



The social formation and cultural identity of Southeast Asian frontier society: Focused on the concept of maritime Zomia as frontier in connection with the ocean and the inland

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Abstract This paper examines the applicability of the Zomia concept for social scientific studies of the Malaysian region, with a focus on the Malaysian port cities, including Melaka. While for both empirical and socio-cultural reasons the term Zomia itself may not be entirely appropriate to the Malaysian Melaka region, the analytical implications that are based on James C. Scott's usage of it, particularly the emphasis on the cultural dynamics of inter-ethnic, inter-national, and inter-religious relations of port areas, can be of great utility to those working in the Malaysian region. Zomia is a neologism gaining popularity with the publication of James C. Scott's provocative book, *The art of not being governed: an anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia*. The term of Zomia is designed to indicate the people who has not been governed by the nation-state and national regime.

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Introduction: rethinking maritime frontiers

Malaysian port cities as open frontiers have been well-known for ethnic, linguistic, and religious diversity, providing rich materials for the study of social dynamism though the power of nation-building processes transformed them into national territories, reconfiguring regional and transnational connections across maritime frontiers. In this chapter, I examine the history and culture of Melaka (Malacca in English), certainly representing Malaysian port cities, with a focus on its role connecting the ocean and the inland in the East Asian maritime world and the characteristics and meanings of interactions.

Recently scholars (e.g. Andaya (2001, 2008), van Schendel (2002), Scott (2009)) have paid attention to Southeast Asian frontiers, standing on the monumental study of earlier scholars such as Den Hollander (1960, 1961), Leach (1960) and Lattimore (1947) on Asian and European frontiers. It is notable that the recent attention of frontiers has centered on Zomia, upland Southeast Asia, largely thanks to the publication of Scott's book, *The Art of Not Being Governed* (2009). Indeed Scott's idea of Zomia comes from Willem van Schendel. van Schendel (2002: 665) calls scholars' attention to border areas that are systematically missed by conventional approaches of area studies to "to break out of the chrysalis of the area dispensation which occurred after World War II, and to develop new concepts of regional space". In this regard,

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he pays attention to vast areas of the Asian hinterlands that has been invisible in scholarship. The rather arbitrary division into four different world areas (Northeast Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia, and Central Asia) has blocked scholars from communicating across these divides. He proposes the study of Zomia as a way to challenge some of the biases of area studies (2002: 653–654). Responding to van Schendel's proposal, James Scott provides a new look at historical and cultural dynamics in a vast area of the Southeast Asian hinterlands and inlands with a particular focus on deliberate state-avoidance.

Now it is observable that Zomia as a concept metaphor defines social reality in a way that it describes (cf. [Sahlins \(1981\)](#)). Concept metaphors, such as gender or the French Revolution, “facilitate comparison, frame contexts, levels or domains within which data – however defined – can be compared for similarities and differences” ([Moore, 2004: 75–76](#)). If there is a general agreement on the defining features of a concept metaphor, it serves as paradigmatic to a particular approach on reality. Similarly, area studies use a geographical metaphor to visualize and naturalize particular social spaces as well as a particular scale of analysis. They produce not only specific geographies of knowing but also create geographies of ignorance ([van Schendel, 2002](#)). The term of Zomia, which is becoming influential, itself may inherently shape our historical and social imagination in particular directions. In this regard, Zomia as a concept metaphor can be both a promise and a problem.

Juxtaposing Scott's case with two other definitions of Zomia- one is that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a promise, and the other is that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a problem, I call attention to the way where concept metaphors define social landscapes and historical dynamics. Drawing on the work of several Asian area specialists, I suggest a model of ocean-inland relations that does not privilege either a community or the state as a dominant player of society and history. The economic, political, and social formation of Zomia represents a strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structure ([Scott, 2009: 39](#)). Zomia as a “non-state” space is characterized by zones of refuge and by “escape” forms of agriculture and social life though it is currently being erased by the nation-state's incorporation powers ([Scott, 2009: 23, 127, 187, 324–325](#), cited in [Jonsson \(2010\): 192](#)).

Upland Southeast Asia, locus of Zomia, has been resistant to control by lowland nation-states. But this relative resilience has been due to their marginality. A lot of ethnic spaces within the upland Southeast Asian region belong to geographically dispersed and politically fragmented minority populations ([Turner, 2010: 121](#)). Over the years, however, the zones of political and cultural resistance were transformed into the zones of economic development with the intervention of the state ([Nyiri, 2012: 533–562](#)).

Is it possible to apply the notion of Zomia to the explanation of the social formations of maritime or watery frontier societies in Southeast Asia including Malaysia? I argue that it can have relevancy in dealing with maritime or watery frontier societies which have experienced the historical and social dynamics of multi-lingual, multi-ethnic, multi-cultural formations. Port cities have represented maritime frontiers and connected the ocean and the inland. Here Melaka as a conspicuous port city has been a hub of watery frontier societies. The concept of Zomia is debatable one. As I mentioned

above, Zomia as a concept metaphor can be both a promise and a problem. I think that Zomia as a concept metaphor can be a problem rather than a promise.

From this point of view on Scott's concept of Zomia, I do explain and (re)interpret the history and culture of Melaka in connection with the ocean and the inland in the East Asian maritime with the notion of ‘watery Zomia’ or ‘waterly frontier’. This explanation and (re)interpretation addresses that the different patterns or types of migration were prevalent in the maritime world before European invasion and this flow linked ethnicity and urbanism ([Hall, 2006: 454](#)).

In my opinion, by examining the widespread patterns of sojourners and inhabitants moving across the maritime world, it is emphasized that the development of urbanism rested on shifting population, not on the static settlements of people in one place at one time. In this regard, I argue that it is important to focus on the social formations and transformations of cultural mosaics or of sojourners and inhabitants as their ways of lives. It is fact that Scott provides a new perspective on the concept of frontier and Zomia. And Scott regards the concept of frontier and Zomia as the terminology of deliberate state-avoidance. However, there are similarities and differences between Scott's terminology of frontier and the terminology of waterly frontier or waterly Zomia concept. From this critical point of view, I emphasize that the concept of waterly Zomia has close relationship with the concept of verandah or window to have connection to the ocean and the inland in maritime world. In Southeast Asian maritime world, seaports like Melaka as a bridge of maritime networks, had an important role to connect with the ocean and the inland. In this regard, the concept of waterly frontier is different from Scott's concept of Zomia or frontier as the area of deliberate state-avoidance. Therefore, I emphasize that it should be understood that the concept of waterly frontier is different from the concept of Zomia, based upon Scott's Southeast Asian studies, focused on the inland Southeast Asian areas. I argue that waterly frontier has been not only an open space to exchange multiple cultures and histories, but also a zone of state-avoidance in Southeast Asian maritime world.

In this sense, it is necessary that Scott's critique of Zomia can be connected to the case of Melaka port city.

The East Asian maritime world and the formation of port cities as maritime frontiers

The East Asian maritime world consisting of inlands, islands, seas and oceans stretches across many countries and diverse ethnic groups. It has been central in cultural and commercial networks in the world. Connecting the region and the rest of the world, it has accommodated multiracial, multi-ethnic, multicultural, multi-religious communities. In this sense, cultural pluralism and dynamism have been deep inside the East Asian maritime world.

Over history, the sea has been intertwined with human societies and their relations. Individual East Asian islands developed networks with other islands and among them particular islands functioned as hubs for collection and distribution in the networks. The islands maintained autonomy which is an inherent nature of their societies. Together with islands, the sea was connected to coastal commercial cities and migrant cities. Combining commerce and migration, this maritime world actively formed urban networks.

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