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From Padi States to Commercial States: Reflections on Identity and the Social Construction Space in the Borderlands of Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand and Myanmar

Frédéric Bourdier, Maxime Boutry, Jacques Ivanoff, and Olivier Ferrari
Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2015, 168pp.

The case studies in this book encompass the utilization of, and an extension of, James Scott's "Zomia" concept. Deriving from anthropological works that focus on the "adaptation strategies of the border population" (p. 15), the book focuses on the enactment of alternative histories and (borderland) "societies" as well as on a revisiting of contemporary state-society relations, borrowing from the concept of Zomia. The authors add to the debates regarding Scott's Zomia, in their words "de-territorialize" (p. 15) the concept of Zomia and focus on the "Inner Zomians," defined as "cast-out and widely dispersed migrants, modern resisters residing within ethno-national borders" (p. 15).

The argument is that even though Zomia territory has been penetrated by the emergence of a "commercial state" based on a paddy cash crop economy that serves as a "system of statehood where rice-farming constitutes the basis of power structures" (p. 16), the "post-colonial nation-state" structures of control remain "partial" (p. 16). This can be seen in the cultural and economic exchanges as well as social and ethnic dynamism established between the "commercial" state and the Zomia communities.

To be more precise, the quote on page 24 narrates the main focus of the book:

> . . . the modalities of the implementation of identities and the transformation of the interethnic relations provoked by development . . . starting from the center, reconfigure a Zomian reality that remains geographically hard for the center to access and exploit . . . we are attempting to understand the strategies that have been developed by the populations who are no longer external to the state and have become integrated, but who still remain "externalized," either through their own will or through the state's paradoxical discourse resulting from a desire to integrate these groups without putting an end to stigmatization. (p. 24)

The chapters celebrate the creativity and adaptability of the (inner) Zomians and address the questions of domination, resistance, and resilient acts through the politics of ethnic identification and construction. Despite the encroachment of the nation-states' developmental programs—some have even penetrated into Zomia territory and have impacted the socioeconomic development of minorities—the political economy of the borderlands operates "as an element of reflection for our complementary understanding of a socio-cultural landscape that cannot be restricted to a geographical landscape" (p. 16) but arguably extends to cultural landscape (ethnicity, religion, ideology) of the "Inner Zomian . . . that is not only ethnic . . . but also socio-ethnic" (p. 18).

The book does not limit itself to locating resistance, or the processes of "not-being-governed"

(Scott 2009), between two opposite categories such as ethnic/minority groups versus the state, but the "strata" within the particular group, coupled with their appropriative capabilities to adapt to differences and survive through the creation of new ethnic identities within the nation-state system.

The "inner" Zomia refers to the "particular strata" (p. 2) within the populations and other territorial groups—namely, the Jarai of Cambodia (Chapter 2), Chinese entrepreneurs or *taukays* and migrants (Chapter 3), the Moken or "sea-gypsies" (Chapter 4), and the minority groups of Moklen and Urak Lawoi vis-à-vis the dominant populations of Thai, Sino-Thai, and Malay Muslims (Chapter 5)—that move and flow between the dual dynamics either in their "relationship with the state or with other minorities" (p. 18).

In Chapter 2, Frédéric Bourdier's analysis locates the "infinity" of ethnic identity of the hill people and the resilience of Zomia in the borderland of northeast Cambodia despite the penetration of "commercial states" activities. The analysis takes into consideration the flexibility of people to adapt and manipulate local strategies to modify the cultural marker in a particular borderland area, or what Bourdier calls "cultural effervescence," a manifestation of the flexible identities that are capable of sharing physical, economic, and social relations with Laos and Vietnam through historical reappropriations and recompositions of the Jarai on the Cambodian-Vietnamese border, and the reappropriation of autonyms and exonyms (the Brao and the Krung).

In Chapter 3, Maxime Boutry argues that the "sea-Zomians" bring a vulnerability to nation-state relations due to the adaptability of the Zomians in manipulating and appropriating interrelations with the nation-state to access resources and form their identities. The Moken or sea nomads' identities survive through intermarriage with the Burmese along with frequent changes in religious practices, which subsequently challenge state-formulated racial and ethnic categories.

In Chapter 4, borrowing from Thongchai Winichakul's concept of "interstices," Jacques Ivanoff's ethnographic research looks at the "sea-gypsies" of Southeast Asia in Malaysia, Thailand, and Myanmar, to locate the construction, recomposition, and reappropriation of the Moken in construing their own "Zomia" within the nation-state system at the margins.

In Chapter 5, Olivier Ferrari's research locates the "sea-nomads" (Moken, Moklen, and Urak Lawoi) in Southern Thailand. The author showcases the way in which sea-nomads perpetuate their identities surrounded by the dominant populations (Thai, Sino-Thai, Malay Muslims) through their own unique management of the "cosmological border"—the coast—as an expression of their unique ethnic identity, thus creating an ethno-regional social fabric (pp. 129–131). Such dynamic relations provide a new perspective in conceptualizing the "nation-state" and problematize the extent to which the nation-state system is capable of homogenizing Zomian societies.

Thus, the book's analysis of "inner Zomia" identifies the enactment of an "infinite parthenogenesis of identity" (p. 16) that blurs state-society relations. The book locates the borderland as a site for contestation and negotiation of "other" societies that are embedded by, and negotiated

through, the domination of the state system. In brief, the book provides a different dynamic of "society" through the lens of a borderland that is not subsumed by the nation-state system but resilient in its own construction.

This is not an easy book to review, to be frank. The difficulty does not derive from the structure of the book. Rather, it derives from the complexities of state-society relations, the concept of "Zomia" and its interrelation to ethnic construction within the population in contemporary nation-state structures, and the ongoing shifts of identity politics in the borderlands that the book investigates. The volume covers a wide array of issues, ranging from the constant shaping of ethnic relations within the ongoing changes of borderland societies and nation-states to the constant political processes produced in a non-static fashion in the borderlands of Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Myanmar.

The major contribution of the book is to provide alternative perspectives on "societies" located at the borders of "maritime and terrestrial" (p. 35) that still exist in a contemporary globalized world underpinned by a neoliberal political economy. Such alternative societies in the borderlands act as an answer to conventional views on the disappearance of societies or minority groups under the shadow of globalization and capitalism within the nation-state domain. Borderlands vis-à-vis the nation-state serve as sites to ". . . redeploy and strengthen people's material and symbolic referents, which are in turn part of identity, which is itself in perpetual negotiations" (p. 34).

Essentially the book uses micro and localized case studies to grasp the social complexities of the locales. It provides rich ethnographic data focusing on case-by-case "micro-study" instead of macro-level patterns to generate particularities of borderlands' political economy. The case studies characterize the non-uniformity and nuances of the "nation" and the "states" as well as "Zomia." Rather than providing a standard model to identify the construction of ethnic identity and politics, the book provides a nonlinear analysis that showcases cultural fluidity within the borderlands and inner Zomians that are resilient and capable of generating multiple relations within a nation-state system.

The authors attempt to uncover deeper complexities, such as the organization of an "Inner Zomian zone" (p. 25), instead of emphasizing the investigation of Zomia per se; the "particular strata" of ethnic groups with the state, instead of between ethnic groups and the state; the constant shape of ethnic identities through interrelation between the dominant groups and minorities within a nation-state; and the processes that took place—negotiation, adaptation, appropriation, domination—as manifestations of new identity politics vis-à-vis the incapability of the "center" to penetrate and homogenize the "margins."

Finally, the book serves as a critique to Scott's "Zomia" as well as an attempt to build an extension of the concept—the "inner Zomia." The book will be of use to those who are interested in comprehending and seeking concepts or theoretical frameworks to explain the process of change and adaptability of alternative "societies," or existing societies vis-à-vis the nation-state system

and neoliberalism; relocating historiography other than official/national histories; and identifying processes of cultural exchange and politics.

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