'What would the history of Southeast Asia look like...if we were to take the turbulent relations between families as normative rather than a departure from the norm of the absolutist state which must "deal with disorder"?'¹⁴

He is talking about establishing the elementary *units of political order*. Depending on location and date, such units might indeed range from nuclear families to segmentary lineages, bi-lateral kindreds, hamlets, larger villages, towns and their hinterlands and confederations. All were in nearly constant motion; dissolving, splitting, relocating, merging, reconstituting. Is an intelligible history possible under such circumstances? It is surely more daunting than dynastic history, but studies exist that seek to grasp the logic behind the fluidity.¹⁵ That is the challenge for a non-state centric history: specifying conditions for the aggregation and disaggregation of its elementary units.

If this fluidity inconveniences historians, state rulers find it well-nigh impossible to exercise sovereignty over people constantly in motion, with no permanent organisation or allegiances, ephemeral leadership, pliable and fugitive subsistence patterns, and who might shift linguistic practices and ethnic identity. And this is just the point! Their economic, political and cultural organisation is a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures.

And since state structures (or their ruins) write history, they leave such people out of it.

Notes

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- 3 Leach, Edmond. 1960. 'The Frontiers of Burma'. *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 3(1): 49-68.
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- 6 Wolters, Oliver. 1982. *History, Culture, and Religion in Southeast Asian Perspective*. Singapore: Institute for Southeast Asian Studies.
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- 9 Beltran, Gonzalo Aguirre. 1979. *Regions of Refuge*. Washington: The Society of Applied Anthropology Monograph Series no. 12, 23 and passim.
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- 12 Gellner, Ernest. 1969. *Saints of the Atlas*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson.
- 13 O'Connor, Richard. 1997. 'Review of Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation*'. *Journal of Asian Studies* 56:1 (February): 280.
- 14 Day, Anthony. 1996. 'Ties that (Un)Bind: Families and States in Pre-modern Southeast Asia'. *Journal of Asian Studies* 55:2:398.
- 15 See: Leach, Edmond. 1954, 1965. *The Political Systems of Highland Burma: A Study of Kachin Social Structure*. Boston: Beacon Press.

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