

# Rethinking Zomia: Institutional Change and Knowledge Frontiers in the Upland Societies of Southeast Asia

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## ABSTRACT

Since its inception, the term "Zomia" has evolved into a theoretical framework for analyzing peripheral societies at the margins of nation-states, sparking extensive debate within the fields of global anthropology and area studies. This article centers on the integration of Zomia theory with the regional history of Southeast Asia. It reviews pivotal scholarly works from both Chinese and international academia in recent years, structuring its analysis along three dimensions: intellectual origins, major research themes, and key debates. The paper outlines significant advancements, identifies existing limitations, and suggests potential avenues for future research. It argues that Zomia, understood as a methodological paradigm rather than a geographical demarcation, holds substantial significance for reinterpreting the history of highland ethnic groups in Southeast Asia, alongside processes of cross-border interaction and state formation.

## KEYWORDS

Zomia; Southeast asian regional history; Marginal societies; Cross-border ethnic groups; Field research

## 1 Introduction: The Proposal of the 'Zomia' Theory and the Rise of Trans-Regional Studies

The term "Zomia" was coined by Willem van Schendel (2002) to describe a trans-national zone stretching from the Himalayan foothills and Xizang (Tibet) Plateau to the Indochinese Peninsula. James Scott (2009) expanded this concept in *The Art of Not Being Governed*, characterizing Zomia as a space of historical resistance to state control where highland communities actively employed evasion strategies rather than being passively marginalized. Through migration, cultural adaptation, and agricultural practices, these communities developed self-organized social systems over time. Although Zomia's dynamics have changed since the mid-20th century, its theoretical framework continues to influence interdisciplinary studies in history, anthropology, and geography.

This framework offers novel perspectives on Southeast Asian highland societies and critical insights into ethnic relations and institutional changes in South Asian frontier regions such as Northeast India, Bangladesh, and the Himalayan foothills. By tracing Zomia's theoretical evolution and examining cases like the "Assam Issue," this paper analyzes institutional transformations and state-society interactions in highland areas. It further proposes new reflections and theoretical extensions based on Chinese academic critique and national strategies.

## 2 The Development and Controversies of Zomia Theory: Methodological Reflections and Regional Applicability

### 2.1 Theoretical Development of Zomia: Geographical Space and Political Metaphor

The academic reception of Zomia theory has sparked intense debate. Yang and Wang (2022) critique Scott's approach as overly constructivist, neglecting state-society interactions. Li (2023) reframes Zomia as a dynamic socio-political space through "relative positional relationships", advancing the theory beyond linear "state evasion" toward structure-agency integration. Shneiderman (2010) warns against overgeneralizing Zomia beyond the Himalayas, while Erni (2008) sees it challenging state-centric paradigms. Ethnographic studies (e.g., Toyota 2003) reveal complex multi-ethnic identity mechanisms in Zomia.

Hong (2016) proposes "Maritime Zomia," applying the framework to port cities like Malacca where multicultural interactions form state-evading maritime societies. Though debated, this offers a new paradigm for coastal Asia. Saha deconstructs colonial knowledge production, showing how Burma—though under British India—was Othered as "non-South Asian" due to colonial-area studies complicity. Zomia helps rethink these artificial categories. Michaud urges returning to van Schendel's original vision: Zomia as a multi-scalar tool deconstructing "geographies of ignorance". Jonsson (via Michaud) challenges Scott's "uniform stateless space," advocating "slow anthropology" to study long-term state-society adaptations.

### 2.2 Chinese Academic Response and Critique

In recent years, with the widespread dissemination of Zomia theory in the study of China's borderlands, numerous scholars have proposed critiques and reconstructions of its concepts and methodologies. Scholars such as Li Zhen emphasize the "relative positional relationships" within the Zomia region, advocating for the introduction of a "structure-agency" duality into the analysis to focus greater attention on internal power dynamics within borderlands. Yang Xuai and Wang Guo, meanwhile, point out that the "state-evading" assumption of Zomia theory overlooks the modern state's

ongoing construction and governance practices in these regions. Others, like Sun Guangqi, have attempted to extend Zomia theory into the fields of cultural transmission and ethnic integration, demonstrating its interdisciplinary potential.

Zheng Yu and Zhang Mengyao point out the internal contradictions in Scott's research. They argue that he simplifies highland societies into "absolute libertarians," overlooking their internal power structures (e.g., the elite agency evident in Phong mythology). They contend that his assumption of state evasion as a "rational choice" ultimately neglects cultural logics (e.g., the religious sentiment driving the Bnei Menashe), and that he sacrifices local complexity to construct a universal theory (e.g., reducing salt smuggling in northern Myanmar to mere "resistance" while ignoring cooperative survival strategies).

Jin Jie acknowledges the academic innovativeness of Scott's proposed mechanisms of "state evasion" (subsistence, political, religious) but highlights its historical inaccuracies (e.g., the theory of the Tai origin of the Nanzhao kingdom) and oversimplification of historical complexity. He emphasizes that the Zomia paradigm promotes the study of trans-boundary relationalism and advocates for the formation of an "ethnographic academic zone" through comparative studies of Southwest China, Southeast Asia, and South Asia. A case study by Yang Meng examines Ugyen Tashi, a Xizang (Tibet) serf who fled to the northern Myanmar highlands in 1945 (diaspora) and voluntarily returned to China in 1986 (return). This case demonstrates that Zomia residents do not engage in a unidirectional "state evasion." His logic for return was to seek a "land of good governance," challenging the absoluteness of Scott's theory.

China's southwestern borderlands are highly congruent with the Zomia region, with areas like the Tea-Horse Road, the Yi-Tibetan Corridor, and the Nujiang River Valley being key research foci. For instance, Yang Haichao (2023) uses the Tea-Horse Road to argue that Zomia theory severs the continuity of regional history, advocating instead for reconstructing a historical narrative of "local complex adaptive systems." Shen Haimei (2023), studying Sino-Myanmar cross-border marriages, points out the tension between state governance and ethnic customs, thereby adding a crucial "gender-ethnicity-state" tripartite dimension to the Zomia perspective. In summary, within Chinese academia, Zomia theory is undergoing a transformation from a singular spatial-geographical model toward a complex institutional-cultural symbiont, thereby providing a methodological reference for subsequent concrete studies of South Asia.

### 3 The Zomia Perspective in South Asian Regional History: Research Trajectories and Case Studies

Lally (2020) examines salt monopoly conflicts between British Burma and Qing/Republican China in Zomia borderlands, showing salt as a materialization of territorial sovereignty. Smugglers built cross-border networks, revealing Zomia as a "friction zone" where states and locals compete. The Laotian mythic hero Hat Ang symbolizes bidirectional strategies (detachment/connection), countering Scott's "passive evasion" thesis. Stolz and Tappe shift focus to "agency and pioneering," highlighting how Zomia residents (e.g., Rmeet women) actively pursue resources through mobility.

Morton (2022) and Sprenger (2023) show highland societies (e.g., Akha, Rmeet) actively negotiating boundaries. Murakami's study of the "Bnei Menashe movement" reveals how Kuki-Chin groups reinterpreted origins through Christianization, constructing a transnational identity challenging nation-state narratives. Katō's "inverse Shikoku" model links Japanese hybrid religiosity to Zomia's "decentering logic," where folk beliefs create spaces of spiritual autonomy.

Shen (2023) explores cross-border marriage governance tensions in China-Myanmar borderlands, highlighting state-local custom conflicts. Keil reveals Zomia as an ecopolitical arena shaped by elephant mobility, used by both colonizers and indigenous groups. de Maaker and Tooker note land privatization and state "modernization" discourses territorializing margins, exacerbating inequality and homogenizing borderlands.

Das challenges Scott's "stateless spaces," showing Naga highlands' complex indigenous governance systems. Colonial "acephalous" labeling constituted epistemic violence. Postcolonial "museumized governance" perpetuated colonial constructions. Highland mobility resulted from colonial economic oppression, not "anti-stateness." Tappe analyzes French colonial partition of Lao-Vietnamese borderlands, ignoring traditional overlapping sovereignty and triggering migration. May studies Khasi Hills' "sovereign elasticity" and multi-directional tribute networks, challenging colonial "absolute sovereignty" myths. Giersch examines trans-Himalayan trade corridors (19th-20th centuries), showing Zomia as a dynamic global node with nested networks (local guides, regional Tusi taxes, global firms). Kuhl and Magnusson document "jellyfishing" in Pakistani highlands, where communities perform for tourists/states while preserving autonomy, deconstructing Scott's binary.

Morton (2022) identifies three Akha groups (traditionalists, neo-traditionalists, Baptist Christians) along the Thailand-Myanmar border, revealing complex cultural transformations through oral histories and literacy attitudes. Sprenger (2023) uncovers gendered "highland pioneering" practices among Laos' Rmeet people. Sims (2022) examines BRI projects in northern Laos, arguing development discourse constitutes "epistemic violence" against local minorities.

Case studies from South Asia reveal a process of bidirectional construction between states and highland societies: states reinforce control through land privatization and border securitization, while local communities respond via cross-border mobility, logistical adaptation, and religious autonomy—challenging any unidirectional narrative of "evasion." The phenomenon of "passive Zomianization" exposes how political powers appropriate the Zomia concept, thereby diluting its inherent resistance narrative. Compared to Southeast Asian highlands, South Asian Zomia exhibits distinct characteristics: Stronger state penetration (e.g., border control regimes in India and Bangladesh); Religiously diversified

resistance (e.g., Christian and indigenous faith movements in Northeast India); Geopolitical fragmentation (cross-border ethnic groups segmented by multiple national policies).

## **4 Cross-Border Mobility and Border Politics: Anthropological Pathways of Zomia Theory and Chinese Engagements**

### **4.1 Borders and Cross-Border Ethnic Groups in Zomia: An Anthropological Redefinition**

The core concern of Zomia theory—"state evasion"—corresponds in anthropology to the responsive reconfiguration of borderland societies to state boundary regimes, particularly reflected in the survival practices, cultural flows, and institutional adaptations of cross-border ethnic groups. For instance, groups such as the Nagas, Mizos, Kachins, and Akha, distributed across India, Myanmar, and Southwest China, maintain internal networks of connection that transcend national borders in language, marriage, trade, and religion. These networks not only constitute interstitial zones escaping full state control but also function as "spaces of elastic sovereignty" where ethnic identity is sustained transnationally. Such practices demonstrate that borderlands are not fixed "peripheries of the state" but rather "zones of institutional friction," characterized by intersecting governance across ethnicities, states, and legal systems. In this sense, Zomia is not an "anarchic space of withdrawal" but a boundary-spatial political formation marked by institutional tension and cultural cohesion. Its analysis necessitates anthropological attention to "governance boundaries," "legal heterogeneity," and "state symbolic practices."

### **4.2 "Cross-Border Mobility" and "Legitimacy Politics": Limitations and Critical Reflections on the Zomia Framework in South Asia**

In the South Asian context, the "state evasion" practices of Zomia groups are often intertwined with cross-border migration, refugee flows, and irregular immigration. Assam in Northeast India, long plagued by issues of Bengali-origin migration, witnessed violent riots triggered by the 2019 Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA)—a quintessential example of the state's attempt to redefine "legitimacy" and "belonging" through governance. This exposes a critical limitation of Zomia theory in addressing practical governance challenges: while it emphasizes the agency of state evasion, it fails to adequately explain how contemporary states reconfigure sovereign grids and reshape inclusion and exclusion through legal and identity mechanisms. From an anthropological perspective, Zomia is not merely a space of resistance for highland communities but a field where sovereignty, law, racial and cultural identities intersect. Therefore, Zomia studies must incorporate analytical dimensions such as legal pluralism, multiple identity systems, and ethno-religious politics to deepen the proposition of "borders in flux."

### **4.3 Rethinking Borderland Governance through Zomia Theory and Chinese Academic Engagements**

Currently, the "Zomia" theory is frequently employed to discuss the "denationalization" trends in China's southwestern borderlands and the broader trans-Himalayan region. To some extent, this reinforces a narrative of structural antagonism between the state and ethnic groups, while overshadowing the logic of collaborative governance and synergy. Within the Chinese academic context, this "depoliticized" interpretation—divorced from the actualities of state institutions—risks being misread as either "state governance failure" or as a "space of governance resistance."

China's southwestern borderlands exhibit a high degree of congruence with the Zomia region, with research hotspots such as the Tea-Horse Road, the Tibetan-Yi Corridor, and the Nujiang River Valley attracting significant scholarly attention. Yang Haichao (2023), using the Tea-Horse Road as a case study, argues that Zomia theory fractures the continuity of regional history. He highlights the theory's neglect of historical connectivity between Southwest China and South-Southeast Asia, urging caution against its inherent regional simplification tendencies, and advocates for reconstructing historical narratives centered on "local complex adaptive systems."

Shen Haimei (2023), examining Sino-Myanmar cross-border marriages, identifies tensions between state governance and ethnic customs, thereby enriching the Zomia perspective with a crucial "gender-ethnicity-state" tripartite dimension.

Zhang Liming (2023) points out that Chinese knowledge production on the Zomia region, particularly regarding South Asia, remains underdeveloped due to constraints in data accessibility, language barriers, and entrenched research traditions. Although geographically adjacent to Zomia (e.g., the Tibetan-Qiang-Yi Corridor), Southwest China remains peripherally studied owing to a scarcity of primary materials. Shen Weirong, in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), proposes that Zomia research in South Asia should prioritize micro-empirical approaches (e.g., ethnic livelihoods, cross-border marriages) to provide cultural risk assessments for policy implementation.

Zhang Haiyang (2014) juxtaposes the Tibetan-Qiang-Yi Corridor with Zomia theory, suggesting shared political-ecological logics between East Asian land frontiers and Southeast Asian highlands. These "zones of thin state capillary power" serve as spaces for ethnic mobility, cultural preservation, and alternative social organization, further validating the potential of the Zomia framework for cross-regional comparative studies.

Zomia—a transboundary geo-cultural region—emerged as a critique of state-centric histories. Defined by van Schendel and Scott as "highland societies evading state effects," it has reshaped political anthropology and South/Southeast Asian studies. In South Asia, it reframes borderland history, tribal narratives, and state formation by challenging

lowland/colonial biases and centering highland agency.

## 5 Conclusion and Prospects: Reorienting Zomia as an Analytical Paradigm

Zomia, a transboundary region of geographic and cultural diversity, emerged as a critique of state-centric histories. Introduced by van Schendel and developed by Scott as "highland societies evading state effects," it has sparked debate in political anthropology and influenced South/Southeast Asian studies. In South Asia, it offers a critical framework for reexamining borderland history, tribal narratives, and state formation—challenging lowland/colonial biases while emphasizing highland agency. Zomia theory's limitations are increasingly evident. Ethnographies from Northeast India, Nepal's Terai, Assam, and Sino-Indian/Myanmar borderlands show that "state evasion" alone cannot explain complex engagements with state, market, and religious structures. Highland societies act as transitional zones under layered governance—shaped by imperial tributaries, Cold War frontiers, and infrastructure states—revealing core features of South Asia's political margins. Future studies must reposition Zomia not as a "residual zone" but a critical nexus of state formation, identity construction, and knowledge-power contestation: a colonial semi-periphery, pre-national corridor, and modern connectivity arena. No longer "outside history," Zomia is South Asia's transformative frontier. Only through integrating field politics, regional methods, and historical critique can it become a "bridging concept" for borders, identity, and governance.

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