



Interactions across the Northwest Việt Nam Highlands during the Đông Sơn Period (8th-1st Centuries BCE)



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[*Abstract*]

The concept of Zomia has become an influential theoretical framework in the study of the relationship between highland and lowland regions in mainland Southeast Asia. This theory interprets highland communities as societies actively evading the control of central states. However, much of the current discussion of Zomia is still based on historical and ethnographic data from later periods, while archaeological evidence for prehistoric and early historical periods remains limited. This paper approaches that debate through the case of the Northwest Việt Nam during the Đông Sơn period (8th-1st centuries BCE). Based on the synthesis and analysis of the spatial distribution of sites, types of high-grade bronze artifacts, and their functions, the study shows that the Northwest Việt Nam did not operate as an isolated, evasive space, but actively participated in inter-regional exchange networks connecting the Red River Delta and Yunnan. However, the degree and form of this participation are not uniform across river valley regions, reflecting the selective integration of mountain communities. These results suggest

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that, within the context of Đông Sơn period, Zomia should be understood as a model that is more flexible over time and space rather than a uniform model for the entire mainland Southeast Asia.

Keywords: Highland, Northwest Việt Nam, South China, Bronze drum, Archaeology, Flat Plateau.

I . Background

In recent years, the concept of Zomia has become a theoretical framework that has generated widespread debate among researchers. Zomia (Scott 2009) interprets the highlands of Southeast Asia as an autonomous space, where the inhabitants actively evade the control of central institutions in the lowlands through dispersed settlements, mobility, and reliance on natural shields such as rugged terrain. These communities actively choose to protect themselves from the constraints of the central state, avoiding enslavement, taxation, and forced labor. This interpretive framework has significantly contributed to the study of the relationship between highlands and lowlands, opening new approaches, but also raised debates about its universality in specific spaces and times.

Much of Zomia's discussion is based on historical and ethnographic documents from the later period. Therefore, how this theoretical framework applies to the formation of early states is not yet fully understood. The roles of trade networks, natural transportation routes, and cultural practices during this period have not been systematically addressed in Zomia's debates. This article ventures an insight into the Northwest region of Việt Nam during the Đông Sơn culture period, drawing on archaeological data to examine whether this highland region operated according to Zomia's model as it alternatively participated in inter-regional exchange and integration networks.

In comprehensive studies on the Đông Sơn culture, the Northwest region is not mentioned as a specific local type of Đông Sơn culture but is often referred to with concepts such as mountain

Đông Sơn or border Đông Sơn (Hà Văn Tấn 1994; Phạm Minh Huyền 1996). This perspective has its merits if only considering geographical factors. A prominent feature of the topography of the Northwest highland of Việt Nam is its strong dissection by high mountain ranges running in a Northwest-Southeast direction and a high density of streams with steep slopes. This topography creates river valleys and basins, forming the main topographical elements of the Northwest region: high mountains-basins-deep valleys-steep rivers. This geographical feature strongly influences population distribution, causing settlements to be far apart due to being separated by high and rugged mountain ranges, or by deep, fast-flowing rivers. Because of this fragmentation and rugged terrain, in prehistoric archaeological studies, the Northwest region was often considered a peripheral, stagnant, isolated area, influenced by the central region, the Bắc Bộ Delta.

However, archaeological findings in Northwest Việt Nam show that river valleys were inhabited by humans from a very early period, with *Homo sapiens* fossils discovered at Hang Hùm on the banks of the Chảy River (Kahlke & Nguyễn Văn Nghĩa 1965: 11-23). During the Late Paleolithic period, relics were densely distributed along the Red River and Đà River valleys (Son La Provincial Museum 2022). During the Đông Sơn period, relics were concentrated in high density along both banks of the Red River (Hà Văn Tấn 1994). Archaeological artifacts found in the Northwest region share many similarities with artifacts discovered in the Red River Delta and Yunnan (China). The similarities in the types of artifacts suggest that the Northwestern mountainous region of Việt Nam not only served as a geographic staging point but also as an important buffer zone connecting and facilitating cultural exchange between two major centers: the Red River Delta and the Yunnan Highland.

Archaeological sites from the Đông Sơn period along river valleys are often found at river confluences, large basins deep within mountainous areas. These basins are connected to the main rivers through their tributaries. Simultaneously, the existence of a high quantity and density of high-grade metallurgical products indicates the accumulation of wealth and integration between the Northwest

mountainous region and neighboring areas.

The geographic context and archaeological findings in this area lead to several research questions: firstly, during the Đông Sơn culture period (VIII-I BCE¹), did the communities in the mountainous Northwest of Việt Nam operate in the way proposed by Zomia or actively autonomous communities evading the state or did they participate in interregional trade and power networks through integration and selection? Secondly, what role did the natural transportation routes in the Northwest region along major river corridors such as the Red River, Đà River, Chảy River, and their tributaries play in connecting the mountainous Northwest of Việt Nam with major cultural centers such as Yunnan and especially the Bắc Bộ Delta? Thirdly, does the degree of participation of different river valleys reflect homogeneity or spatial differences? Fourthly, what contributions do these archaeological findings make to the Zomia theoretical framework in the context of pre- and early history in the highlands of mainland Southeast Asia?

To answer these questions, this study uses Zomia as the central theoretical framework, tested with archaeological evidence. Other approaches, including interregional interaction theories in archaeology (Schortman 1989; Stein 2002) and socio-economic archaeology (Furholt, Grier, Spriggs, & Earle 2020), serve as analytical tools to better explain the archaeological evidence. Therefore, this paper demonstrates that, during the Đông Sơn culture period, the Northwest region of Việt Nam was not isolated but was rather one of the important cultural transit areas connecting the Red River Delta and Yunnan. During this transit process, the Northwest region integrated with these centers through the exchange and redistribution of high-grade metallurgical products such as bronze drums and bronze jars, while also contributing to the refinement and expansion of discussions about Zomia during the early formation of states in mainland Southeast Asia.

1 Before Common Era

II . Sources of Materials and Research Methods

This article is based on a synthesis and analysis of archaeological documents on the Đông Sơn culture discovered in the mountainous Northwest region of Việt Nam from the past to the present. These documents mainly consist of archaeological reports, articles announcing archaeological discoveries of the Đông Sơn culture in the Northwest region, and the results of a survey conducted by the authors along the Red River in April 2025. These documents relatively fully reflect the spatial distribution of the sites in the river valleys and mountainous basins of Northwest Việt Nam.

The most regrettable aspect is that the archaeological findings are largely accidental, lacking cultural layers. A few of these were excavated but no samples were collected for dating. Therefore, the dates used in this article are primarily based on typological comparisons with similar artifacts found at other sites that have already been specifically dated. This is an objective shortcoming but does not affect the main objective of the article, which is to analyze patterns of connection and integration.

Comparative typology is an approach applied in understanding the relationships between regions. The appearance of the same type of artifact, or the same style of pattern in different places, reflects the interaction and exchange of goods between those regions. This method identifies that artifacts were not simply disseminated in one direction, but that their presence reflects the level and form of participation of communities in the broader exchange system of the Đông Sơn culture period.

Archaeological findings are linked to the geographical context and the function of the artifacts, especially bronze drums and bronze jars. Bronze drums were considered ceremonial objects, symbols of power, or musical instruments, while bronze jars were containers; however, findings in this area show that bronze drums and jars were also repurposed, becoming coffins for burying the dead. These similarities in burial practices are important evidence for cultural connections across a wide range, contributing to clarifying the selective integration of mountain communities within

the overall Đông Sơn culture.

Through the approaches described above, this study aims to use archaeological data to test the Zomia theoretical framework to clarify the extent to which mountainous communities in Northwest Việt Nam both participated in interregional exchange networks and maintained distinct local characteristics.

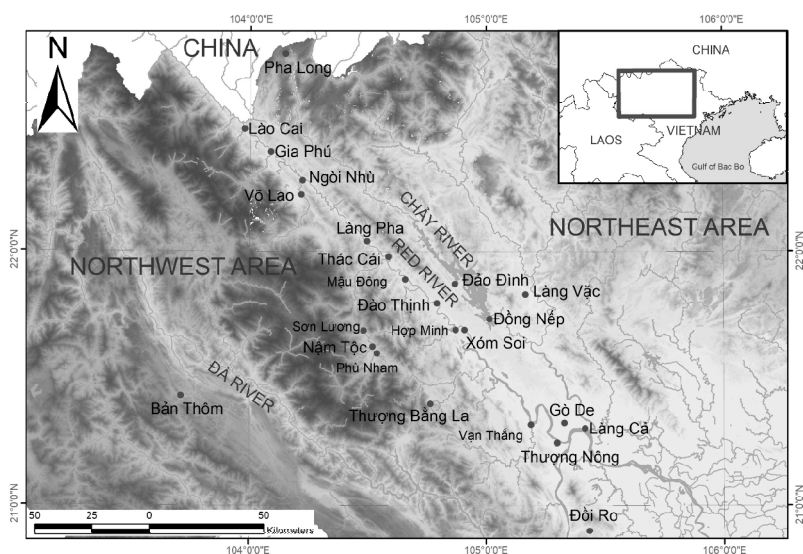
III. The Interactive Relationship between the Northwest Việt Nam Highland and Neighboring Areas during the Đông Sơn Culture Period: Archaeological Evidence

Archaeological findings in the Northwest region show the particularly prominent role of river valleys and basins during the Đông Sơn culture period. Regarding the distribution, Đông Sơn cultural relics and artifacts, including bronze drums, bronze jars, production tools, weapons, and jewelry, are concentrated along large river valleys, tributaries, and basins in the high mountains (Hà Văn Tấn 1994). This distribution reflects a pattern of settlement and trade, in which areas with convenient transportation played a central role. In the case of the Northwest region, this is the confluence of large rivers and their tributaries. Đông Sơn archaeological sites are often found around river junctions (see Figure 1). These locations allowed for control over trade in all directions. From these centers, goods were exchanged along the large rivers vertically and along smaller streams deep into the high mountain basins.

According to that model, areas such as Lào Cai, Gia Phú, Ngòi Nhù, Yên Bái, and Việt Trì emerged as important settlement and trading centers. These areas had relatively large, flat lands and were strategically located along waterways. The large number of bronze drums and bronze vessels discovered here indicates a much higher concentration and accumulation of wealth compared to other areas. Conversely, mountainous areas, narrow valleys, and more difficult-to-access regions show a significantly lower density of Đông Sơn relics. This disparity reflects a disparity in settlement, production, and trade activities, which were not evenly distributed

but concentrated in areas with more favorable natural conditions and transportation.

From a geographical perspective and based on archaeological findings, the mountainous Northwest region of Việt Nam is a multi-linear space, in which river valleys and basins play a role in organizing and directing human activities. This topographical organization of settlements facilitated the Northwest region of Việt Nam's deep involvement in inter-regional communication networks during the Đông Sơn period, acting as an important intermediary between the Red River Delta and southern China.



<Figure 1> Distribution of major Đông Sơn sites in Northwest Việt Nam.

Source: Compiled by the author

3.1. The Red River Valley and Its Network of Settlements and Trade Routes

The Red River Valley is the area with the highest concentration of Đông Sơn relics and artifacts. This indicates that the Red River Valley was an important inter-regional trade axis, along which important settlement centers emerged with significant accumulation of wealth.

The Lào Cai area possesses two crucial conditions for becoming a regional center of the Đông Sơn culture: a river confluence, the junction of the Dum stream and the Red River, and a relatively large alluvial plain. From the late 20th century to the present day, within a 5 km radius, numerous discoveries of bronze drums, bronze jars, production tools, weapons, and jewelry have been recorded in this area.

More specifically, the findings recorded in the Lao Cai area are systematically presented in the following data table (see Table 1):

<Table 1> Major Đông Sơn Bronze Assemblages along the Red River Corridor in Lào Cai

Sites	Artifacts
Lào Cai Airport	Bronze drum and bells
Provincial Hospital area	1 bronze drum, 8 slanted axes, 5 symmetrical axes, 3 plowshares, 2 hoeing tools, 1 shovel, 2 spearheads, 3 javelins
Pắc Tà	1 bronze drum
Cốc Lếu Market	1 plowshare, 2 symmetrical axeheads, 3 slanted axeheads, 1 spearhead
Hill opposite Lào Cai High School	2 bronze drums, 4 bells, 1 bell handle, 1 knob, 1 plate, many fragments of pots, basins, and handles, 3 iron knives, 3 jade sword guards
Near Crystal Hill	3 bronzes drums, 1 sickle, 1 bowl, 1 tray, 2 large basins, 2 handle fragments, 2 iron swords, 1 silver bowl
Crystal Hill	4 bronze drums and a large bronze pot
Ngô Quyền junction	4 bronze drums, horse ornaments, figurines, glass beads
Cốc Lếu II	3 vases, 2 sickles, 2 basins, 3 bowls, 2 plates, 1 sieve, 3 trays, 1 incense burner, several pots, 3 spikes, 1 fruit, 10 bells (3 of which have Chinese characters), 1 bear statue, several bronze fragments, 4 iron swords, stone artifacts: 1 grinding stone, 2 hammocks; and 1 glass plate.
Ethnic Boarding School area	1 bronze drum, 1 bronze jar with boat motifs
Phổ Mới Bridge area	2 bronze drums, 2 incense burners, 4 basins, 1 jar, 2 pots, 1 spearhead, 1 duck statue, 1 stone tray, some rusted iron artifacts

Source: Compiled from Huyền Sâm (1973); Phạm Minh Huyền (1999); Trần Hữu Sơn (1994); Trần Hữu Sơn (1999); Minh Nguyệt (2002).

While classifying the Đông Sơn bronze artifacts discovered in Lào Cai, there is a group of bronze statues such as kneeling human figures and animal figures like bears, monkeys, and parrots, ranging in size from a few centimeters to over 10 centimeters. These statues are all round and are part of larger bronze objects, placed at the base of the containers. The style of the statues shows many elements integrating Han culture from the North and the grassland culture of Central Asia, such as the kneeling human figure with curly hair, deep-set eyes, and a goatee (Trịnh Sinh & Đinh Văn Hải 1999: 169-171).

The Đông Sơn bronze drums in the central area of Lào Cai province are divided into three stylistic groups: Đông Sơn style (11 drums), Shizaishan style (6 drums), and Wanjiaba style (2 drums), indicating that the dominant cultural element of Lào Cai is Đông Sơn. However, cultural influences from Southern China are also evident in the Shizaishan and Wanjiaba drums. This further demonstrates the attraction and convergence of Lào Cai to bronze drum centers in general and early Iron Age centers in particular. The Đông Sơn drums discovered in Lào Cai are in much larger numbers than in other localities, and exhibit many different early and late styles, indicating the long existence of the Đông Sơn cultural space here. Therefore, Lào Cai could be a center of a regional leader, a center of power in three aspects: political, economic, and social power (Phạm Minh Huyền 1999: 38-63; Diệp Đình Hoa & Phạm Minh Huyền 1996: 163-164).

The Gia Phú site, located about 30 km south of Lào Cai, lies at the confluence of the Red River and the Ngòi Bo stream. At this river junction, the Gia Phú bronze drum and numerous other bronze artifacts such as tools, weapons, and jewelry were discovered (see Figure 2). Notably, the Gia Phú bronze drum also contained human remains and many valuable burial goods (Nguyễn Lâm Cường, Nguyễn Văn Thắng, Bùi Thị Hương, Phan Chí Cường, Nguyễn Thị Hoa, & Hoàng Thị Kim Luyện 2020: 197-199), suggesting it was used as a coffin for burying the dead. In April 2025, we conducted a survey in this area. Besides the Gia Phú drum, there were many traces of ancient artifacts looted by antique thieves, and scattered bronze fragments were found in several locations. These findings

indicate that Gia Phú was also a settlement center with accumulated wealth. This center strategically controlled the trade route between the Red River corridor and the narrow corridor along the Ngòi Bo stream.

The Ngòi Nhù site, located 8 km south of Gia Phú site, lies at the confluence of the Red River and Ngòi Nhù River. We conducted investigations and excavations at this site in

November and December 2025. Numerous disturbed pits dug from the surface layer deep into the cultural strata, left by artifact poachers, were densely distributed across the surface of the site. Many pits also contained fragments of bronze. Based on the investigation, Ngòi Nhù appears to have been an important center at the river confluence. From here, the flow of bronze artifacts continued deep into the mountainous region via Ngòi Nhù, evidenced by the bronze artifacts discovered at Võ Lao (see Figure 3), approximately 20 km upstream from the Ngòi Nhù confluence with the Red River.

Further south along the Red River, discoveries in Yên Bái further reinforce this pattern. Major centers such as Đào Thịnh, Hợp Minh, Yên Hợp, and Châu Quế (Nguyễn Văn Quang 2004) are all located in riverside areas, near the confluence of the Red River and large streams such as Ngòi Thia, Ngòi Thiến, Ngòi Lâu, and Ngòi Hút. These sites all contain a large quantity of high-quality bronze artifacts.



<Figure 2> Gia Phú bronze drum
Source: Photographed by the Author



<Figure 3> Võ Lao bronze drum
Source: Photographed by the Author

At Đào Thịnh, Đồng Gianh area, artifacts were accidentally discovered due to riverbank erosion or during agricultural activities. While this site lacks a cultural layer, it has yielded relics such as bronze basins, pottery fragments, and bronze drums, the most notable of which is the Đào Thịnh bronze jar. This is the largest of the discovered bronze jars, intact, with a lid and beautiful patterns. Besides geometric patterns, the lid of the Đào Thịnh jar is decorated with four sculptural blocks, each depicting a male and female in sexual intercourse. This symbolizes fertility beliefs, which were prevalent among rice-farming communities in the Red River Delta. The Đào Thịnh bronze jar, located near the Red River bank, 3 meters below the surface, was discovered accidentally. Inside the jar was a smaller jar containing copper nails, copper ore, a piece of wood, human teeth, etc. Subsequently, surveys around the discovery site revealed a bronze basin, a bronze drum, traces of a bronze drum imprinted in the ground, and other bronze artifacts (Lê Văn Lan, Phạm Văn Kinh, & Nguyễn Linh 1963: 79-80). According to archaeologists, this was a burial site with a burial practice using bronze jars and drums as coffins.

In Hợp Minh, Đồi Chọi area, in 1995, an intact jar with a lid was discovered. Inside the jar were human remains and burial artifacts including a bronze dagger, a bronze axe, a bronze rattle, and a broken four-pronged earring (Nguyễn Lâm Cường 1995: 51).

In the Yên Hợp area, near the Ngòi Thia stream flowing into the Red River, during road construction in 2013, excavators unearthed a bronze drum, known as the Yên Hợp bronze drum. This is a low, flared-body bronze drum (Yên Bái Museum 2013).

At Xóm Soi on the banks of the Red River, in the Trấn Yên area, a burial site was discovered without a coffin, containing only traces and some bronze tools buried with the deceased, including one bronze cauldron, one bronze plowshare, two bronze shovels, one bronze axe, one chisel, two daggers, and some bronze fragments. At Ngòi Quạch estuary (Mậu Đông), a Mậu Đông bronze drum of the Wanjiaba type was found along with traces of human bones. At Đồng Nếp, two lidless bronze jars were discovered buried with bronze artifacts. At Làng Pha, an area on the banks of the Red

River, eight bronze jars were found, both with and without lids, containing human bones and other Đông Sơn bronze artifacts (Nguyễn Văn Quang 2004: 153-158).

In the area stretching from Lào Cai to Yên Bái, there is a noteworthy phenomenon: the use of bronze drums and bronze jars as coffins for burying the dead. Particularly noteworthy is the Hốp Minh jar containing the remains of a child only 4 to 5 years old (Nguyễn Lâm Cường 1995: 51). This child, unable to produce wealth, was buried in a high-quality bronze jar with many valuable burial artifacts. This may reflect a form of material compensation linked to the parents' profound grief (Oxenham, Matsumura, Domett, Nguyen Kim Thuy, Nguyen Kim Dung, Nguyen Lan Cuong, Huffer, and Muller 2008: 204), and suggests that the child's parents were leaders or wealthy individuals in the community. Meanwhile, the Red River valley is a narrow and constantly flood-prone area, making the land unsuitable for large-scale rice cultivation. This implies that the economic resources of these communities did not come from rice farming but from exchange of goods.

In the Việt Trì area, important Đông Sơn culture sites such as Làng Cả, Gò De, and Vạn Thắng (Hà Văn Tấn 1994) are located near the major confluence points of the Red River, Đà River, and Lô River (Chảy River is a tributary of the Lô River). These areas have favorable conditions for wet rice cultivation and control over all important waterways through the Đà River, Red River, and Lô River in both directions towards the Red River Delta and the Northwest highlands. Therefore, these areas have a dense population with the concentration of prestige goods, as evidenced by the scale and composition of burial artifacts discovered at Làng Cả, Gò De, and Vạn Thắng.

The Làng Cả residential and burial site is located near the Bạch Hạc junction, the confluence of the Red River and the Lô River; and the Hồng Đà junction, the confluence of the Đà River and the Red River. The site was discovered during the construction of a factory. At this site, the total excavated area is 6589 m², and 311 burial sites belonging to the Đông Sơn culture have been discovered, with a cultural layer 30-40 cm thick. The collection of artifacts

obtained at Làng Cả shows that this was a large settlement center of the Đông Sơn culture with the widespread use of copper metallurgy and a clear differentiation of wealth (Hà Văn Tấn 1994: 25-26).

Gò De burial site is a large Đông Sơn culture burial site. The number of artifacts unearthed in this area is not fully documented due to loss and looting. In 1995, six burial chambers were discovered, densely distributed, with unclear boundaries. The tombs all oriented northeast-southwest and are earth pit tombs. 52 bronze artifacts were found in the tombs, including various production tools, weapons, jewelry, musical instruments, and household items (Hà Văn Phụng 1995: 112).

The Vạn Thắng bronze jars were discovered in 1962 at Mọc Hill, 400 m from the Red River. The two jars were buried vertically. Based on the remaining traces inside the jars, archaeologists determined that this was a cremation burial. Of the two bronze jars, one had a lid and was intact, belonging to the typical beautiful jars of the Đông Sơn culture (Lê Văn Lan et al. 1963: 75-76).

Material evidence and folklore suggest that the first state of the ancient Vietnamese people was formed in Việt Trì, at the confluence of the major rivers the Red River, the Đà River, and the Lô River, before they merged into a single river flowing into the Bắc Bộ Delta. It is no coincidence that the first rudimentary state was formed in this area and not elsewhere. The area around Việt Trì was a key point, strategically located on the trade route between the fertile rice-growing region of the Bắc Bộ Delta (Việt Nam) and Yunnan (China). Therefore, the chiefs here could control most of the trade routes, as people exchanged products in various directions along the rivers. The products exchanged likely included agricultural products, copper, and copper metallurgy. Following the Red River, material economic values converged at the center of Việt Trì, creating a solid economic foundation for the region.

Evidence from the centers suggests that the corridor along the Red River valley represents a major vertical network of connections. These centers were linked through high-quality bronze products originating from Yunnan and the Bắc Bộ Delta. This is evident in the

types of bronze drums, bronze jars, and their decorative patterns. Regarding bronze drums, Dian-style patterns such as humped oxen, striped-clothed figures, and topknots appear in Lào Cai, and in the delta region, as seen in the Dong Xa drums. Đông Sơn-style bronze drums are also found in all three regions.

Regarding bronze vessels, very few have been found in Southern China, while many have been discovered in the Bắc Bộ Delta of Việt Nam, throughout the Northwest region, with decorations characteristic of the agricultural beliefs of the Bắc Bộ Delta, such as the male and female figures on the Đào Thịnh vessel, and images of birds and animals typical of the tropical South. All confirm that the Northwest region of Việt Nam, through its network of settlements along the Red River, played a crucial role in transmitting culture between the two highly developed regions of Yunnan and the Bắc Bộ Delta.

Concrete evidence from archaeological findings along the Red River valley suggests that the social space and location of the Northwest mountainous region of Việt Nam can hardly be explained by the Zomia framework, if emphasis is placed on dispersed settlements, high flexibility, and avoidance of control axes. Conversely, the dense concentration of bronze drums, bronze vessels, and rich tombs at sites located at major confluences such as Lào Cai, Yên Bái, and Việt Trì indicates settlement, accumulation of wealth, and deliberate control over transportation routes along the river valleys.

Thus, the Red River Valley was not merely a natural transportation corridor but also a central axis of socio-economic power organization. In this area, the communities of the Northwest during the Đông Sơn period directly participated in the inter-regional exchange network. One of the key points is the discovery of artifacts concentrated at river confluences, showing that these communities did not actively evade central power as in Zomia theory, but rather actively chose their positions at key locations, controlling trade routes. Therefore, this evidence suggests that the Zomia model for large river corridors in highlands needs to be reconsidered.

From a theoretical perspective, the distribution pattern of Đông Sơn sites along major river valleys suggests that the living spaces in the Northwest mountainous region were not randomly dispersed or isolated. Conversely, the concentration of sites at river confluences and large basins suggests the existence of organized connecting corridors, where the rivers served as axes of transportation and exchange. This model raises questions about the Zomia interpretation, which emphasizes avoidance as a dominant strategy of highland inhabitants, at least in the context of Đông Sơn archaeology.

3.2. Secondary Trade Routes of the Red River

Crossing the Red River valley, major tributaries such as Ngòi Dum, Ngòi Bo, Ngòi Nhù, and Ngòi Thia played a crucial role in extending the influence of the Đông Sơn culture deep into the mountainous interior. Discoveries of bronze drums and artifacts along the Ngòi Nhù and Ngòi Thia routes indicate that Đông Sơn communities used these connecting routes to integrate with centers located deep within the mountainous basins.

In the Võ Lao area (Lào Cai), a bronze drum was discovered in 2003. The discovery site is located near Ngòi Nhù, about 10 km as the crow flies from the confluence of the Red River and Ngòi Nhù. The Võ Lao bronze drum is relatively intact, belonging to the low-profile type with a flared body, and its style is like the Gia Phú bronze drum (Bùi Thu Hương, 2004).

Upstream of the Ngòi Thia stream, in the Nghĩa Lộ area, a large basin, 2 Đông Sơn bronze drums were discovered: the Nậm Tộc and Phù Nham drums. Both are of the low-profile, flared-body type. The Nậm Tộc drum was found lying face up, containing burial artifacts such as axes, knives, shovels, bronze bracelets, tubular beads, traces of cloth, and human bones. The traces of cloth indicate a 14C age of 2080 ± 90 BP (Nguyễn Văn Quang 2004: 210-213).

The bronze drums discovered along with other bronze tools suggest that these deep mountainous areas were not merely hiding places or burial grounds for migrants, but rather reflected stable and

important settlement centers. This indicates that the deep mountain basins were not stagnant areas passively receiving resources from one side, but rather actively accumulated wealth through the exchange of high-quality copper products from the Red River valley. Following this path, the inhabitants of these remote areas approached the level of development of the lowland inhabitants. From a Zomia perspective, these basins located deep in the high mountains, with their natural geographical barriers, would be living spaces where communities actively avoided influences from the lowlands, and were less connected to exchange networks. However, these archaeological documents show that the communities in the Northwest mountainous region were not separate from the trade and cultural exchange system of the Đông Sơn culture; instead, they participated actively and selectively.

The culture of using high-end products such as bronze drums and bronze vessels, and the way they treated them in Northwest Việt Nam shows similarities with the cultural practices and use of bronze objects in the Red River Delta. Thus, the mountainous basins of the Đông Sơn period were not spaces separate from the state in the sense of Zomia but rather had close ties with the Red River Delta and the Yunnan Highland.

The presence of highly valuable metal artifacts, sharing styles and craftsmanship with the Red River Delta and Yunnan Highland, suggests that the communities in the Northwest mountainous region participated in extensive inter-regional exchange networks. However, differences in type, density, and quantity between river basins also reflect uneven levels of participation. This suggests a limited form of active integration, in which local communities both received material elements from the inter-regional network depending on community scale, economic resources, and cultural identity. This mode of participation is not entirely consistent with the Zomia model, which views the highlands as a space outside of power and exchange networks.

3.3. Chảy River Valley

Compared to the Red River, Đông Sơn artifacts along the Chảy River

are found in lower densities but still exhibit a similar distribution pattern. Most sites containing Đông Sơn artifacts are located near the banks of the Chảy River. Along this river valley, 12 sites containing Đông Sơn artifacts have been found, 11 of which are located near the riverbank, while the Làng Vạc site is 10km from the riverbank. Among these, 4 Đông Sơn bronze drums were discovered, and one site (Đồng Nếp) was a burial site with 2 bronze jars found along with a group of accompanying bronze objects. The bronze drums found here are of the low-bodied, flared type, and late Đông Sơn drums had flying flag patterns and variations in shape compared to standard Đông Sơn drums (Nguyễn Văn Quang 2004: 157). Among them, the Pha Long bronze drum, discovered in 1956 at a site near the Chinese border, is a particularly beautiful Đông Sơn drum. Several other bronze drums along the Chảy River, such as those from Làng Vạc, Mông Sơn, and Đảo Đình, are mainly of the late type, with patterns and shapes that vary from standard Đông Sơn drums. Drums of this type have also been found in Northeast Việt Nam and in greater numbers in Southern China.

The evidence above indicates that the Chảy River basin exhibits a different pattern from the Red River valley, with a lower density of artifacts and the appearance of later-style bronze drums with variations. This suggests that it was not a deliberate rejection of integration with the Đông Sơn culture in the delta, but rather a process of adaptation to the needs of each specific period. The inhabitants along the Chảy River adopted Đông Sơn elements in a way that suited local conditions. This pattern suggests the need to reconsider the Zomia framework considering archaeological evidence for interregional interaction.

The use of bronze drums and bronze vessels as coffins in burial practices in the Northwest mountainous region shows a shared symbolic practices and social conceptions of death with the Đông Sơn communities in the lowlands. This evidence suggests that the relationship between the highlands and lowlands cannot be reduced to an opposition between avoidance and being controlled but should be understood as a complex socio-cultural negotiation process.

3.4. The Đà River Valley

Although the Red River and Chảy River are more easily connected to other areas by smaller boats, the findings in this area are not as typical or dense as those in the Red River. In the Đá Đỏ area in the 1980s, two bronze drums (Đá Đỏ I, Đá Đỏ II) and one bronze jar were discovered. The Đá Đỏ bronze drum was discovered in 1980 on the banks of the Đà River in Sơn La province (Hoàng Lương 1984). The Đá Đỏ I drum is in Đông Sơn style. In the Hoà Bình area, where the Đà River meanders eastward, several bronze drums have also been discovered, such as the Sông Đà drum, the Chợ Bò drum, and the Đồi Ro drum (Phạm Minh Huyền, Nguyễn Văn Huyền & Trịnh Sinh 1987). Overall, the Đông Sơn traces in the Đà River area are relatively faint.

The disparity in density and number of relics in the Đà River valley suggests that not all mountainous regions participated in the exchange network according to the same pattern and scale. In this case, the Zomia approach may explain the limitations in the level of integration. However, this difference does not stem from a deliberate avoidance of central state power, but rather from the limitations of the Đà River's connection to the Bắc Bộ Delta and central Yunnan. Clearly, the Red River valley is very favorable for connecting from the Bắc Bộ Delta to Dali, but the Đà River does not have such an advantage, with its upstream area being quite narrow and the terrain rugged.

Such regional disparities suggest that the highlands are not homogeneous, but rather exhibit varying forms and levels of participation in exchange networks. Therefore, Zomia is not suitable for encompassing all highland regions, but rather applies only to specific areas at specific times.

IV. Discussion

The concept of Zomia was developed from ethnographic and historical studies and observations on the development of highland communities in mainland Southeast Asia, emphasizing dispersed

settlements and a nomadic lifestyle actively avoiding influence from the central government. Many studies consider highland areas with rugged terrain far from centers as peripheral, outside-state zones. However, archaeological data from the Đông Sơn period in Northwest Việt Nam reveals a more complex picture, necessitating adjustments to the application of this theory in specific historical spaces and time periods.

Archaeological data found densely along river valleys, especially the Red River, is evidence of the presence of connecting axes between the highlands and the lowlands. The settlements and trading centers organized at river confluences, convenient for exchange, do not conform to a dispersed settlement pattern and an active avoidance of state control. Conversely, this evidence reflects a different kind of proactive participation: active involvement in inter-regional exchange networks and control of natural transportation routes along river valleys. Thus, during the Đông Sơn period, the mountainous Northwest region of Việt Nam was not a Zomia space in the true sense of the word.

The appearance of high-grade bronze artifacts and Đông Sơn bronze objects in the intermountain basins via the tributaries of the Red River shows that these areas were not isolated but actively received these products. With such a mindset, these objects held significant importance for their lives. Areas deep within the mountain ranges, isolated from trade routes and far from the centers of the plains, are a suitable subject for Zomia's theoretical framework. However, archaeological evidence suggests that these areas were not entirely isolated; the types of artifacts indicate a close connection with the Red River axis and with major centers in the Bắc Bộ Delta and Yunnan region.

Data from the Chảy River valley and the Đà River valley reveal the diversity of areas within the Northwest highlands. While in the Chảy River basin, the appearance of late-period bronze drums represents a choice and shift in trading space, in the Đà River basin, it reflects a limitation of spatial connectivity rather than a deliberate avoidance.

The application of the Zomia theoretical framework in the

study of Southeast Asian highlands has contributed to highlighting the proactive role of mountain dwellers in maintaining distance from power centers in the lowlands. However, Đông Sơn archaeological evidence in Northwest Việt Nam requires a more flexible perspective on the pre- and early historical periods.

Instead of reflecting a systematic avoidance strategy, the communities of Northwest Việt Nam during the Đông Sơn period appear to have chosen selective forms of integration. The widespread presence of bronze drums and bronze vessels, artifacts associated with power, rituals, and interregional exchange, suggests that these communities were not outside the political and economic networks of northern Việt Nam during the Đông Sơn period. On the contrary, they participated in these networks by leveraging their geographical advantages, abundant resources, and control of important transportation routes.

From this perspective, Northwest Việt Nam can be understood as a space situated between two extremes: maintaining the unique ecological and habitat characteristics of the highlands while actively participating in inter-regional trade activities. This approach does not deny the value of the Zomia framework but shows that its application within each specific spatial and temporal context is necessary.

The high density of bronze drums and bronze vessels in the Red River valleys and deep basins in the high mountains indicates that these artifacts played a central role in the socio-economic life of the Đông Sơn communities in Northwest Việt Nam. The use of drums and vessels as coffins, along with the large number of burial goods, reflects the accumulation of wealth.

Given the unfavorable natural conditions for large-scale rice farming, this wealth can hardly be explained purely by agricultural production. Instead, archaeological evidence suggests that the economic resources of the communities in Northwest Việt Nam were linked to controlling transportation and the exchange of mountain produce, raw materials, and handicrafts. Bronze drums and bronze vessels were not only ritual symbols but also materialized manifestations of economic and social power.

Controlling the key transportation hubs along the Red River and its tributaries facilitated the emergence of regional power centers in Lào Cai, Yên Bái, and especially Việt Trì.

In this context, the role of Northwest Việt Nam extended beyond that of a geographical buffer zone. This region became a crucial component in the socio-economic foundation leading to the formation of larger power centers downstream of the Red River. The convergence of trade flows from the mountainous and lowland areas contributed to creating favorable conditions for the formation and development of the nascent state in Northern Việt Nam.

Placed within the broader context of mainland Southeast Asia, the case of Northwest Việt Nam demonstrates that highlands cannot be simply understood as peripheral regions or areas of power avoidance. On the contrary, they can play an active role in connecting, regulating, and restructuring regional networks of interaction.

The findings of this study contribute to broadening the approach to highland areas in Southeast Asian archaeology, highlighting the role of river valleys and intermountain basins as important spaces for habitation, exchange, and wealth accumulation. This perspective not only helps to better understand the Đông Sơn culture but also suggests new approaches to studying the formation and functioning of prehistoric communities in the region.

V. Conclusion

This study re-examines the role of the midland and mountainous regions of Northwest Việt Nam within the context of the Đông Sơn culture from the 8th to the 1st centuries BC, by combining spatial geographic analysis and archaeological findings to engage in a critical dialogue with the Zomia theoretical framework for a specific case of a highland in mainland Southeast Asia. The results show that this region is not a passive periphery or an isolated space, but an active component in inter-regional communication networks between the mountainous and lowland regions of Northern Việt

Nam and southern China.

Archaeological evidence indicates that river valleys and intermountain basins served as settlements and trade hubs. The concentration of bronze drums, bronze vessels, and Đông Sơn burial sites in these centers reflects the settlement, control over transportation and accumulation of wealth. The differences between the main river valleys suggest uneven development and integration of the areas, indicating the inherent diversity of the highland region.

This study confirms that highland spaces may have played a crucial role in the formation of early power centers and states in northern Việt Nam. Identifying Northwest Việt Nam as a space for convergence and restructuring of inter-regional exchange flows not only clarifies understanding of the Đông Sơn culture but also contributes to broader discussions about the dynamics of early complex societies and the relationship between highlands and lowlands in mainland Southeast Asia. For the case of the Northwest Việt Nam highlands, the concept of Zomia should be understood as a historical strategy rather than a uniform model applied across the entire space and time of the Southeast Asian highlands.

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