



James C. Scott. *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia*. Yale University, 2009, 442p.

Over the past twenty odd years efforts have been made to redefine the scope of Southeast Asia as a whole, as well as to identify cultural areas within it. The most recent is Sun Laichen's "Greater Southeast Asia" which extended as far north as the Yangzi River in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE with a fluid boundary that has been shifting ever since.<sup>1)</sup> Attempting to overcome the Bangkok biased view of Thai history, scholars have turned their attention to the Tay residing inside and outside Thailand. This trend has spawned new conceptualizations of the multi-ethnic area covering Yunnan, Guangxi, Northern Continental Southeast Asia and Assam. The linguist Shintani Tadahiko has dubbed it the Tay Cultural Area and Hayashi Yukio and his colleagues have examined it from the perspective of Theravada Buddhism.<sup>2)</sup> Observing the use of a common script, Hans Pentz has coined the term, "Culture of the Region of the Dhamma Letters."<sup>3)</sup> These concepts are founded on historical and cultural criteria and try to encompass the wide linguistic and ethnic diversity prevailing there, and they aim to avoid the pitfalls of narratives promoted by modern Southeast nation states, which often

reflect the views of single, or dominant, ethnic groups. One common feature of them is that they all assume close relationships and interactions between lowlanders and hill peoples. The general picture that emerges is one of hill peoples loosely governed by Tay rulers in a lord/vassal relationship, and while some, particularly Mon-Khmer speaking ethnic groups, adopted certain aspects of Tay culture (e.g. Buddhism, scripts etc), others shunned unnecessary contact with them. Besides that, we really know very little about the history of hill peoples due to the dearth of source materials and limited anthropological fieldwork.

In this context Scott's book is refreshingly welcome because it aims to clarify the common historical experience of hill peoples vis-à-vis lowland regimes in general, an approach that hitherto has been sorely lacking. The author argues his case in a clear, comprehensible and erudite fashion leaving readers in little doubt as to where he stands. His basic thesis is that hill peoples deliberately chose a material life style (residential location, agricultural techniques, rejection of written scripts), ideology, and a flexible social organisation in order to defend themselves from the encroachments of lowlanders and avoid incorporation into the administrative systems of paddy states (his term for lowland states). Hill peoples embraced the ideals and aspirations of egalitarianism, freedom and independence, and it was only by designing and securing a mode of living and a social structure of "escape" that they could succeed in maintaining their cherished life styles. The author offers state evasion and state prevention as key concepts for rethinking past and present discourse on state formation in particular and civilisation theories in general. Striving to overcome historical views based on the nation state interpretation of history, he emphasises intentional statelessness as the reverse side to state formation by classical Kingdoms and their successor modern states in Southeast Asia.

1) Laichen [2010].

2) Shintani first advocated the concept in *Ogon no Yonkaku Chitai: Shan Bunkaken no Rekishi Gengo Minzoku* [1998]. A collection of articles has been published on northern Laos. See Shintani Tadahiko *et al.* [2009]. Hayashi Yukio edited a major collection of articles on Buddhism and Islam [2009].

3) Pentz [1994: 13]

Barbarianism is defined as not acquiescing to administration by states, specifically the act of not paying taxes, so hill people favoured “self barbarianism” as a strategy for avoiding government control.

A whole range of questions readily come to mind. Are state evasion and state prevention viable concepts for understanding the history of hill peoples? Were these the only two factors defining their culture and social and political organisation? I find the author's picture of the hill people's history oversimplified and incongruent with the facts. Anarchy never reigned supreme in hill societies. While we may say that hill peoples did aspire to self autonomy and did prize independence from outsiders, it is equally true that they all maintained forms of social organisation to control their members; clans and villages laid down conventions and rules in the absence of leaders. Furthermore, there is a growing body of historical evidence indicating that some hill peoples did engage in polity building exercises, so the notion of government by leaders was more omnipresent and more widely accepted than the author surmises. Again, with agricultural techniques the point that shifting agriculture was a clever practice for tax evasion is perceptive as it is persuasive, but he is stretching the argument too far when he claims that they cultivated escape crops as a means of avoiding depredation from lowland officials. As far as I know the main crops were upland rice and other cereals, cultivars that could be easily appropriated by the state if the cultivators settled for a long period. In short, the logic is astoundingly circular; the conclusion drawn from every topic from agriculture to script always reverts back to state evasion and state prevention, revealing the ideological obsessions of the author rather than a desire to argue from historical evidence.

This comes as no surprise for the author confesses at the outset that he is enrolled in the

“psychological warfare branch” of the Zomia army (p. 14), and works for the noble cause of redressing the imbalance of past accounts which espouse the viewpoint of paddy states. That they have been neglected is undoubtedly true, but I find it disappointing that the author fails to address important issues already raised in the growing body of research. Previous studies have identified alienation of upland subjects from Tay overlords, conversion to Buddhism and Christianity, the relationship of the spread of these two great religions with indigenous animism, the prohibition of shifting agriculture, the integration of hill peoples into the world market, migration to cities to search for work (e. g. Thailand) and so forth, as major factors affecting the lives of hill peoples. The intricacy of the situation surrounding hill peoples defies reduction to a single factor such as state intervention.

The category hill people encompass an assortment of ethnic groups with different languages and cultures, and their history has been heavily shaped by outside influences. Therefore the task of clarifying the major factors that influenced change in their societies and grasping their common historical experience is certainly necessary. What I take issue with are some of the premises on which the author bases his argument. First, he misconstrues one aspect of the basic lowland/upland relationship. No one would ever be so rash as to deny the dichotomy between lowland and upland, or claim that there never was any armed conflict, or blood spilt. But to suggest that the sole concern of hill people was organising their lives to escape paddy states is far too one-dimensional. By arguing that only conflict prevailed he underplays the role of the symbiotic nature of lowland/upland relationships; the two groups were interdependent despite being antagonistic at times. Hill peoples supplied forest products to Tay either through tribute or trade, and the ubiquitous periodic mar-

kets facilitated the exchange of necessities for lowlanders as well as upland peoples. Loyal upland vassals provided troops and guides in times of emergency. In short, lowland regimes could not function without the co-operation of upland peoples, and we even know of cases where Tay mismanagement of hill peoples led to the confiscation of their upland territories by Chinese dynasties.<sup>4)</sup>

Second, to argue that hill tribes never aspired to building their own polities is simply unfounded. Historians of Northern Thailand, particularly Cholthira Satyawadhna and Aroonrut Wicheinkeeo, have cited archaeological as well as documentary evidence from the post 17<sup>th</sup> century period to demonstrate that Lawa (Lwa, Lua, Wa; a Mon-Khmer group) polities existed prior to the foundation of the Lanna polity by the Tay.<sup>5)</sup> Chinese scholars maintain that Mon-Khmer speakers were indigenous to Southern Yunnan, and they have singled out the Wa, Plang and De'ang (Palaung) ethnic groups as the earliest inhabitants of the Yunnan/Burmese border region.<sup>6)</sup>

Chinese historical sources reveal clusters of Mon-Khmer power bases scattered over a wide area west of the Mekong (Lancang) River in Yunnan from the 13<sup>th</sup> to 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. The picture emerging then is one of Mon-Khmer polities based on shifting agriculture that wielded political power prior to the arrival of the Tay.<sup>7)</sup> Even when the author does refer to political organisations of hill peoples he avoids the issue of polity formation among them. In his discussion of the theocratic regime with five centres administered

by Mahayana Buddhist monks that arose among the Lahu in the hills of southwest Yunnan, circa 1800 to 1887, the author concludes that Lahu prophets aimed “to resist subordination to valley states” (p. 291). Kataoka Tatsuki, who studied this case earlier than Scott, also arrived at a similar conclusion about the role of theocracy as an agent for maintaining political independence from the Qing dynasty and Tay regimes, but he also noted that the regime in effect constituted a multi-village polity.<sup>8)</sup> What we really need are insights into the organisation of hill people polities and the significance of their motives for state building activities. Unfortunately, this book remains frustratingly laconic about such urgent matters.

Third, the author often ignores the historical context of the sources that he brings to bear on the subject. Inadequate attention to this aspect has serious consequences for the creditability of his conclusions. He primarily relies on evidence from the reports of colonial officials and anthropological studies all of which describe society during the post 18<sup>th</sup> century period. The population explosion in China during the 18<sup>th</sup> century spawned large-scale Han Chinese migration to the highlands of southern Yunnan. Enlarged populations in the hills together with the expansion of commercial cotton and tea cultivation in the highlands of Southern Yunnan and Northern Burma resulted in a domino effect pattern of migration causing some ethnic groups to relocate further south in the hills of Burma, Thailand, Laos and Vietnam.<sup>9)</sup> In addition to the perennial encroachments of Chinese dynasties, paddy states, and later colonial regimes, hill peo-

4) Daniels [2004] and Giersch [2006].

5) Satyawadhna [1997] and Wichienkeeo [2000].

6) Wazu Jianshi [1985].

7) See Daniels [2000], Reprinted in Wade [2008: 295–343].

8) Particularly see Kataoka [2007a: 93–96]. Also see Kataoka [2007b].

9) For commercial crops see Takeuchi [2010]. For Han migration see Nomoto and Nishikawa [2008].

ples now had to cope with increasing commercialisation and pressure on land. This was an era of turbulent change for upland societies, one in which conflicts between lowland and upland residents had become exacerbated by outside factors. Therefore we must pose the question, how valid is an argument based on data from this period for formulating a general theory about the material and ideological history of hill peoples over the long term?

Fourth, this book is certainly enriched by the accounts of slave maroon communities in America, but the reader is left wondering how this connects to the subject at hand. The social and political environment surrounding the lowland/upland relationship in continental Southeast Asia differed greatly from that of the plantation system in North America, so it is natural to wonder how legitimate the comparisons really are. The author frequently cites evidence out of context, providing no explanation about its relevance to the upland peoples of Zomia. For instance, the author's argument for escape agriculture, a central component of the state evasion concept, is based on the supposedly deliberate cultivation of escape crops, a category that includes two new World cultivars, maize and cassava. Though the cultivation of maize on slope land did spread throughout Southwest China among the Han from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it did not turn into a major subsistence crop in the hills of Continental Southeast Asia during the contemporary period. As for cassava, I find it a curious for a book in an "Agrarian Studies Series" that the author slips this American tuber into the argument as corroborative evidence (pp.205–207) because, as far as I know, hill peoples have never grown it as a subsistence crop, before the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century at least.

Bearing in mind all of my serious reservations about the usefulness of Scott's concepts for the intricate task of reconstructing the history of

hill peoples in Southeast Asia, do I still recommend his book? The answer is definitely yes. It has made a significant contribution by highlighting egalitarianism and independence as the ideals of hill societies, for we can employ these as benchmarks for historical analysis at the macro-level. Cynics could contend that the new term Zomia (coined by William van Schendel) merely extends the reach of the already known lowland/upland dichotomy to India, and thereby downplays the impact of this neologism on the grounds that the author says very little about India and mainly draws on data from continental Southeast Asia and Southwest China. But I feel that by situating Zomia at the centre of the stage, and elucidating the values of its residents, the author forces us to face the fact that hill peoples did play a part in the history of Southeast Asia, a topic which historians have consistently ignored in the past. By challenging the current idea of borderlands as marginalised and deprived areas destined for incorporation into modern nation states and ultimate assimilation, Scott has provided us with a platform for rethinking ethnic identities and inter-ethnic relations.

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