

Roundtable Session Proposal for “Hmong in Comparative Contexts Conference”

Roundtable Session Title:

“To Zomia or not to Zomia? Critical Ethnographic and Historical Perspectives”

Organizer: Jacob R. Hickman, University of Chicago

Session Length: 1 hour and 45 minutes

Roundtable Panelists:

Mai Na Lee, University of Minnesota

Hjorleifur Jonsson, Arizona State University

Faith Nibbs, Southern Methodist University

Jacob R. Hickman, University of Chicago

This critical roundtable is inspired by James C. Scott’s (2009) recent thesis and the debate it has stirred in Southeast Asian Studies and Area Studies more generally. In order to take a critical look at Scott’s theory about upland Southeast Asian anarchy, the panelists will present historical and ethnographic perspectives from their work with Hmong and Mien in Southeast Asia and the West. This is not a traditional panel with papers and a discussant. Rather, each panelist will take 10 minutes to present “data” from their research that challenges, problematizes, or supports different aspects of Scott’s theoretical framework. These short presentations are designed merely to set the table for a debate with all participants present at the roundtable. The overall purpose is to foster an engaged discussion and debate about how well Scott’s concept of Zomia and the sociopolitical dynamics inherent in the concept apply to ethnographic and historical data on the Hmong, the Mien, and other highland ethnic minorities in the region. To this end, each panelist will present the following data and initial arguments, summarized below, within the time frame of 40 minutes. The remaining 65 minutes will be open for discussion and debate amongst all participants in the roundtable (i.e., everyone present). Opening arguments will be made in the following order:

Mai Na Lee challenges the ways in which Scott characterizes minorities in the Zomia zone as anarchists whose whole purpose for being is to evade state control. She argues (extending from her dissertation research and in her current book project) that the Hmong actually felt a need to engage and do actively engage the states they are under because of their leaders’ necessity of external political legitimation. In other words, it would be historically inaccurate to call the Hmong from Lee’s research anarchists. They do seek autonomy, but they do so while dreaming of creating their own nation-states that can engage the colonial state as equals. This directly challenges the notion of pervasive upland anarchy that avoids the emergence of state structures at all costs.

Hjorleifur Jonsson's research with Iu Mien in Southeast Asia presents some ethnographic diversity to this panel's critique of Zomia. From this perspective, Jonsson characterizes "Zomia" as an "intellectual smartbomb." He focuses on contracts and negotiations with spirits and states, including how they related to Mien social units. From this he addresses basic problems with arguments about Zomia. For one, a very selective reading of twentieth century materials for generalizations about a thousand-year history is quite problematic. Second, Scott's inability to recognize history as other than the state's force precludes engagement with any highland people's terms.

Faith Nibbs will present some findings from her multi-sited, transnational fieldwork with Hmong in Texas and Germany. From these data, Nibbs critiques the "methodological nationalism" that characterizes much contemporary research in diaspora studies. On the other hand, she also argues for the importance of ethnic and cultural differences in understanding the effects of particular locations on resettlement communities and diasporic dynamics in groups like the Hmong. These arguments support the idea of Zomia, but also present some challenges to its potential universal applicability across a diverse region where local physical and social ecologies breed significant intra-ethnic differences.

Jacob Hickman will discuss some of his ethnographic encounters with messianic movements in both Thailand and the United States. Comparing his findings to Scott's summary of "Prophets of Renewal," Hickman will discuss some of the challenges that Hmong messianic movements present to the idea that they constitute a counter-nationalization trend. In conjunction with this, Hickman will also present some of the data he collected on moral ideation in the Hmong diaspora (comparing Hmong in the United States in Thailand). The prevalence of autonomy and its relationship to ethics of community and filial piety all present in some cases supporting evidence and in some cases contradictory evidence to Scott's thesis of pervasive upland resistance to state encapsulation.

Following these opening arguments, the debate will be opened to all participants, with the focus of the discussion being a critique of "Zomia" and its characteristics in light of ethnographic and historical data on the Hmong and Mien.