



Introduction

The Flat Plateau: Rethinking Vietnam's Highlands beyond Zomia: Revisiting Zomia



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James C. Scott's conception of "Zomia" has loomed large in Southeast Asian studies since the publication of *The Art of Not Being Governed* in 2009. Scott adopted the term "Zomia"—originally coined by Willem van Schendel in 2002—to denote the massive upland zone stretching from the Himalayas to mainland Southeast Asia (Le Tourneau 2023). In this encompassing framework, the ethnically diverse highlands of Northeast India, upland Southeast Asia, and southwest China form a distinct "world" apart from the lowland states. Scott's thesis boldly reinterpreted these highlands as "an historical sanctuary for state-evading peoples," a refuge where upland communities deliberately chose to reside in rugged, hard-to-reach terrains to escape the predations of lowland kingdoms (Scott 2009: 127). By this account, highland societies were not primitive holdouts awaiting incorporation, but politically savvy communities who used geographical "friction of terrain" as a shield against taxes, corvée, and other impositions of state rule (Le Tourneau 2023). This provocative argument—essentially an "anarchist history" of upland Southeast Asia—proved *epoch-making*,

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sparking vigorous debates about upland-lowland relations, historical agency, and “secondary primitivism” across disciplines (Vargyas 2016). Scholars hailed the Zomia concept as a long-overdue recognition of uplanders’ agency and a challenge to state-centric histories. Scott’s work thus injected new energy into Southeast Asian studies, encouraging researchers to look “above and beyond” the conventional narratives anchored in lowland dynastic cores (Vargyas 2016).

Yet the Zomia framework has also faced substantial critique. Many experts have noted that Scott’s grand portrait glosses over the heterogeneity of upland histories and leans on a slim empirical base (Daniels 2010). Scott’s all-encompassing anarchist narrative risks overgeneralization—it flattens diverse highland trajectories into a single story of deliberate escape (Le Tourneau 2023). Critics detect an ideological bias in portraying upland peoples almost uniformly as liberty-seeking egalitarians, which can obscure internal complexities and interactions with power. Indeed, not all highlanders were refugees from the lowlands; some had long been autochthonous to their hills or even formed their own hierarchical polities. For example, as Vargyas (2016) argues in his ethnographic study of the Bru in Vietnam, this Mon-Khmer speaking group is “if not ‘native,’ at least the oldest known inhabitants” of their highland area—a fact that does not actually contradict Scott’s insight about state evasion. In cases like the Bru, upland communities may have a very long history in situ, and their relations with states cannot be reduced simply to flight from lowland oppression. Moreover, scholars have pointed out that upland zones were rarely as isolated as the Zomia model suggests. Trade, warfare, and cultural exchange connected many highlanders with lowland societies well before the mid-20th century. By Scott’s own admission, the highland “autonomy” began succumbing to new forces after the 1950s, when roads, radios, and modern armies allowed states to penetrate the hills (Le Tourneau 2020). In Vietnam and its neighbors, this era witnessed the final incorporation of highland frontiers—an outcome that Scott addresses as the “end of Zomia.” (Estevez and Palmer 2024; Saxer and Horstmann 2018; Noseworthy 2013). Thus, while the Zomia concept has been deeply generative, it requires critical calibration to

avoid treating the vast highland region as a timeless, monolithic enclave of statelessness. Its value lies in prompting new questions about upland agency and interstitial histories; its limitation is the need for finer-grained analysis of specific contexts. This special issue responds to that need by examining Vietnam's highlands through an alternative framework—the “Flat Plateau”—that builds on Zomia's insights while addressing its blind spots.

Plateau as Conceptual Space

Vietnam's uplands provide a compelling test case for rethinking Zomia. The country's highland zones—stretching from the forested massifs of the far north to the broad plateaus of the Central Highlands—are not “outside” history or nation. Scott himself includes Vietnam's highlands in Zomia, noting their linguistic and cultural diversity and late integration. However, a closer look reveals a more complex panorama that Zomia's one-size-fits-all model cannot fully capture. Unlike the archetypal Zomian realm of steep, roadless mountains, Vietnam's uplands also encompass extensive plateaus and valleys that facilitate mobility and state access. The Central Highlands, for instance, consist of rugged high terrain cut by deep river valleys but also many fertile high plateaus with rich basaltic soils. This geography presents travelers with the kind of topographical “friction” that Scott attributes to Zomia, and indeed the region has been long regarded as remote in Vietnamese: *vùng sâu vùng xa*; in French a hinterland (*vùng xa*) by lowlanders (Salemink 2018: 2). Yet crucially, the Central Highlands are relatively flat compared to the jagged mountain chains along Vietnam's frontiers, and modern states eventually overcame the friction of distance (Noseworthy 2013; Salemink 2018; Sowerwine 2024). French colonial forces pushed roads and garrisons into these high plateaus by the late 19th century, “pacifying” them and establishing direct rule by 1898 (Salemink 2003). The very term “plateau” suggests a broad, level highland—an upland space that, while elevated, is not entirely inaccessible. We use “Flat Plateau” as a concept to capture this in-between quality of Vietnam's highlands: neither lowlands nor impassable mountains, but porous upland plains that have been

zones of interaction, contestation, and gradual incorporation.

Historically, Vietnam's highlands were far from empty or anarchic. Before colonial conquest, these regions had their own forms of social order outside the Kinh (Vietnamese) state. In the northern uplands and the Annamite Range, various indigenous groups (Tày, Thái, Hmong, Jarai, Ba Na, and others) lived in relatively autonomous communities. In the northwest (the Black River region), powerful Tai-speaking lordships known as *muang* ruled over tiered valleys. Local forms of governance were already present before the later reorganization associated with the lowland Vietnamese majority (O'Connor 2000; Anderson and Whitmore 2017). In the Central Highlands, Highlander (upland) societies were organized at the village level; loyalty to one's village community often outweighed any broader ethnic or political identity (Hickey 1982; Condominas 1977; Dang 2023). Lowland Vietnamese chronicles barely mentioned this upland interior and made few attempts to govern it, aside from occasional military forays. Still, contacts did occur: Nguyen dynasty envoys established nominal tributary relations with some highland chiefdoms in the early 1800s, and enterprising Vietnamese traders were active in the highland barter economy for forest products (Salemink 2018; Salemink 2003). The plateau was thus a frontier space of partial connection—not fully integrated into precolonial state structures, but not completely isolated either. This frontier quality persisted under French colonialism. When the French seized Vietnam, they moved to stake claim over the highlands, citing Vietnamese “suzerainty” as justification (Salemink 2018; Stuart-Fox 1995). Resistance was fierce: between 1901 and 1914, Highlander warriors in the Central Highlands killed multiple French officers despite being armed only with bows and spears. One famous uprising in 1937, led by a visionary known as the “Python God,” swept across upland Annam and Laos, fueled in part by indigenous prophetic movements (Salemink 1994). Geoffrey Gunn suggests this millenarian ferment was catalyzed by French colonial abuses—a violent backlash that helped spark the 1937 revolt (Gunn 1987). Such episodes underscore that Vietnam's highlands have long been contested zones, where external powers encountered spirited local resistance rather than

passive acquiescence. As Christian Lentz (2019: 10-11) notes in his study of northwest Vietnam, this area functioned as a zone of negotiation and gradual incorporation, where processes of integration unfolded unevenly over time. While systems of governance in Vietnam tended to be more consolidated in the lowland delta regions, they are more plural, layered, and locally mediated in the mountainous region, reflecting its diverse social and ecological conditions. These realities complicate the Zomia image of highlands as refuges wholly untouched by state power.

Our notion of the **Flat Plateau** builds on this complex history. We envision the highlands not as a vertical escape realm opposed to the state, but as a horizontal frontier space of *encounter*—a socio-spatial plateau where multiple sovereignties, cultures, and economies have converged. Unlike Zomia, which foregrounds upland societies primarily through their historical avoidance of centralized state power, the concept of the Flat Plateau does not reduce upland-lowland relations to a single explanatory logic. Instead, it approaches these relations as a heterogeneous field of interaction encompassing cooperation, contestation, negotiation, and mutual dependence. The “flatness” of the Flat Plateau is not a topographical description but a theoretical stance that seeks to level the analytical hierarchy between uplands and lowlands, moving beyond rigid oppositional frameworks. In this view, highlands are not imagined as a vertical realm of escape from the state, but as a horizontal frontier of encounter—a socio-spatial plateau where multiple sovereignties, cultures, and economies converge. Economic exchange, cultural circulation, and migratory mobility function as relational forces that “flatten” analytical distance, bringing uplands and lowlands into closer and more dynamic interdependence. This relationship has often been characterized by enduring tensions and asymmetries, yet it has rarely resulted in complete separation. Rather than constituting mutually exclusive spheres, upland and lowland societies remained historically interconnected through shifting patterns of exchange, conflict, accommodation, and mutual dependence. Rather than positing a sharp civilizational divide at the forest line, the Flat Plateau framework emphasizes gradients and transitions, highlighting how upland societies have been gradually

entangled with state structures while continuously negotiating the terms of their integration. This perspective highlights the significance of Vietnam's highlands within broader national narratives.

Indeed, recent scholarship has underscored the centrality of the Central Highlands in regional history, noting, for example, their role in precolonial trade and warfare (Salemink 2018). The Flat Plateau, as a conceptual space, thus draws attention to the highlands as a “dynamic middle ground” (to borrow the term of White (2011: 50-53). It is a zone of exchange and adaptation between upland and lowland states and peoples. It acknowledges with Scott that highlanders often sought autonomy but insists that this autonomy was always relational and provisional-shaped through the interaction of states, markets, and other social forces. In short, the plateau is *flat* because it is an interactive arena, not an isolated world apart. By reconceptualizing Vietnam's uplands in this way, we aim to capture both the agency of highland communities and the powerful structuring influence of colonial and national regimes.

Conceptual Dimensions of the Flat Plateau

Connectivity: Uplands as Spaces of Connection

This approach seeks to challenge conventional political and academic discourses that marginalize upland regions. Instead, the highlands are conceptualized as sites of convergence and circulation, where flows of goods, people, knowledge, and cultural practices move across and beyond regional boundaries. Rather than emphasizing elevation as a source of division between uplands and lowlands, the *Flat Plateau* framework suggests that mountain ranges themselves have historically opened up corridors of movement—most notably through mountain passes. It is through these passes that interactions between upland and lowland spaces have been sustained and facilitated. From this perspective, the highlands do not stand outside the broader historical trajectories of particular communities or states but constitute an integral component of wider spaces of interaction.

Bidirectionality: Upland-Lowland Relations as Two-Way Processes

This analytical dimension underscores that relations between uplands and lowlands are never unidirectional, but inherently multidirectional. The Flat Plateau framework rejects the view of uplands solely as spaces of evasion or resistance to centralized state power. This does not imply that upland societies are simply dependent on central states; rather, it highlights a relationship of mutual reliance. In certain historical circumstances, lowland states themselves have depended on upland regions for their survival. Upland-lowland relations are therefore understood as dynamic and contingent, continually reshaped by changing historical contexts as well as shifting configurations of power and interest between the two sides.

Relative Centrality: Polycentric Highlands

The notion of polycentricity within the *Flat Plateau* framework is intended to move beyond the assumption that the highlands constitute a single, fixed center. Instead, multiple centers have emerged and been reconfigured over time in response to specific economic, social, and political conditions. This perspective is particularly suited to the spatial breadth of the highlands and their diversity of ethnic groups and cultural forms. Accordingly, the *Flat Plateau* is best understood as an open and dynamic highland space—one that is constantly in motion, interaction, and transformation within broader historical and social networks.

Taken together, these dimensions position the Flat Plateau as a relational, historically grounded, and analytically flexible framework. In dialogue with Zomia and post-Zomia scholarship, it brings Vietnam's highlands into closer analytical focus within broader discussions of regional history, state formation, and social transformation, without presuming either isolation or uniform incorporation. By emphasizing connectivity, bidirectionality, relative centrality, and knowledge production, the framework seeks to offer a more nuanced and multidimensional understanding of upland-lowland relations in Vietnam and beyond.

Themes and Contributions

The contributions to this special issue collectively demonstrate the analytical power of the Flat Plateau framework. They cover a broad range of themes—from colonial history and revolutionary statecraft to contemporary cultural politics—each grounded in Vietnam’s highland context but speaking to larger questions raised by Zomia.

In line with the core analytical dimensions of the *Flat Plateau* framework, the articles in this special issue explore the “flatness” of the highlands through three thematic clusters.

Historical Depth and Long-Term Interaction

Articles in this cluster examine upland-lowland interactions across extended historical trajectories. Rather than focusing on a single historical moment, these studies trace the formation, evolution, and transformation of such relations over time. By adopting a long-term perspective, they provide readers with a continuous and integrated understanding of how upland-lowland relations have been constituted and reconfigured throughout history.

Political Authority, Governance, and Mediation

This cluster focuses on the ways in which states have governed upland regions. It shows that central state authority in the highlands has rarely operated through direct imposition, but more often through intermediary mechanisms, dialogue, and adaptive negotiation. Upland actors are not treated as passive recipients of state power; instead, they emerge as active and influential participants in the implementation of state policies and programs, as well as in shaping national security strategies in upland areas. Power, in this sense, is understood as a co-produced outcome of interactions between central states and upland societies.

Mobility, Exchange, and Regional Connectivity

The third cluster examines the highlands as important spaces of mobility and interaction across different historical periods. Through trade routes, migration, military movements, and various forms of

exchange, flows of goods, people, knowledge, and cultural practices linked upland and lowland regions while situating the highlands within broader regional processes. Rather than treating the highlands as isolated frontier zones, these studies emphasize their role as dynamic spaces through which different social, political, and economic networks intersected.

Across these varied contributions, a shared analytical orientation becomes apparent. Collectively, the articles support the Flat Plateau approach by drawing attention to intermediate and relational dynamics that lie between perspectives emphasizing separation and those emphasizing full integration. Rather than framing Vietnam's highlands in absolute terms, the contributions highlight them as spaces shaped by long-term interaction, adaptation, and historical complexity. Highland communities are presented not as static or isolated entities, but as participants in historical processes whose engagements with wider political, economic, and cultural frameworks have taken diverse and situational forms. These engagements reflect a range of responses and adjustments over time, shaped by local conditions as well as broader structural influences. In parallel, governance in the highlands appears not as a uniform or uninterrupted process, but as one characterized by variation, gradual extension, and differentiated forms of engagement across periods and localities.

The Flat Plateau framework is designed to capture this multilayered reality. It provides a conceptual middle ground for examining how upland and lowland contexts intersect, how different forms of organization and affiliation coexist, and how regional and transregional forces interact with local lifeworlds in highland settings. Rather than idealizing uplands or treating them as residual spaces, the framework approaches them as historically embedded and socially consequential components of national and regional development. Scholars of highland regions have noted that conceptual models such as Zomia are most productive when employed as supplementary analytical perspectives that enrich interpretation without displacing established approaches (Shneiderman 2010; van Schendel 2002). In this spirit, the Flat Plateau is offered as a complementary framework that facilitates

dialogue across scales and disciplines. The studies brought together in this issue—drawing on archival materials, ethnographic research, and locally grounded perspectives—illustrate the value of approaching highland regions through such an integrative lens. We invite readers to consider how the Flat Plateau framework may be applied in other upland contexts, contributing to broader comparative discussions of historically complex regions.

Taken together, the articles in this special issue contribute to a rethinking of the position of the highlands in relation to lowland states and populations in Vietnam. Rather than marginal or passive spaces in historical processes, the highlands emerge as indispensable partners of the lowlands. This partnership is relative rather than fixed, continually negotiated within specific historical contexts and realized through diverse forms of interaction, including trade, migration, and cultural exchange. The *Flat Plateau* framework proposed here does not seek to replace *Zomia*, but rather to render a globally-oriented concept more attentive to local contexts through sustained engagement with local sources and empirical materials. In doing so, it aims to open broader scholarly dialogues on upland spaces in Vietnam and beyond.

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