

## IS ZOMIA A USEFUL IDEA FOR INNER ASIA? (The Lattimore Lecture (2014), Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia)

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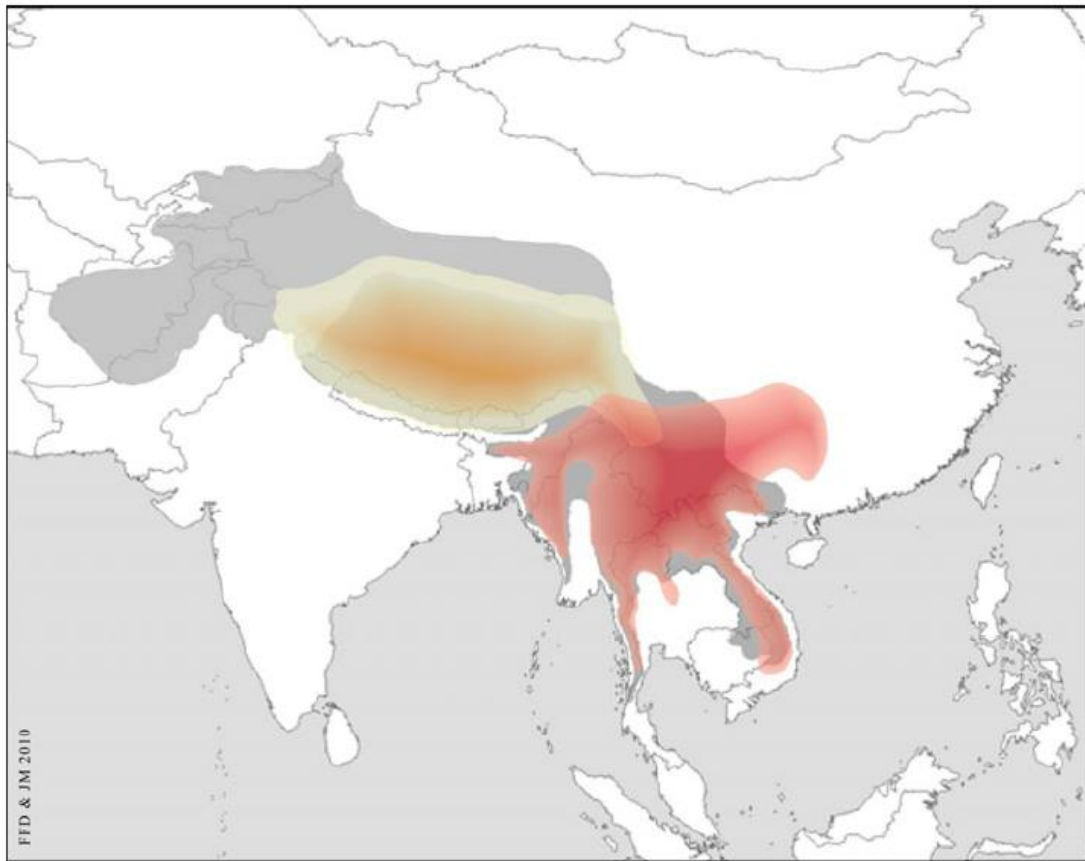
**ABSTRACT:** *James Scott’s idea of ‘Zomia’ – societies in Southeast Asia resisting the state and taking refuge in cross-border regions difficult for military access – is at first sight difficult to apply to Inner Asia. For Inner Asia has been under state rule for centuries. However, it has also had pockets of resistance and regionally specific economies. This article suggests that, if due attention is paid to historical and geographical specificity, the idea of ‘Zomia’ can be useful. It suggests a way to think about history that is not dominated by nation-state narratives, but instead explores regional irregularities, cross-border socio-cultural formations, and episodes when groups have attempted to build their own politics rather than subordinate themselves to a central state.*

This lecture considers the idea of ‘Zomia’ and whether it has relevance for Inner Asia and Mongolia. To explain: Zomia is a name invented in 2002 by Willem van Schendel (2002: 647-68) when he was thinking about how ‘area studies’, such as ‘Russian Studies’ or ‘Mongolian Studies’, have been used to categorise, visualise and naturalise particular social spaces. He argued that area studies have created geographies of knowledge - but also geographies of ignorance. Area studies are structured to create ‘heartlands’, while other areas are seen to be peripheral and obscure. ‘Zomia’ is van Schendel’s word for one such neglected region in South East Asia – one that did not make it as a world ‘area’, because it was remote, lacked strong state centres, was ethnically complicated, and politically ambiguous.

Van Schendel’s Zomia is the mountainous and forested area inhabited by diverse small ethnic groups that cross-cuts the national borders

of China, Thailand, Laos, Vietnam, and Myanmar. His argument is that this highland region has its own cultural logic, but because area studies have been set up to focus on major states and large cultures, the Zomia has little academic clout and has been seen as an ‘area of no concern’ (2002: 653). Nevertheless, he suggests, there is much to be gained from ‘jumping scale’ to zoom in to the detailed character of such neglected areas, because they can tell us about processes: flows of people and goods, borderland and hybrid identities, and the interaction of small-scale polities with great states.

I shall be asking if such a ‘Zomia’, or maybe more than one, exists in the expanses of Inner Asian. Are there areas that fall outside – or across – nationally imagined academic subjects and therefore their character as distinctive regions has been largely ignored? This seems to me an appropriate question for this memorial lecture, because Owen Lattimore was concerned



*Map 1. Scott's extended version of Zomia*

above all with wide geographical-political issues and I think he would have been intrigued to try to answer it himself. I shall argue that there *are* such places, but that we need to go beyond Lattimore's own ecological-economic perspective to conceptualise them.

But before that, I need to say a little more about what has happened to the Zomia idea since 2002. Van Schendel saw 'Zomia' both as an **idea** (a configuration of space neglected by history and geography as disciplines) and also as a **real place** existing in the world, i.e. in the Southeast Asian mountainous zone. Soon the American social historian James Scott jumped in and said: but we *can* know about Zomia, and it is larger than van Schendel thought - it extends into the Himalayas.

Scott also introduced a new sharpness to the idea of Zomia – which is indicated by the title of his book *The Art of Not Being Governed: an Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (2009).

According to Scott, Zomia is a primarily a historical political entity: it is a refuge, an area without precise boundaries where over the centuries various peoples have fled because they resisted being governed by great states. Scott calls this refuge a 'non-state space', and he argues that people in such a region create their own type of society, culture and politics. In brief, Scott's version of Zomia has the following characteristics. It is:

- A distinct social space with its own logic of refuge, isolation or autonomy
- Tends to be in mountainous areas, or regions difficult to access
- Is a mosaic of different cultures and languages
- Is integrated by active circulations of migrant people and trade networks
- Has a relatively egalitarian 'anarchic' social structure; chiefdoms rise and fall
- Tends to preserve small 'tribal' cultures

- Religion is oral rather than written, often a syncretic mixture
- Prophetic religions of renewal are common
- Is marginal, but linked to political history of a wider region and parts are often claimed by neighbouring states

This idea of Zomia began to make a big impact, and soon writers were exploring the idea in the Himalayan Massif (Schneiderman 2010; Michaud 2010), Tibet (Samuel 2010; 2013) and Southwest China (Purdue 2008). At a 'Zomia Workshop' held in 2011 Christopher Atwood discussed the application of the idea of Zomia to Central and Inner Asia, and I shall come back to his comments later.

I must admit that my first thought was that Scott's Zomia *cannot* possibly apply to anywhere in Inner Asia. First of all, how can we possibly think of this as a 'non state space'? Although both Scott himself and Purdue (2008) thought that steppe nomads, with their mobility and lack of unity, were ideal candidates for Zomia, I cannot agree. From ancient times, the steppe gave rise to its own strong states and empires, from the Hsiung-nu, through the Kitan, Jurchen, Mongol and Manchu states. Within such states, as Atwood has observed (2013), the ordinary herders were not anarchical; they were far less mobile than their rulers and they were subordinated through tax-paying and state duties. Social relations were not based on clans/lineages, but on aristocratic leaders with their followers (Sneath 2007; Munkh-Erdeni 2010). In recent centuries great areas of Central and Inner Asia became part of the Russian Empire, and all of the remaining part was included in the Manchu Qing Empire. In the modern period, the entire area has been under the jurisdiction of either the Soviet state, followed by the Russian Federation, or the state of independent Mongolia, or the state of China. Thus in Inner Asia there are no regions that have what Sara Schneiderman (2010), following Des Chene (2007), calls 'the condition of non-postcoloniality' that she associates with a Himalayan Zomia— in other words, the relatively autonomous situation of Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal

and other fringes of Tibet, which, although they were strongly shaped by engagement with imperial powers, were never fully colonized by the British Raj or the Qing Empire. By contrast, the entirety of the Inner Asian steppes was - at least by the beginning of the 20th century - in principle included within, and ruled through, imperial and incipiently colonising state structures. So, for all these reasons, both the vagueness and over-inclusiveness of the concept of Zomia itself,<sup>1</sup> and the empirical political reality of the presence of over-arching state jurisdictions, perhaps it would be most prudent simply to forget the idea as regards Inner Asia.

However, I am going to argue that Zomia *can* be a productive idea. I shall suggest that, suitably adapted for Inner Asia, it can be seen as a framework for historical analysis - not as an *alternative* to the 'traditional' frame of nation states, rather as an *addition*, a potentiality, that adds another dimension to the usual centre-focussed perspective. The idea can help us tune our ears to hear peripheral, rebellious and contrary, as well as orthodox state voices. It is true that anthropologists often seek out exactly such out-of-the-way places, and so Van Schendel's point that thinking in terms of Zomia dispels 'geographies of ignorance' may be less applicable to them than to historians and political scientists.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, even for anthropologists state borders often channel the boundaries of their research.

Here, I would like to agree with what Chris Atwood said in his 2011 comments on Zomia: the important observation we need to take from Scott is that *the state can be bad for its people*. In Mongolia, it may be a political and academic tradition to admire the state, if only because the historical identity of the Mongolian people is so bound up with the great Empire founded by

<sup>1</sup> Michaud (2010) provides an extended survey and critique of the literature on Zomia. He points out (2010: 202-3) that extending the notion to regions beyond Van Schendel's zone means encompassing a colossal level of variation in the societies included, which 'precludes any conclusive cultural assessment.'

<sup>2</sup> I am very grateful to Christopher Kaplonski for clarifying this point to me.

Chinggis Khan. But if we step back from looking at ‘the state’ as an ideal, and observe instead its practical effects – such as state-led wars, conscription into armies, taxation, corvée labour, restrictions on movement, and the unfairly differential effect of laws on various groups in the population – then it is evident that while some elites prospered very many other groups suffered at the hand of the state.

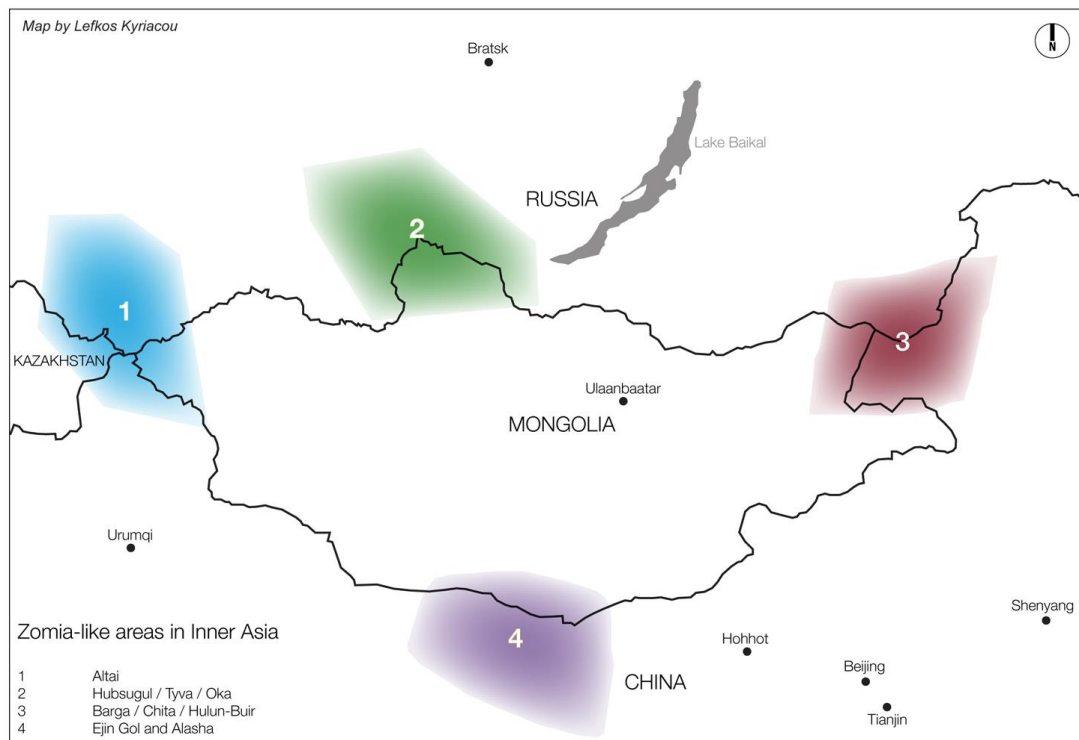
There are many examples in Inner Asian history of such disadvantaged groups fleeing to some area that was relatively free from government intervention, refuge areas that we might call in Mongolian *orgokh gazar*. Could these be Zomia-like places? In Inner Asia, such areas cannot be defined by height above sea-level as in Southeast Asia; in other words, they are not only mountainous zones as Van Schendel and Scott suggested. However, I think we can use two ideas from Scott to describe them, first his idea of ‘friction of terrain’ and second his notion of ‘shatter zones’, both of which I’ll discuss in more detail below. Such regions, I shall argue, have been ‘Zomia-like’ at certain periods in their history. Yet because of the

not easily ignore, in some localistic-anarchistic way, the surrounding scene. Thus a key to the Inner Asian region, which was not so important in the classic Southeast Asian Zomia, is that by the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the people who had taken refuge in various *orgokh gazar* not only maintained their specific local social and economic relations, as Scott suggested, but also often took an oppositional state-like political stance – they were rising up and arguing for *different kinds of state* from the dominant Empires.

So where are these places?

I shall suggest, for the sake of argument, that there have been **four** such regions around Mongolia (though there may have been more – this is not an exclusive list): the **Altai**; the **Hovsgol/Tyva/Oka** region; the **Chita/Barga/Hulun Buir** region; and the area of **Ejin Gol / Alasha**.

In contemplating these four areas, we must acknowledge that there can be different kinds of Zomias; or perhaps, better put, these are Zomias in different ways. In this regard it is worth considering Lattimore’s typological work.



overall Inner Asian condition of domination by states, they were pockets of difference that could

Lattimore (1947) categorized Inner Asia into broad geographical-cultural zones, and he was

**Map 2.** Four Inner Asian ‘Zomias’

interested in how they confronted, or interacted, with one another in the areas he called 'frontiers'. He pictured Inner Asia as consisting of (1) a northern forested belt, where Russian-type extensive, rain-fed farming was combined with the livestock and hunting economies of local people; (2) a grassland and desert-steppe zone, inhabited by mobile pastoralists; and (3) a southern and eastern belt of Chinese-style irrigated agriculture with settled towns and villages. Lattimore argued that the two frontiers of the steppe were very different: to the north, the extensive economy of the nomadic pastoralists shaded into and overlapped with the extensive farming of the Russian settlers without too many problems; however to the south the pastoral economy and the intensive irrigation economy were completely incompatible, and this led to many clashes along this frontier. Lattimore's idea would suggest, based on his geographical-economic categories, that frontiers might well give rise to buffer-zone Zomia-type areas. His work would suggest the further implication that along the Russian borders such zones would be more peaceful and more culturally inter-penetrating than those in the hostile margins between the Chinese-dominated irrigation agriculture and the pastoral-dominated steppes. However, this does not seem to have been the case historically, and one must conclude that the differences between the various Zomia-like regions are based on other factors, not on 'ways of life' or geographical-economic zones. Now earlier, in his article 'On the wickedness of being nomads' (1935, reprinted 1962) Lattimore had even suggested that the nomadic way of life in general was antithetical to 'the state', at least to the Russian and Manchu-Chinese versions of it. This is a dubious idea, as mentioned earlier, since the Mongols, Buriads and other peoples managed for the most part to adapt their mobile pastoralism to the limitations of life within these Empires. So, to sum up, while Lattimore has been an inspiration in pushing us to think about broad economic-geographical differences in Inner Asia, his idea of such 'frontiers' has little to contribute to the understanding of differences

between possible Zomias in Inner Asia – which seem to emerge not so much from terrain and economy as from terrain and politics.

At this point it is worth considering Scott's useful idea of the 'friction of terrain'. With this idea he suggested simply that Zomias occur in areas that have physical barriers that hinder pre-modern forms of military and bulk transport, thus setting limits to the effective reach of traditional states. These places are too awkward of access to be useful in providing food supplies (e.g. by ox-cart) to the core population, yet they may be relatively frictionless to access for native subjects who know the byways on foot or horseback – and hence they make good places to escape to (Scott 2002: 43). Scott emphasises that distance in kilometres is not most relevant, but the freedom and speed of travel. Smooth terrain allows regular social and cultural relations across wide distances, but travel even in a small rugged, mountainous area involves massively increased travel times, and make links much less frequent (2002: 47). A 'friction of distance map' would allow the practical military reach of states to spring into view (2002: 48). In Inner Asia, daunting military obstacles are perhaps more relevant than moving food supplies, since the latter tend to consist mainly of mobile livestock. Such harsh lands are exactly the areas where national frontiers tend to run. 'Friction of terrain' here was presented not only by high mountains, as in southeast Asia, but also by dense forests, swamps, deserts or absence of water sources.

Different kinds of 'friction of terrain' are behind my four cases. The Altai region does accord with the high altitude mountainous type of Zomia, but Tyva / Hovsgol was rendered remote by a combination of mountains and forests as well as distance from through routes to prosperous plains; while Ejn Gol / Alasha encompassed well-established trade and religious routes it was still unpropitious for military manoeuvres because access lay across its deserts and rugged rocky landscape. The case of Chita / Barga / Hulun Buir is more puzzling to see as a case of 'friction of terrain', as this area

is flat open steppe, albeit crossed by swampy rivers like the Argun, so it is suitable for standard pastoralism. However, the region as a whole was located away from the historically main Jangjiakou-Urga-Kykhta route between China and Russia. Also, before the advent of the railway, military access and control to the east was made difficult by the Hinggan Mountains and to the west by a whole series of similarly hostile forested mountain ranges in Trans-Baikal. The area became a little regulated frontier zone, like a broad basin separated from the more populated areas of Buryatia (Russia) and Inner Mongolia-Manchuria (China). All of the four zones I have identified had international borders running through them, but Chita / Barga / Hulun Buir is the clearest case where awkwardness of access combined with an inter-imperial frontier stand-off; this was an area that both the Russian and the Chinese Empires were content for long periods up to the 1920s deliberately to maintain as an extensive ‘buffer zone’ on either side of their mutual border.

None of these four areas was ever an empty blank – they became distinctive cultural-political territories in their own right. Thus they might be places of escape, but they were not places of defeat and persecution – on the contrary, as Lattimore observed, there might be good reasons to abandon poverty-stricken, highly-taxed farming in favour of a relatively prosperous freer life in the margins (1962b: 35). On this question, though he was not of course thinking of Zomias, Lattimore came up with a significant idea. He wrote about the Altai - Tien Shan region, “Most important of all, the mountain ranges in general are at the centres of their zones, so that historically they have served not as dividing barriers but as strongholds and rallying points” (1962a: 64). In other words, there can be areas whose very difficulty of access can be turned to the advantage of the people who have fled there. From these ‘strongholds and rallying points’ I suggest the imperial or central states can be resisted, or held at arms’ length, while small, autonomous

polities on different principles can be set up, at least for a time.

With these ideas in mind, let me briefly look at the four zones.

**The Altai** is the only one of my four regions that Atwood (2011) described as a Zomia, and it is clearly the one that is most similar to the classic Southeast Asian case. It is mountainous and it is crosscut by four national boundaries: Russia, China, Mongolia and Kazakhstan. Altai also fulfils Van Schendel’s *theoretical* criterion, since it falls between the area studies fields of “Central Asia” (meaning the former Soviet Union’s five ‘-stans’), “Russia” and “Inner Asia” (the regions around Mongolia) – while there is no academic field, or anyway not yet, of modern “Altai Studies.” The mountain valleys of the Altai zone are populated by many small and shifting ethnicities, which have been categorised by such names as the Teleut, Kumandin, Chelkan, Shor, Tele, Altai Kizhi, Telengit, the Mountain Kalmyk, and the White Kalmyk, Kipchak, and the Black Tatar. In Mongolia, people in the Altai regions include Kazakhs, Urianghai, Dörvöd, and Khoshuud. Many of these groups seem to have formed as a result of breaking away from larger conglomerations such as the Oirat Zhungars, or splintering as a result of Qing or Russian conquest. In this way the area fits Scott’s idea of a “shatter zone”, i.e. a region where groups split and reform as a result of coercive state-making (Scott 2009: 24-5).

In the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Altaian socio-economic organisation was similar in many ways to that of the typical ‘Zomia’ (Michaud 2010: 292): most of the inhabitants were mountain pastoralists or cultivators, supplemented with hunting and trade; their ethnicity was fluid, veering between Turkic and Mongolian; social relations were relatively egalitarian and clan-based, while religious traditions were syncretistic and oral. The more shamanic religious culture in particular evinced a recurrent Zomia-like hostility to hierarchical, homogenous and exclusive ‘world religions’,



whether Islam, Buddhism, or Russian Orthodox Christianity.

Scott's defining characteristic of Zomia, 'against the state', can be seen in the Altai above all in a religious movement that swept through in the early 1900s. The millenarian and charismatic Ak Jang movement, also called 'Burkhanism', was a political protest against the Tsarist government and Russian colonisation. Yet it was connected with Mongolian histories and memories from across the border. The Ak Jang leaders announced the imminent arrival



Map 3. Cross-border map of Altai

of the mythical hero Oirat Khan, or the reincarnation of the historical 18<sup>th</sup> century warrior Amursana, an idea that was echoed other millenarian movements in Western Mongolia, such as that of Ja Lama Dambijaltsan. These movements attempted to create a new all-Altai consciousness as can be seen from songs and poems of the time celebrating cross-border Altai

as constituting one region.<sup>3</sup> By 1918, the leaders of Ak Jang were calling for the establishment of an 'Oirat Republic', intended to include areas to the north and east, including Tuva and Khakassia. This movement was so strong that for a time even the Soviet Communist Party felt they had to compete by setting up their own reincarnation, 'Red Amursana', to gain popularity with ordinary people (Znamenski 2014: 18). The Ak Jang movement was later gradually repressed by force by the Soviet government, but it persisted underground, and has revived in the present day. Ak Jang today is still resistant to state power and its activists are occasionally imprisoned (Arzyutov 2014: 14). Its most heartfelt worship is tied to the mountains, to the land itself; it rejects anyone that disturbs this relationship (such as 'colonisers', tourists and mining companies) and at the same time is hostile to imposed systems of thought, such as the world religions. These certainly seem Zomia-like characteristics.

### The Hovsgol / Tyva / Oka area

After the defeat of the Zhungar Mongols in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century by the Qing, the remote region known as **Tannu-Urianghai** was for a time a kind of political hinterland between states in that it was located outside the main line of Qing Manchu border posts but was also beyond the line of the border with Tsarist Russia in the Sayan Mountains.<sup>4</sup> It was acknowledged to be part of the Qing Empire as a far-flung extension of Mongolia, but Qing officials did not venture there and the region was administered by highly indirect rule through local chiefs. On the ground, because of shared ways of life, similar languages and cross-border migrations, it makes

<sup>3</sup> 'Now I came to meet you, my poor Oirat people./ At this hour when the final battle is fought,/ Will we shatter the enemy?/ Will you stay together?/ My motherland is Altai, Irtysh, Khobuk-sairi, Emil, Borutala, Ili, and Alatau./ All these lands are one Oirat motherland./ I am the grandson of Amursana.' Parchen, a Mongolian epic singer, poem about Ja Lama (1913). Quoted in Znamenskii (2014).

<sup>4</sup> The Hovsgol (Khövsgöl) border region (*hyazgaar*) included Darhad Shavi and Tannu-Urianghai between 1760 and 1911 (Sanders 2010: 389).

sense to see Tannu-Urianghai as part of a wider Zomia-like region. This would include the Hubsgul Depression in Mongolia and the Oka and Tunka valleys of the Eastern Sayan Mountains, which are located at the west edge of present-day Buryatia. Small Turkic-language speaking reindeer-herding and hunting groups nomadised across the borders, known by names such as Karagas, Soyot, Tubalar, Tofalar, Tsaatan / Dukha and Todzha, while Mongol-speaking Darhad and Buriad pastoral groups lived in the more open valleys. But these divisions and names were flexible and people could change identities. Overall, this was a range of dispersed, more or less egalitarian, clan-based societies, with self-sufficient and varied economies. Hunting, indigenous forms of agriculture, artisan production, silver mining and trading supplemented the main livestock economy. People adhered to their own way of life and were resistant to outside influences. As a result, for example, unlike in other regions of Buryatia, Russian settlers, who arrived to mine gold in Oka from the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, had to operate in the local language not in Russian (Budaeva and Darmakheeva 1995: 58).

After 1911 there was a separatist movement in the area of present-day Tyva, which then became the independent state of Urianghai (contested by the Mongolian government). In 1914 Tsar Nicholas II declared Urianghai a Russian protectorate and founded its capital, Byelotsarsk ('White Tsar'). In the 1917, Urianghai took advantage of the revolution to rescind the protectorate and re-named the capital Khem-Beldyr. But soon, in a way that recalls the partitioning of the S E Asian Zomia by Chinese and colonial powers, armies invaded Urianghai from three sides: White Russians took control of the north, Chinese troops invaded the south-west, and a Mongolian army under General Magsarjav occupied the south. Over the next few years local peasants rebelled against both Admiral Kolchak's White Russians and the Chinese, the Mongols withdrew, and Soviet influence came to prevail. In 1921, the All-Tuva Constituent Khural ('governing assembly')

declared that 'the Tannu Tuva Republic is a free state of free people, independent of all in internal affairs', a declaration approved by the Soviet leadership in Moscow. Soon however, in 1924, amid resentment of Russian settlers, a revolution ousted the communists. The new government proclaimed closer links with Mongolia, established Buddhism as the state religion, and set up a project for over a thousand shamans to act as 'teachers' and 'tutors' of the local population. Despite Soviet incursions and repressions in the 1930s, the region remained hardly governable; 82.2% of the population was classed as nomadic herdsman and hunters and in the 1930s they resisted collectivisation en masse.<sup>5</sup> As in Scott's characterisation of Zomia, these people were 'choosing deliberately to place themselves at a physical and cultural distance' from the civilisation of the state (Scott 2009: 173).

It was not till 1944 that the whole Tannu-Urianghai zone was finally divided up between the USSR and Mongolia (Hangartner 2011: 11-12). But the borders remained permeable, and migrations, ethnic re-identifications, and flights were common. As Morten Pedersen has written about the Darhad valley on the Mongolian side: "For centuries, if not for millennia, the region and its indigenous inhabitants have been known as a destitute, barbarian and shamanic backwater, whose fate was always to hover at the edge of civilisation" and furthermore as "a political no-man's land" (Pedersen 2011: 10). This seems like a good characterisation of a Zomia. Pedersen adds that the region could also be seen as a "political everyman's land", because, just as in Urianghai, several polities, including Russia and China, exercised power for a time by offering protection and extracting taxes, and sometimes both did so at the same time (Pedersen 2011: 12). Just such relative degrees of linkage to states (Scott 2009: 278), along with distant, overlapping, temporary and over-reaching lordship, is also characteristic of

<sup>5</sup> The information in this paragraph is taken from: <http://www.schudak.de/timelines/tannutuva1911-1944.html>. Consulted August 2014.



the classic Zomia of Highland Southeast Asia (2009: 282). In fact, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century the most stable domination of the Mongolian part of the area was not the Qing state but the Buddhist church, a pattern that the Urianghai government emulated in their own way, as mentioned. In these peripheral areas the relatively benign Buddhist sway even increased for a time after the Mongolian Revolution in the 1920s, and as a result several fleeing groups from both Buriatia and central Mongolia were incorporated into the Hovsgol region. Thus it became a refuge of a Zomia-like kind, since presumably these migrants were escaping from violent incorporation, taxation and state punishment of people seen as internal enemies (Pedersen 2011: 13).

However, Tyva-Hovsgol was a different kind of Zomia from the Altai. The region did not become the location for a widespread millenarian movement against the state. Instead, it became renowned for its shamans, who were scattered in 'wild' forests and obscure valleys. Their power was of a fissile, spiritual and symbolic – rather than overtly political – nature, and it persisted in secret (unlike Buddhist establishments, which were more easily identified and repressed in the communist era). The people of the Hovsgol area, notably the Darhad, have been characterised by other Mongols as *intrinsically shamanic*. Hangartner then makes the interesting argument that the Darhad, Tsaatan, and other native inhabitants of the region thereby became a symbolic foil against which the state defined itself. In the socialist era the Darhad shamans became the symbols of 'backwardness' against which socialist modernity was measured. After the 1990s, the same Darhad shamans were re-conceptualised as 'spiritually powerful' in direct contrast to the state, which was now seen as too worldly. The shamans are associated with the 'pure' and 'wild' periphery, understood as representatives of the *hödöönii savdag* ('rural forces') that can replenish and purify the polluted urban centre (Hangartner 2011: 12-13). This observation recalls Scott's argument that

the relation between the valley (state) and hill societies is symbiotic: 'the fact is that hill and valley societies have to be read against one another' (2009: 27).

It seems to me that it makes sense to see the Tannu-Urianghai region as a trans-national Zomia-like zone, rather than divide it up as separate peripheries of Mongolia and Russia. For one thing, ethnic labels are fluid in this area; the Darhad people, for example, seem to be made up of a mixture of Buriad, Urianghai and Mongolian groups, and their shamans claim to be descended from Urianghai ancestors who migrated to the region from the west (Hangartner 2011: 12). Despite the more closely policed contemporary international borders, reindeer herders and hunters from the Buriad and Tyvan districts still sometimes migrate in and out of Hovsgol. Finally, the notion of the area as a symbolic foil to a centralised state seems to work just as well for Tyva and Buryatia as for Mongolia. In each of the latter, these mountainous and forested areas, Todzha in Tyva and the Oka and Tunka districts in Buryatia, are famous for shamans (and religious power more generally) and likewise act as distant zones of difference and purity, contrasted with the state.

### The Chita / Barga / Hulun Buir zone

Let me now move to the Chita / Barga / Hulun Buir zone, which I shall call **Dauria** for short. The 17<sup>th</sup>-18<sup>th</sup> centuries had seen migrations (or flights) of large groups into and out of this territory (by people now known as Buriad, Daur, Barga, Khamnigan and Evenki), and perhaps memory of these historical movements laid the ground for the more recent mobility in the area. Until the international borders were more rigidly enforced from the mid-1920s onwards, local people habitually crossed between Russian, Mongolian and Chinese territories almost without hindrance for pasturing, hay-making, hunting and trading (Urbansky 2013). For example, in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Khorii Buriads, short of land because of Russian peasant settlements, made agreements with the Mongols and regularly went long

distances to pastures in Mongolia each summer, while mixed Russian-Buriad-Tungus Cossacks similarly crossed the Argun River to use land on the Chinese side. Eastern Trans-Baikalia in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century came to have an ethnic mixture even more complex and fluid over time than in Tannu-Urianghai, resulting in a patchwork of administrative areas. It included sedentary Cossacks of mixed parentage, sent to man the border by the Tsarist authorities, along with mobile Buriads, Khamnigan, Evenki and so-called ‘Tungus’, who overlapped with some of the former and were administratively categorised as ‘wandering’ and ‘nomadic’ groups. A further population, known by Russian officials as the ‘horse’ or ‘mounted’ Tungus, in fact consisted of Mongolised Daur and Solons who had migrated into the Russian area from China in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Nanzatov 2012: 100). Meanwhile, across the border in China, the Qing rulers had marshalled people into military Banners and moved them around. The population was equally mixed. Groups resulting from earlier migrations, such as the people now known as ‘Old Barga’ and ‘New Barga’, who retained the same clan names as the Khori Buryat living on the Russian side, lived adjacently with others groups who had been moved into the region by the Qing. Thus on both sides of the border Imperial administrations attempted to fortify their frontiers by implanting militarised groups. But such was the remoteness and lack of close supervision that these incomers adapted to the local society and took on mixed cultural characteristics, for example, Cossacks who became primarily pastoralists and spoke Buriad (Urbansky 2013).

If this relative mobility and fluidity of ethnicity chimes well with the idea of Zomia, another feature – regional integration through trade – was also present in Dauria. The great annual trade fair, held at the Ganzhuur Monastery in southern Hulun Buir, attracted people from far and wide and across the national borders. In its heyday, the 1910s, the fair hosted 1,200 Chinese and over 400 Russian merchants offering every conceivable variety of goods, as

well as Mongol, Buriad, Barga and Evenki people selling their own products (Urbansky 2013: 224-27). Eastern Daur would trek across the formidable Hinggan Mountains to sell their home-made carts (Humphrey and Onon 1996: 134-6). For Russian Buriads the fair was where they could sell their livestock and purchase the silks, tobacco, tea, and Buddhist religious items that were central to their way of life.

For centuries the region was crossed by imperial borders but never fully integrated politically. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the leader of the group later known as ‘horse Tungus’ was a Daur chief, Gantimur, whose following was sufficiently prosperous and powerful for him to be courted by both the Manchus and the Russians. Gantimur played it both ways, in typical Zomia fashion, siding first with one, then with the other, and finally going back to the first (Russia). But Gantimur was just the first notable leader in this region to play one side off against the other and attempt thereby to maintain some local autonomy. Later, groups frequently crossed the border to escape taxation or colonisation, such as the Evenki who migrated from Siberia into the Hulun Buir region in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 1930s, Buriads fleeing from Tsarist and Soviet policies repeatedly did likewise, as did ‘White Russians’ who settled in the ‘Three Rivers’ area on the Chinese side. The region became known for lawlessness, cattle theft and smuggling.

‘Dauria’ best fits to Scott’s anti-imperial aspect of the Zomia idea of all four of my examples. Local and not-so-local leaders repeatedly tried to set up alternative, separate, autonomous and even more or less independent sovereign polities there. When the late Qing government tried to implement its ‘New Policies’ to further colonize Mongolia and integrate peripheral regions more closely with China there was massive migration of farmers into Manchuria (Amrith 2011: 49-55). As a result many dispossessed Horchin Mongols fled into the Dauria-Hulun Buir area. Resistance to the new policy was widespread in Inner Mongolia, but it was most notable of all in

Hulun Buir. Togtakhu Taiji (1863-1922) led a fierce, ultimately unsuccessful, revolt over many years; he surfaced with his band in the Hinggan Mountains and elsewhere, only to end up finding asylum over the border in Russia with the Buriads. In 1912 Daur and Barga Mongols rose up, overthrew the Chinese governor, removed the border posts, and declared the allegiance of a new regional polity to newly independent Mongolia. Disunity among the ethnic groups as to the best policy, as well as the inconstancy of Russian support, led to the eclipse of this polity in 1914. A further independence movement led by Babujab was ended only with his untimely death in 1916. In the 1920s, the Daur revolutionary Merse, who had extensive contacts with the Soviets, again briefly overthrew the government in Hulun Buir, while in 1932 the Horchin Mongol leaders Tömörbagan and Gada Meiren rose against the Chinese to the south in the Tongliao area (Bulag 2009: 10). Local songs and ballads celebrating these Mongol rebels were (and still are) an important part of the regional culture.

The international borders splitting 'Dauria', though regulated by treaties since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, came under diverse pressures and buckled repeatedly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Perhaps the most famous of the desperate struggles against state incorporation is the 'Dauria Station government' set up by Ataman Semenov, a half-Buriad, half-Russian Cossack in 1919-21. This was an (in-the-end futile) attempt to withstand the Soviet Red Army advance through Siberia by establishing a cross-border military redoubt. It would not be correct to say that this polity was in any sense egalitarian (along Zomia lines). Indeed Semenov distributed copies of Hitler's *Mein Kampf* to his Japanese allies. Yet Semenov made use of the cross-border cultural and religious affinities of the region. He aligned with people even more cruelly bandit-like than himself in his attempt to establish a base for a pan-Mongolian state, with a reincarnate Buddhist lama as its figurehead (Atwood 2004: 137). The advance of the Japanese imperialists

in the area in the 1930s did not eliminate the reiterated attempts by borderlanders to make strategic alliances that would keep subjection at bay. As Bulag has shown (2009: 10-15) local leaders in 1939 and again in 1945 tried to avoid total political incorporation by the Japanese and Chinese states through Zomia-like unorthodox means: defection from imperial armies, refusal to fight other Mongols, splitting off into 'bandit' groups, spying for 'the other side' and pursuing their own agendas of local tribal enmities. The ideologies of these later regional leaders tended to be more egalitarian or socialist (Lattimore 1962: 452-3). But on each occasion the attempt was to create a polity *autonomous* from Russian, Chinese or Japanese direct control, and being locally based, of a different social make-up and geographical scope to the imperial projects. In sum, many features of Dauria look Zomia-like: the relative isolation of the area, the diversity and fluidity of ethnic identities, the mobile populations, the maintenance of of clan identities, the cross border trade, the oral culture, and the repeated, short-lived projects for a degree of regional independence from imperial domination.

### Alashan and Ejin Gol

My last example, Alashan and Ejin Gol (**Alashan** for short) consists of oasis-like valleys set in the deserts, sand dunes and craggy mountains at the edge of the Gobi. The area again was a kind of administrative exception, not being included in any of Inner Mongolia's six leagues under the Qing and later moving between Chinese and Mongol jurisdiction. It was a zone of ethnic mixing: from the 17<sup>th</sup> century various groups of Western Mongols moved in and out of Alashan. Eventually, it came to be settled mainly by a mixture of Khoshuud Mongols coming from the Altai / Tien Shan mountains and Torghud Mongols ('Kalmyks') who had fled back to Qing domains after pressure from the Tsarist government; but diverse others also lived there, including Khalkhas escaping from the revolution in Mongolia, Chinese Muslims, Mongolian Muslim

camel-herders of unclear origins, and non-Muslim Chinese trading families from Shanxi.

In Lattimore's geographical terms, Alashan was beyond the edge of the Chinese-settled agricultural areas of Gansu and Ningxia and also - cut off by mountains and desert - outside main Mongolian steppe zone. So according to his ideas it should have been a site of conflict between the two utterly different economic cultures. But actually it seems to have been culturally a more complex buffer or synthesising-zone, where Tibetan, Manchu and Muslim influences added to the mix. It can be seen as Zomia-like, I think, because historically it was often 'not fully tamed' (Samuel 2013: 90) and its various groups repeatedly attempted to stave off full incorporation into Chinese state structures.

Alashan was remote, yet it was a crossroads of routes from north, south, east and west. It had a certain political independence, which arose not only from its peripheral yet strategic position, but also from its wealth. The area had salt lakes, which enabled it to flourish from the salt trade, and its rulers were also able to make big fortunes by taxing the trade caravans that came through from Xinjiang to China. Thus, the princely family of Khoshuuds lived in high style. They were particularly favoured by the Qing emperors because their ancestors had subdued other Mongols in the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Borjigidai 2002: 182) and thereafter they made repeated marriages with princesses from the Manchu ruling families, a tradition that lasted till the early 20<sup>th</sup> century (Nasan Bayar 2002: 244). These women had separate estates and brought their own sophisticated Manchu-Chinese culture, so the central town with its palaces and temples came to be known as 'little Peking' (Cabot 2003). Latterly the ruling prince frequently resided in Peking, leaving Alashan to be ruled by a regent.

Admittedly, such imperial connections do not make Alashan sound like 'Zomia', and maybe this is my least convincing case. But nevertheless, reconsidering its history in relation to the idea of Zomia is illuminating. The idea

brings to the fore features of Alashan that are often ignored, or seen as fringe aspects of larger histories located elsewhere. We find, for example, that it was repeatedly a place of refuge, where a rebel leader would hole up and hope to establish a base from which to expand his influence to north and south. Furthermore, in the Qing-Buddhist world Alashan was heterodox, in the sense that it maintained a 'secret history' at odds with the imperially recognised Dalai Lama genealogy (Jalsan 2002). And this combination of refuge / heterodoxy was indeed its reputation in local Mongol culture. A foundational, but secret, history concerned the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama, who according to local views did not die in 1706 when he was arrested by opponents in Tibet and sent to Peking for trial; he escaped on the journey and after travels across Asia took refuge in Alashan. Here he changed his name, established 'patron – priest' relations with the princely family, gave teachings and established monasteries. He remained mobile, making links especially with the Tibetan region of Amdo (Jalsan 2002: 349-50). Thereafter, the two great reincarnation lines of Alashan, that of the 6<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama and that of his political supporter in Tibet Desi Sangye Gyatso, maintained a defiantly separate history from the state-approved line. In Alashan, however, they were to produce several powerful figures over the centuries. These sometimes took up civil rule. They vied with one another, and also with the princely house and other rebellious local leaders, to produce what became a highly unstable political environment by the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps it was partly because of this non-orthodox Buddhist set-up, as well as Alashan's strategic ex-location and 'friction of terrain', that in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the armed rebel leader, Dambijantsan, the so-called 'False Lama', fled Mongolia to set up his last fortress here. However, we could perhaps see Alashan's complex multipolar arrangement of power sources – the frequently absent prince, the

<sup>6</sup> The Qing court finally recognized the 5<sup>th</sup> reincarnation of the Sangye Gyatso line in 1897 (Jalsan 2002: 354), but the Alashan 'Dalai Lama' remained of course unacknowledged as such.

imperious high-status princesses, the oscillation of power between religious and political leaders, the competing reincarnation lines, and the social distance between the ‘Manchu-ised’ noble family and the Mongolian officials and herders – as a Zomia-like example of ‘evading [a single] permanent hierarchy’ (Scott 2002: 211).<sup>7</sup> These features swung into clear relief in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Alashan took on its most Zomia-like aspect.

In the late 1920s, the Daur revolutionary Merse, whose failed uprising in Hulun Buir was mentioned earlier, went to Alashan to try to set up a revolutionary base. Ta Wang, the prince, was in Peking; meanwhile, partly as a result of Merse’s influence, a disgruntled young noble locally known as Xiaosanye<sup>8</sup> executed a coup in 1928 to overthrow his cousin the prince. Xiaosanye declared he wanted to overthrow the feudal system, establish a new, more democratic regime and above all to achieve independence from China, signified symbolically by cutting off the Manchu braid (Atwood 2002: 790-98). This adventure did not last long, but it was not followed by outright introduction of rule by the Chinese government – for the latter had no direct control over the Alashan region at this point. Rather, because of the extraordinary complexity of the various competing powers in Alashan, including the expanding ambitions of the Muslim warlord Ma Hongkui located nearby in Ningxia, and violent bandits besetting many local routes, the region managed to maintain a precarious quasi-autonomy until the 1940s. In complex twists and turns, the Lamatan (reincarnation of Sangye Gyatso), who was succeed in power by Danizana, last prince of Alashan, made temporary alliances with various powers that were not only incompatible with one another but potential enemies of their own: the

Japanese, Chinese Republican government officials, Ma Hongkui, high-ranking Tibetan lamas, Mongolian nationalist leaders, and even latterly with Chinese Communists (Jalsan 2002: 354; Nasan Bayar 2002: 256-61).

In his analysis of the complex short lived alliances and cross-cutting loyalties of this period Nasan Bayar argues for a ‘double legitimacy’ obtaining among the people of Alashan, one that ‘leaves space for different groups with various historical backgrounds to imagine they participate in other ethnic and even political identities, on the basis of their own [...] ethnic discourse’ (2002: 269). This is demonstrated most clearly during the period after World War II when Alashan was to become a classic anti-state refuge for the last time. In 1949 Prince Demchugdongrub [Prince De] of Sunit, whose Mongolian national movement for autonomy from China was close to defeat, fled to Alashan with his followers and set up a governing council in the capital. He gathered representatives from all over Inner Mongolia. The idea was to use Alashan’s strategic position also to attract support from socialist Mongolia. If this failed, the leaders would flee via Tibet to India and try to regroup there with international support. Thus the grouping was imagining their participation in quite different external political identities; this can be seen, I think, to signal the exhaustion of the internal resources of Alashan as a Zomia. Prince De’s project collapsed because his followers betrayed him – they knew a comprehensive Chinese communist victory was just about to overwhelm them. But such failures in the face of technically superior, centrally organised power are typical: this has been the fate of all Zomias in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## CONCLUSION

This lecture has taken inspiration from one aspect of Owen Lattimore’s work – his interest in the broad political-economic features and historical transformations of Inner Asia. In this context, the idea of Zomia has been useful to me as a heuristic and to provide a new perspective. With this idea we no longer focus on nation-states, looking from their vantage point and

<sup>7</sup> Scott uses as an example here the case of the Kachin of Highland Burma, whose tendency to oscillate between relatively egalitarian and more autocratic, ranked ‘tribal’ forms was described by Edmund Leach (1954).

<sup>8</sup> His name was Dechin-idshin-norbu. Xiaosanye means ‘junior third lord’, alluding to his position in the noble family (Nasan Bayar 2002: 248).

seeing the centre as typical and important, the periphery as somehow an exception; we need no longer end our studies at the national frontier. The idea of Zomia forces attention to be paid to cross-border zones and makes it interesting to think about why these ‘marginal’ areas have so often been crucial in historical events and attempts to resist or change the status quo.

Thinking in terms of Zomia allows a looking outwards from peripheral areas at the *impositions* of states and empires. It becomes clear that the ‘friction of terrain’, the very difficulty or remoteness of these zones, has given an advantage to the native inhabitants, who know the local passageways, the hideouts, the hidden desert wells, and so forth in a way that no outsider can do, while at the same time rendering tax-collection, military conscription, etc. - not to speak of direct conquest - difficult enough to be hardly worth the effort for a pre-modern state apparatus. With this strategic advantage Zomia-like areas could maintain a certain independence and freedom of actions for their inhabitants. At the same time, their relative inaccessibility was the very reason why these zones became refuges for repeated waves of runaways, migrants, deserters and bandits, and also, in some cases, sites of millenarian resistance to colonialism. In each of the four zones, but especially Dauria and Alashan, the people were able to use their geographically interstitial position to exploit specific resources, amass wealth, tax caravan traffic, and trade the products widely beyond the region. This suggests that we need to open our eyes to other models of exchange and distribution in Inner Asian history, different from the usual categories of steppe pastoralism and irrigation agriculture. And, I think, we could include ‘shamanic power’ among the cultural objects of exchange between centres and peripheries.

When these various factors are added together, the economic connectivity along with the multi-ethnic, multi-religious and politically splintered features of these zones, each of which tend to create links outside, we can see that Inner Asian ‘Zomias’ were not just inward-looking refuges. At least in certain times and particular

places, Inner Asia Zomias like Altai and Uriyanhai were oriented to the state in order to keep it at a distance: they maintained the state-repelling features mentioned by Scott – the fission, dispersal and small-group mobility that made it difficult for a state to extend its rule through a stable hierarchy (Scott 2009: 279). Even in Alashan, which was ruled by a princely house, a range of alternative powers and networks linked locals to external religious and political powers - which recalls Scott’s statement about Southeast Asia ‘Hill peoples have at hand a bandwidth of identities that they can take up, each calibrating a different relationship to lowland states (2009: 281). However, in Inner Asia all of the four regions I have described were outward-looking in a specific way. Because of the vastness of the Empires in which they were to some degree included – a vastness in which only certain points and routes could be closely state controlled – the Zomia-like areas were always interstitial. Never wholly independent, they could nevertheless use their relative remoteness and freedom to play off one encroaching power against another. They were spaces bridging between neighbouring polities in distinctive ways. In this situation, a certain local sensibility, a regional cultural logic could develop, as is revealed in the legends and songs about the heroes of the place.

Of course I do not wish to essentialise the idea of Zomia – the character of the regions I have identified in this way was changeable and was always the product of many contingent historical circumstances. Maybe other people would choose quite different ‘Zomias’ from me. And in the contemporary world of Inner Asia – criss-crossed by modern forms of transport, subject to surveillance, globalized as it is - Zomia-like regions no longer exist. But still, the idea has been useful, at least to me, in reshaping my mental map of Inner Asian history, a map that started with Lattimore – because he was my teacher – but one that can also be redrawn in a way that I am sure he would have been fascinated by, even if he did not agree.



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## ХУРААНГУЙ

КАРОЛАЙН ХАМФРЕЙ

### ДОТООД АЗИЙН БАЙДАЛД “ЗОМИА” АВЧ ҮЗЭХ ХЭРЭГТЭЙ ЮУ?

Жеймс Скоттын “Зомиа” гэдэг бол зүүн өмнөд Азийн зарим нийгэм төрийг эсэргүүцэн цэргийнхний нэвтрэхэд хэцүү бүс нутгаар хил даван дүрвэж байгаа тухай юм. Үүнийг анх харахад Дотоод Азийн байдалд авч үзэх боломжгүй мэт байдаг. Дотоод Азийн хувьд олон зууны туршид төрийн хяналтад байсаар ирсэн. Хэдий тийм боловч жижиг бүлгүүдийн эсэргүүцэл тэмцэл бас байсан бөгөөд бүс нутгийн онцлог бүхий эдийн засагтай байсан. Энэ өгүүлэлдээ дэвшүүлж буй миний санаа бол түүхийн тодорхой нэгэн үе болоод газар нутгийг сайтар ажиглахад “зомиа” хэрэгтэй байж болох юм. Үүний тулд үндэстэн улсын төр хүчтэй ноёрхож байгаагүй түүхэн үеийг авч үзэх, ингэхдээ төрийн тухай биш харин бүс нутгийн дүрэм журам захиргаагүй байдал, хил дамнасан нийгэм-соёлын байгуулал, ямар нэгэн бүлэг төрийн захиргаанд орохоос татгалзан өөрийн гэсэн улс төрийг бий болгох гэсэн үйл явдалд анхаарал хандуулахыг санал болгож байна.