

Responses and Reflections on Scott's Study of Zomia in Recent Years in Domestic Academia

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Abstract: James Scott, a professor of political science and anthropology in the United States, proposed the influential "Zomia" theory in his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. The theory has garnered significant international interest and has yielded numerous research findings. Meanwhile, the domestic academic community has shown little regard for the book. Until 2016, when the Chinese translation of Scott's "Zomia" was published in China, the impact of his theory in the Chinese literary world had been significant, prompting lively discussions among numerous scholars. Local scholars utilized their own research experience to either introduce it as a new theory and method into their research practice or thoroughly analyze its viewpoints, contents, theories, and methods. This paper analyzes the role and significance of Scott's book in relevant research fields by combining domestic research. The aim is to provide a reference for further research in these fields.

Keywords: Zomia, Country effects, Regional studies.

1. Introduction

James Scott, a Professor of Political Science and Anthropology at Yale University, published *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* in 2009. The book continues Scott's legacy of critiquing the state and advocating for the marginalized. The opening chapter defines and contextualizes the term "Zomia". The term "Zomia" was proposed by Dutch scholar Schendel as a cross-regional concept that transcends traditional regional studies. It refers to the border region of East, Southeast, South, and Central Asia. Scott further elaborates on the concept by positing that "Zomia" includes all areas above 300 meters above sea level, ranging from the central highlands of Vietnam to the northeastern region of India. It covers the five Southeast Asian countries Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar, as well as China's Guizhou, Guangxi, Yunnan, and part of Sichuan. According to Scott, the "Zomia" range was formed by the rise and expansion of lowland states before the establishment of modern nation-states in 1945. Its boundaries contained people who had escaped the governance of the valley states and those who were yet to be governed. Scott considers the social space in Southeast Asian highlands that "Zomia" alludes to as an escape from state governance. The mountain people's livelihoods, social structures, languages, and religions are a deliberate effort to avoid state control or prevent significant internal centralization of authority. This perspective challenges the conventional notion of hill societies as "uncivilized", "primitive", or "barbaric" in national history. It is not difficult for civilization to reach the mountains, but rather, the mountain dwellers have actively chosen to reject civilized behavior in their relations with the lowland nations. Therefore, there exists a dialectical coexistence of mountain societies and valley states. "Zomia is a product of the state effect. After the publication of *The Art of Escaping Rule*, <<citation needed>>" *The History of Anarchism in the Southeast Asian Highlands* has garnered significant attention from foreign academics and produced numerous relevant research findings. However, domestic scholars have shown little interest in the book until the

Chinese translation was released in 2016. However, domestic scholars have shown little interest in the book until the Chinese translation was released in 2016. However, domestic scholars have shown little interest in the book until the Chinese translation was released in 2016. This event marked the introduction of Scott's "Zomia" theory to a wider audience in the Chinese literary community, leading to extensive discussions. Based on their research experience, domestic scholars have introduced Scott's book as a new theory and method into research practice or discussed its viewpoints, contents, theories, and methods. This paper focuses on the domestic-related research and analyzes the role and significance of Scott's book discussion in related research fields. The goal is to provide a reference for related field research.

2. Discussion at the Theoretical and Methodological Level

2.1. Regional research value of "Zomia"

Mr. He Ming and Mr. Chen Jianhua are studying the emergence and evolution of the concept of "Zomia" from a regional studies perspective. They support studying "Zomia" as a trans-regional, trans-ethnic, or trans-border concept holistically, which aligns with Scott's idea. They also argue that the focus on the connectivity and linkages of "Zomia" fosters exploration of the establishment and progression of economic, social, cultural, and other relationships among various groups. Simultaneously, it aids in discovering novel directions for comprehending some of the existential predicaments encountered by humans. [1] Ma Qingyun posits that Scott's research on the "Zomia" area is a supplementary methodology to China's regional studies. The study encourages scholars to surpass national boundaries and seek agreement in a larger area, revitalizing academic research. [2]

2.2. Relevance of "Zomia" research

Gu Jiarong posits that Scott's thesis on the escapist nature of Southeast Asian mountain societies, resulting from the role of the state and political choices made by the mountain

inhabitants, challenges researchers who have solely focused on the state's sphere of influence and catered to the rulers' preferences. Furthermore, Jiarong maintains that Scott's work has fostered a renewed attention to the perspective of the cultural subject as a crucial means of acknowledging the Other. [3] Wang Xiaoyi asserts that Scott's analysis of the art of escapism provides insights into contemporary society. Individuals facing pressure from mainstream modern society may resort to escapism as a means of survival. They construct subcultural identities and engage in self-mainstreaming to create a free space for themselves outside of mainstream society. [4]

2.3. Political anthropological significance of "Zomia" studies

According to Zheng Peng, the theory of "Zomia" brings the spatial environment into the scope of political anthropology while returning the agency to the people at the bottom, which has been historically deprived by the state's perspective. This theory enables the summarization of non-state spatial reproduction measures. The research methodology and paradigm of "Zomia" theory have influenced post-"Zomia" mountain-style scholars, warranting further investigation. The ethnic autonomy and diverse lifestyles present in the "Zomia" region may be a valuable reference point in the contemporary world of increasing homogeneity for safeguarding differences and enhancing social autonomy and self-organization. [5] According to Yan Qing and Liu He, Scott's study of Zomia from a political anthropology perspective reveals the intricacy of historical interactions among and between ethnic groups and peoples, as well as between such groups and the state. [6] Jin Jie recognizes the value of Scott's book *The Art of Escaping Domination*. Scott boldly proposes a theoretical hypothesis based on extensive material reading, suggesting that Southeast Asian mountain dwellers escaped from the rule of lowland states to survive. This idea promotes innovation in related research. Secondly, the "Zomia" research paradigm has motivated scholars to venture beyond borders and take a relationalist view of Southwest China. By comparing Southwest China to Southeast Asia and South Asia, we can analyze its political economy throughout history and in contemporary times, as well as social and human patterns focused on interaction and mobility. This promotes the restoration of long-term interethnic interactions, examination of current anthropological paradigms, exploration of novel knowledge production on a larger regional level, and development of the region as an "ethnographic academic area" that will advance anthropology and ethnography in China. [7]

2.4. Criticism and reflection on Scott's "Zomia" study and its theory and methodology

According to Fanco, the intensive agricultural societies of the flatlands misunderstood and disliked mountain dwellers due to political and economic factors. However, this does not reflect the uniqueness of mountain civilization or culture. While Scott's arguments hold true, we should avoid stereotyping mountain dwellers as a Zomia state. [8] According to scholars like Luo Kanglong, Scott committed the error of logical generalization when he replaced the long-term and multi-dimensional cultural development activities of mountain dwellers with linear and short-term escapist activities. The various cultures of mountain communities in

Southeast Asia may be better explained from the perspective of ecological anthropology, which offers greater academic relevance and value. [9] According to Zheng Yu and Zhang Mengyao, in his book *The Art of Escaping Rule*, Scott employs holistic, interactive, and comparative approaches of anthropology. He emphasizes the subjectivity of mountain dwellers in anti-evolutionary concepts and anticentrism. Scott also attempts to put forward a "Zomia" theory that clarifies the strategy and rationality of highland communities' escape from the state through systematic argumentation. But at the core, Scott is entrapped by Western cultural centrism. He imposes absolutist liberal values indigenous to the West onto the "Zomia" mountain people and constructs a streamlined argumentative structure that dichotomizes conflict between the highlands and the state. Secondly, the author assumes that the mountain people possess instrumental rationality. According to the logic of means-end argumentation, he depicts the mountain people as rational individuals who employ a variety of strategic and combinational methods to evade state control. Consequently, in Scott's narrative, the mountain people of "Zomia" are essentially Oriental individuals clothed in the ethnic minority's garb with Western fundamental values. In terms of methodology, Scott employs deductive reasoning to construct his argument and highlight the universal applicability of his theory. However, during the process of deductive reasoning, Scott may intentionally or unintentionally omit, disregard, and selectively utilize information, which can negatively impact the credibility of his methodology. [10]

2.5. Overall assessment of Scott's "Zomia" theory

Du Shuhai was among the early scholars in China to publish a comprehensive critique of Scott's *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. His perspective is particularly relevant as he posits that the "Zomia" theory holds paradigmatic significance in macro-theory. It serves as a framework for examining stateless regions, including mountains, deserts, swamps, and islands. In terms of research methodology, Scott's global history approach has made a wide and far-reaching impact. The approach crosses disciplinary boundaries, breaking the traditional nation-state-centered perspective and writing history for the unwritten. While acknowledging Du Shuhai's theoretical contributions, it must be noted that Scott's research leans towards an extreme viewpoint by placing excessive focus on the dichotomy between national and non-national spaces, while ignoring the interrelated and integrative nature between these spaces. Scott overlooks the endogenous mechanisms and internal differentiation of mountainous societies as they do not pertain to the lowland regions. [11]

3. Case-based Responses and Reflections

3.1. Response and reflection on the study of "Zomia" from a textual point of view

By examining the origin, spread, and development process, as well as the global influence of "RPA Hmong" and "Salvation Hmong" that emerged in the 1950s in Hmong communities in the Southeast Asian highlands, Meng Changpai and Long Yuxiao discovered that Hmong people in the region place great importance on the written language. This is a significant manifestation of the Hmong people in

Southeast Asia. The study indicates that the Hmong in the Southeast Asian highlands place great importance on the physical appearance of written language. This finding challenges Scott's argument in *The Art of Not Being Governed* that Southeast Asian highland societies deliberately chose to avoid writing in order to resist subjugation, and prompts a reevaluation of his thesis. [12]

3.2. Response and reflection on the study of "Zomia" from an economic and trade perspective

By presenting case studies of the interaction and games between highland and lowland ethnic groups in the Xishuangbanna region of Yunnan during the Qing Dynasty, as well as between the Qing central dynasty and the local Dai dancing regime around the Pu'er tea trade, Xiao Kunbing argues that Scott's analysis underestimates the role of economic trade in the formation of highland societies and the maintenance of balance among ethnic groups. Kunbing also suggests that Scott overestimates the political and military influences. Technical terms are explained when first introduced and the language remains clear, objective, and value-neutral. The structure maintains a logical flow of information, with causal connections between statements, and adheres to conventional academic sections. The text also follows consistent citation and footnote styles. Li Zhangquan's research on the Achang Tosha knife trade in the Yunnan border region reveals that lowland and highland communities work together in a symbiotic relationship to maintain a dynamic equilibrium in the trade network. According to Zhangquan, the economy wields a more significant influence over the Zomia region than its political and military roles. [13]

3.3. Responses and reflections on the applicability of the "Zomia" theory

Li Jin's study of historical changes in the Muping Tusi area at the northern end of the Tibet-Yi Corridor demonstrates that mountain communities were not just subject to the political rule of others, but also actively made their own political and cultural decisions in their interactions with various types of states. These choices were productive and self-determined, which challenges Scott's "Zomia" research paradigm. This problem arises because Scott's binary approach to argumentation oversimplifies the intricacy of the Zomia area. [14] Zheng Shaoxiang's case study of a temple relocation demonstrates the possibility of active cooperation between mountain communities, local government, and villagers to maintain cultural differentiation and self-sufficiency. This successful effort reorganized community life and secured survival space in the face of state domination. The study provides valuable insights into the potential of active binding for communities facing similar challenges. In other words, the relationship between mountain communities and the lowland state is not always about escape and resistance, as Scott suggests. Negotiation, cooperation, and mutual compromise are also significant relational options. [15]

3.4. Response and reflection on the study of "Zomia" from the perspective of regional integration

Dong Xiangyun examines the development of Chinese frontier garrisons in the "Zomia" region with a focus on point

embeddedness, line expansion, and surface development. Xiangyun contends that while Scott highlights conflicts among civilizations in the region, he fails to discuss it adequately in terms of regional convergence and development. She contends that the examination of the Chinese military presence in the "Zomia" area has achieved a dynamic analysis of cultural exchange and placement, surpassing the veneer of cultural fragmentation in the same Zomia area. This study presents the manifestation of multi-cultural contemporaneous progress and promotes a greater comprehension of civilization overall. It is a novel approach to comprehend the history and evolution of mountains in Southeast Asia, distinct from the Western discourse. [16]

3.5. Response and reflection on the study of "Zomia" from the perspective of religious beliefs

Through a case study of the conversion of peoples living in mountainous regions of southwest China to Christianity during the Republican period, Ai Juhong argues that the spread of Christianity not only introduced new beliefs but also behavioral norms and values that aligned with the modern social order in areas such as education, medical care, ideology, and social organization. This facilitated the movement of mountainous peoples towards modernity and socialization. This aligned with the long-standing national government's goal of indoctrinating the mountain peoples. As a result, Scott observed only the use of Christianity as a tool to resist state domination, while disregarding its role in encouraging mountain peoples to adhere to the state. [17]

3.6. Response and reflection on the study of "Zomia" from the perspective of ecological anthropology

Shu Yu's case study on the Deang's evolving livelihoods demonstrates that the decision to pursue a specific livelihood by mountain communities arises from both ecological adaptation and ethnic group influence. Contrary to Scott's argument, not all of the livelihood choices of mountain people are politically motivated and aimed at avoiding subjugation. Secondly, the advent of modernity has overcome the physical space of elevation which formed topographical resistance in pre-modern societies. However, the individual's perception of differences in elevation has become stronger. This could potentially lead to further expansion of Scott's theory of Zomia. [18] By comparing rice, upland rice, and root crops, Zhang Haichao and Zhang Han reorganized the logical framework for agricultural production in the Zomia region, discovering a certain consistency between rice farming and mountain nomadic agriculture, previously considered to belong to two distinct production systems: the absence of field management, the lack of striving for high yields through increased labor input, and the emphasis on utilizing the surrounding area as a source of agricultural income. There is insufficient field management, and it is not recommended to prioritize high yields with increased labor inputs. Both approaches promote the importance of food diversity from the surrounding environment. Furthermore, lowland communities involved in rice farming experienced marginalization from the state. Consequently, the authors propose that Scott has overemphasized the politics of rice and root crop cultivation in the Zomia region and that the social organization behind rice and root crops is not significantly

dissimilar. Scott's classification of the two as "subservient agriculture" and "escapist agriculture" is deemed unsuitable. [19]

4. Conclusion

To conclude, domestic scholars acknowledge the significance of Scott's "Zomia" study in two regards. Firstly, the thesis that "the highland societies of the Zomia region are the products of the state effect" successfully challenges the "national historical perspective" and offers a fresh outlook on researching mountainous ethnic groups in Southeast Asia. Secondly, this study presents a framework for conducting cross-regional, cross-border, and transnational research. It encourages researchers to transcend existing boundaries and examine ethnic group relationships from a wider regional context, with a focus on cultural subjectivities. At the same time, scholars have critiqued Scott's analysis of Zomia in multiple ways. Firstly, his reliance on the dichotomous highland and state structural model, which ascribes mountain livelihoods, positive social structures, language, and religious beliefs to political choices, oversimplifies the complexity of the Zomia region. Moreover, this model is suspected of being biased and prone to overgeneralization. Secondly, Scott fails to consider the historical context in which the internal structure of highland societies developed. Thirdly, Scott oversimplifies the effects of trade on mountain communities in Southeast Asia. Finally, Scott's misuse of historical facts, oversimplification of materials, and lack of adequate support detract from the credibility of his research. In the opinion of the author, domestic scholars' critiques of Scott's "Zomia" study offer more detailed and insightful analysis. There is both praise for its research worth and critiques and analysis of its research limitations. Additionally, the relevant outcomes contain both grand theoretical debates and small-scale case studies, blending macro and micro approaches to effectively bridge research gaps in related fields and propel their advancement. Secondly, considering the content of existing research results, scholars conduct field research prior to publishing their reviews, thereby significantly enhancing the academic merit of their findings. Of course, in addition to these positive aspects, the author believes that there are also some shortcomings in the domestic research results that need to be emphasized. Firstly, the published results of Scott's "Zomia" research response and reflection concentrate mostly on anthropology, ethnology, and history, with less focus on interdisciplinary research. Scott's Zomia region is vast, and its complexity cannot be comprehensively analyzed through a few disciplines alone. In the future, it's essential to incorporate a multidisciplinary approach that involves disciplines like literature, geography, linguistics, religion, among others to broaden research horizons and enhance the study of Zomia. Additionally, there is potential for further in-depth discussions concerning macro theories and micro case studies. Overall, Scott's study of Zomia is both enlightening and contentious. Future research regarding Zomia could explore various directions, including issues addressed in the book. This includes how to integrate the polity and political economy at a greater level between former capitalist countries and their frontiers. Existing studies have covered this topic to some extent, but there is room for further investigation. This is an important goal of Zomia studies. Perspectives such as integration, trade, and marriage cannot be ignored as we seek to comprehend this topic. Through this exploration, we may achieve a new appreciation of the Zomia region.

Moreover, the Chinese segment of "Zomia" has been consistently intertwined with the civilization of the Central Plains for thousands of years, lending it a unique character in the overall "Zomia" area. In the future, it may be possible to develop various theoretical explanations based on this distinctiveness, and establish a theoretical framework with Chinese characteristics. This is a plausible avenue for exploration.

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