In an interesting critique of the way Southeast Asia has been treated as a ‘crucible’ for many of the world’s religions and civilizations, Beemer in 2009 examined the 16th century transportation of lacquer engraving and the 18th century transportation of the Raayana dance-drama from what is now Thailand to what is now Burma as an example of how intra-regional ‘slave-gathering warfare’ stimulated cultural change within the region and acted as a cohesive force. The Ramayana dance drama itself may have attained popularity even before the sixteenth century as result of raids on Khmer court performers by Ayutthaya. This emphasis on internal cultural vectors within the region runs strongly counter to most previous considerations of the region’s capacity to localize extra-regional forces and to the general tendency of the ‘world historians’ today, who seek, to paraphrase the words of the Mission Statement of the exciting and still fairly new *Journal of Global History*, to search for a more historical treatment of globalization, transcend the dichotomy of the West and the Rest, straddle traditional regional boundaries (for example, the Himalaya foothills, the North Sea, the Eurasian steppe), relate material to cultural and political history, overcome the thematic fragmentation of historiography, and assess interdisciplinarity. It also, as Beemer points out, challenges the kind of nationalist histories which deny all influences from other nations, as an upcoming ANU thesis by Michael Churchman in the History Department is doing for the Vietnam-Guangxi borderlands region.

It may be that the long-discredited Boasian and diffusionist notion of culture area (taken forward, as Blackburn reminds us, by the Austrian *Kultukreis* and later the Lieden schools) is making something of a comeback. The notion has the potential advantage at any rate, of avoiding the pitfalls of nationalism into which so much of history has become and is becoming trapped (cf Reynolds 1995), while at the same time resisting the urge
towards considering regions predominantly in terms of extraneous influences as in the
world systems approach championed by Wallerstein and best reflected in anthropology
perhaps by Wolf’s *Europe and the People without History*. One sign of this in the area
which concerns us is in the work of Stuart Blackburn at SOAS on tribal Arunachal
Pradesh, which reaches deliberately back to Boas’ vehement attacks on the ‘comparative
method’, positing a (Tibeto-Burman) culture area of the extended eastern Himalayas (that
is, upland Southeast Asia, Southwest China, the Burma/India/Bangladesh border, and
central Arunachal Pradesh) defined by common oral traditions. As he notes, Leach’s
1960 ‘Frontiers of ‘Burma’ ’ article, and later both Kirsch and Lehman (not to mention
Von Fürer-Haimendorf), similarly concentrated on this broad region (Blackburn 2007).
Using the interesting notion of an oikotype, derived from botany by the 1930s Swedish
glossologist Von Sydow (which is about how folktales take on local characteristics as they
travel), Blackburn examines variants of oral legends which go to suggest a common
regional habitat. Among the four main stories he picks out as examples of his thesis, are
the story of the shooting down of the nine suns and the story of the loss of writing, and
the major ritual he focuses on is the detailed voyage of the deceased to the Otherworld
(which he also considers in detail elsewhere), all of which are found among the Hmong
of the Thai-Yunnan borderlands with whom I have worked. So too is another major
legend he refers to, the creation myth of origin of a brother and a sister from a gourd after
the flood, a story which Frank Proschan (2001) has exhaustively examined variants of in
Laos, particularly among the Khmu. In considering the earlier debates of the Leiden
school and Boasians which ended up largely rejecting explanations of commonalities and
resemblances in terms of notions of psychic unity, and arguing on the contrary in favour
of explanations in terms of historical borrowings, Blackburn even suggests that we might
reconsider the idea of ‘vertical’ historical borrowing, i.e. by descent and common origin,
rather than horizontal borrowings across cultures.

Interestingly, in an issue of the *Journal of Global History* devoted to a quite critical
consideration of Scott’s most recent (2009) work, *The Art of Not Being Governed,*
considering the case of the Thangmu people who regularly cross borders between India,
Nepal, Sikkim and the border areas of the Tibetan Autonomous region TAR), Sara
Schneiderman (2010) complains that for Himalayan Studies, or studies of ‘High Asia’, which crosscuts the TAR, Sikkim and other states in India, Nepal and Bhutan, the problem has been one of not taking sufficient account of the importance of nation-states in the region, which has long been considered a unified cultural and ecological area, rather than the converse. She also wonders why Scott had detached the Central and Western Himalayan massif from the original Zomia hypothesized by Van Schendel, whom I come to below, and prefers to think of a Himalayan massif comprising Bhutan, Sikkim, Nepal and Tibet, and we might add Assam to her list (in the old capital of which, Shillong, Van Schendel (2002) began his inquiry, asking rhetorically if this was the northwestern borderland of Southeast Asia or the northeast borderland of South Asia) overlapping with a Southeast Asian massif. What she suggests we now need is a clear political history of the Himalayan region which would look at how centres of power arose and exploited other parts which then became marginal or peripheral and led to migrations, rather than trying to discover ‘true’ Tibetan culture, say, in Nepal or Bhutan (Schneiderman 2010). I would echo this call for the Thai-Yunnan borderlands and note that it leads logically to a concern with notions of citizenship and theories of state formation and construction.

Scott’s 2009 work on what he follows Van Schendel in calling Zomia, has, as a number of commentators have now pointed out, in fact done a considerable disservice to Van Schendel’s original ideas, which were largely hypothetical in nature.

Van Schendel’s (2002) argument had been that Zomia should include all the highlands of Asia from the western Himalaya range through the Tibetan plateau and down to the end of the island Southeast Asia highlands, in an attempt to break down the usual disciplinary boundaries between Central or Inner Asia, South Asia, East Asia and Southeast Asia (Michaud, 2010). Later he extended Zomia north and west, including southern Qinghai and Xinjiang and a lot of central Asia with the highlands of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Tajikstan and Kyrgyzstan (ibid). Scott does not follow Van Schendel as far as Afghanistan (which Van Schendel notes as a test case, sometimes part of the Middle East, sometimes South or Central Asia) but limits his Zomia to the hilly areas east of
Afghanistan from the Naga and Mizo hills of northern India to the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh. He quotes Michaud’s (2006) Dictionary on what the latter calls the ‘Southeast Asian Massif’ to show that this encompasses southern and western Sichuan, all Guizhou and Yunnan, southern and northern Guangxi, western Guangdong, most of northern Burma with a bit of northeast India, north and northwest Thailand, most of Laos, north and central Vietnam and the northern and eastern edges of Cambodia – a huge region in any case, on the borders of mainland Southeast Asia, China, India and Bangladesh. But the point I want to stress here is that Van Schendel mainly seems to have intended Zomia as a heuristic device, an area that did not make it into scholarly recognition after World War II owing to the dominant imagination of Southeast Asia in a way which structured area ‘heartlands’ and ‘borderlands’ in a particular way. It was a call for new concepts of regional space, and an argument that the spatialisation of social space could be reconfigured in ways other than areas, such as crosscutting areas, borderlands and transnational flows. The notion of Zomia, though, for which he undoubtedly provides some quite compelling first-hand evidence, seems to have got away from him and taken on a life of its own. Such is the academic politics of scale.

II

Much ink has been spilt on area studies in general, and on the area of Southeast Asia in particular. In the early to mid-2000s there was a flurry of articles on Southeast Asian area studies kicked off by ANU Southeast Asian scholar Ariel Heryanto in *Moussons* in 2002, who followed Craig Reynolds (1995) and others in raising some cogent questions about the invisibility of Southeast Asians in Southeast Asian studies and their relations with ‘Northern’ Southeast Asia scholars, and basically critiquing the Orientalism of the field. This was hotly pursued by 2 articles in *Sojourn* by Peter Jackson, another ANU Thai scholar. Pointing out how area studies had come under near-fatal attack both from globalization theories and poststructuralism, but noting that globalization neither erased borders nor homogenized cultures, Jackson (2003a,b) argued for a revitalized form of area studies which would remove the essentialism and parochialism associated with older area studies approaches in favour of a focus on discursive and cultural differences. In the
same journal in 2006 Rommel Curaming, also at the ANU at that time, tried to take
Jackson to task for confusing the philosophically epistemological with the physically
geographical, and conflating the discursive sense of ‘difference’ with the spatial sense of
it, I think somewhat missing the points many had by that time already made about area
studies as a constructed body of knowledge or, as Van Schendel had put it, how area
studies use a geographical metaphor to visualize social spaces and differences of scale.
And Terry King, who may actually have started the ball rolling with his earlier, 2001
article in *Moussons*, ‘Southeast Asia : An Anthropological Field of Study’, provided a
very useful follow-up literature review in 2006 of I believe all the previous work on
Southeast Asian area studies, paying particular attention to the contributions by Reynolds,
Heryanto and Jackson.

As Van Schendel, doubtless influenced both by Foucault and Said, usefully noted, areas
have shifted, disappeared or emerged, owing both to changing political realities on the
ground and academic relations between specialists within areas and their colleagues
outside those areas, as in the 1990s emergence of Central (or Inner?) Asia, and indeed the
‘Asia-Pacific’ of the 2000s offers another good example of this dynamics between place,
scholarship and political priorities, or even the current Greater Mekong Subregion or
Upper Mekong region (the latter term dating back at least to 1992 at the ANU). This was
very much the case with the emergence of the Thai-Yunnan borderlands area as a region
of study in the 1980s, at the intersection, as Van Schendel would put it, of East, South,
Central and Southeast Asia. In fact the Thai-Yunnan Project was singled out by Van
Schendel in his seminal 2002 paper for special mention as a rare pioneering example of
the kind of cross-regional collaborations he hoped to see in the future.

III

Let us consider how the Thai-Yunnan project came about. The International Thai Studies
Conference (ICTS) had started up in Bangkok in 1984, although an earlier meeting in
India in 1981 was later to be called its first session, while a related meeting in 1985 in Sri
Lanka was not so dignified, and was at that time beginning to reach beyond the national
borders of Thailand to encompass studies and representatives of Tai-speaking groups in
Burma, Laos, Vietnam, Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and even Assam. As I remarked in a
paper written in 1994, the ICTS always had an uneasy relation with non-Tai ethnic
minority groups within Tai-dominated polities but yet has always included these (Tapp
2000). At the same time, China was ‘opening up’. Although Chinese economic reform
did not reach many places within China for several years, it was officially launched at the
end of 1979 and the early1980s saw a gradual opening up of academic liaisons with
China as Chinese visitors and scholars on the Tai attended Thai Studies conferences and
finally organized one in Kunming in 1990. Lao and Vietnamese scholars followed a
similar path. It was in this political context, and against the background academic context
of a continued interest in what I still tend to see as the Indochinese borderlands, or as
Leach put it the areas between India and China, that Gehan Wijeyewardene started the
Thai-Yunnan Project in 1987, after the highly successful holding of the ICTS at the ANU
in July of that year, which I attended at his suggestion (together with scholars from China,
Vietnam, Laos and India besides the large contingent from Thailand and other
international attendees; Wijeyewardene et.al. 1987).

I may be slightly biased in my historical recollections of the project, as an outside
contributor, but I cannot help but see the collection Gehan edited in 1990, *Ethnic Groups
across National Boundaries in Southeast Asia*, published by the ISEAS in Singapore, as
among the foremost achievements of this project. Based on an earlier workshop in 1985,
it contained major contributions by Christian Bauer, Cholthira Satyawadhna, Rozanne
Lilley, Douglas Miles and Ananda Rajah, all closely associated with the project and with
the ANU, and covering the T/hai, Mon, Lua, Karen, Hmong and Yao. This was one of the
first works to deal with the theoretical issues posed by cross-border ethnic and cultural
linkages, and marked a genuine *crise de coeur* among many Southeast Asianists who,
with the opening up of China’s borders, found themselves forced to rethink the very
contexts in which they had previously formulated their essentialist frameworks of ethnic
and cultural groups in Southeast Asia. I experienced this shift of theoretical grounding
myself, moving from Thailand to China to study the Hmong, although I had been aware
from the first of their Chinese antecedents, and it was perhaps even more marked for
Douglas Miles whose work on the Yao in Thailand was politely but contemptuously taken to task by Jacques Lemoine (together with all other researchers on the Yao in Thailand) for completely missing the fact that their religion, far from being a form of isolated tribal ancestral worship, was in fact a recognizable branch of one of the world’s main religions, Daoism, and moreover identifying their kinship system of descent as bilateral rather than a severely modified patrilineal one (Lemoine 1983). Later, when Jacques Lemoine and my then head of department at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, Chien Chao, organized the International Association of Yao Studies (for which I served as honorary Secretary/Treasurer), another initiative stemming like the Thai-Yunnan project from the new possibilities of contact and liaison across academically formerly impermeable borders, I had the privilege in 1986 of accompanying both Doug Miles and the sadly late Georges Condominas (to say nothing of Lemoine, Fei Xiaotong, and various other luminaries) on their first visits to China and the minority Yao areas there (but who were the Yao? Lemoine was to ask at the end of one of our subsequent Yao Association publications, the 1991 *The Yao of South China*, in his own *crise de coeur*. Certainly there was no such simple equation of language with cultural identity as was often the case in Southeast Asia. Whole branches of the Yao in China turned out to speak a Tai-related language, or a Miao language, or Chinese. The encounter with China proved a humbling and unsettling experience for many Southeast Asianists, and the Thai-Yunnan project arose from the excitement and challenge of that encounter). Returning to the book on ethnic groups across national boundaries, re-reading Cholthira’s article on the Lua is an experience very telling of the new discoveries which were being made. Cholthira, who had become acquainted with the Mon-Khmer speaking Lua (Lwa, Lava) minority of Thailand during her long sojourn at a Communist Party of Thailand base in their armed struggle against the Thai government, and went on to write her thesis at the ANU Department of Anthropology supervised by Gehan, is not only able to describe the aquatic culture and matricentric kinship ideology of the Lua of Nan province, but also to compare this with later fieldwork on the Laveue of Chiangmai and Maehongsorn, and finally to relate this to her research among the related Wa in Yunnan, shedding light in the process on head-hunting, slavery, millenarianism and Jonathan Friedman’s theories about the devolution of Asiatic social systems (Cholthira 1990). Lilley (1990) rounds off
the collection with an incisive critique of ethnic and culturist essentialism. I am not quite alone in my respect for this collection; Van Schendel (2002) also picks it out, together with Andrew Walker’s (1999) work on cross-border traders, as a pioneering example of the new analysis of border flows in terms of a “politics of mobility” he calls for. Regions may take unfamiliar forms, he says, such as “lattices, hollow rings, archipelagos, [and] patchworks”. Archipelagos, maybe not, but it is easy enough to think of lattices, hollow rings and patchworks in the region.

Looking through the digest of articles from the old newsletters which Andrew Walker and I prepared in the 2000s (The Tai World) one is struck by the richness of the materials it represents. We have Baas Terwiel, who was later to work so importantly on the Ahom Tai-speakers of Assam, on the White Tai and Nung of Vietnam after his visit there with Amthony Diller in 990, Cam Trong on the Black Tai of Vietnam, Scott Bamber on traditional Thai medicines, Chusit Chuchart on the “ox-train traders” of northern Thailand, Diller on Tai languages, Serge Thion on Cambodian words for settlements and peoples, Thawi Swangpanyangkoon on old Kengtung in Burma, translations of Lue songs and legal codes, essays on Dai tattooing in Sipsongpanna and on Zhuang frog worship, Li Xiangyang on the history of Luchuan in Yunnan…..

We had focused on the more Tai-related and cultural materials but we can also find pieces in the old Newsletter on the military massacre in Bangkok of May 1992, Cambodian politics, the difference between Hmong and Miao (Enwall), Burmese insurgency, the Upper Mekong project, reports on the UN drugs projects in Burma and opium production, Vietnamese revolution (Philip Taylor), economic developments in the ‘emerging Mekong corridor’ (Ted Chapman, 1991), Burmese refugees in Bangladesh, HIV/AIDS on the Burma borders, the difficulties of ethnic classification in China (Liščák), drinking water in Laos and so on.

Another major achievement of the 2000s, which owed much to the inputs of Andrew Walker, besides the successful publication of several issues of the online Bulletin which replaced the Newsletter, was the publication through Pandanus Press of Lakchang A
Reconstruction of Tai Identity in Daikong, by Yos Santasombat of Chiangmai University.

As Walker notes in his preface, Chatthip Natsupha in his own preface to the Thai edition had suggested this remarkable ethnography of the ‘Chinese Shan’ was the first proper study by any Thai scholar of a Tai region outside Thailand, and as such it remains a landmark publication.

This brings me to my final point. Apart from all the publications and the workshops and conferences, it seems to me that what was most remarkable about the project in the years before 2000 when Gehan was guiding it, was the extensive translations of texts from Vietnamese, Lao, Burmese, Thai and Chinese which it commissioned and published, and that what has continued to be important since then has been the cross-regional contacts and visits between researchers in Australia and throughout the region. It is this collaborative cross-fertilization of ideas on, about, and from which powered and has continued to characterise the project. The translations, the meetings, and the many crucial doctoral theses associated in one way or another with the project, have all arisen out of and evidenced the network of academic interests which remains focused on the region.

To pick just a very examples, when Li Xiangyang came to the ANU as a Visiting fellow and translated historic Chinese texts on Dai in Yunnan for the project in the 1990s, when Cam Tron, the leading Black Tai specialist in Vietnam, welcomed Tony Diller and Terwiel to Vietnam in the mid-1990s, when doctoral students such as Amporn Jirattikorn and Aranya Siriphon (both now established academics) visited the project at the Department of Anthropology in the mid-2000s for substantial lengths of time (6 months, and 1 year, respectively) as part of doctoral theses being completed elsewhere (while of course other doctoral students who are now themselves established scholars continued to join us from the region and beyond it), research linkages were and are being formed which are of a productive and creative kind in contributing to new and shared understandings of the region and its shifting, changing contours. This leads one to reflect more critically on Heryanto’s complaints that Southeast Asians have been excluded from Southeast Asian studies, or that they have a theoretically uninformed understanding of the region which is at odds with those in ‘northern’ institutions. It is certainly not the case with the Thai-Yunnan Project that this has been the case; from the start, as we can see in
the extensive programme of translations, workshops and visiting fellowships and
dractorates, it has been a collaborative endeavour fully involving and exchanging with
people from the region studied. Nor is what Heryanto calls the ‘stubborn insistence’ of
Southeast Asians on studying their own countries generally the case with the kind of
research the project has been involved with. Instead, what we have tended to have is Han
Chinese scholars studying non-Han groups, albeit within China, while Thai scholars (like
Ajan Yos) have come more and more to study Laos, Vietnam or China, albeit related Tai
groups there. Burma is of course the general exception here, and our efforts to
communicate and set up exchanges with our Burmese colleagues have met with
considerable frustrations, despite a pioneering RSPAS trip there in 2002. However, things
may now be changing on that front, with one Burmese doctoral scholar involved in the
project currently and another, working on the history of the Shan states, expected shortly
on a Visiting Fellowship.

In answer to Heryanto, Terry King says “It seems to me that it has been our very success
in supervising, training and collaborating with Southeast Asian scholars which
has, in part at least, contributed to our demise. I do not complain about this;
it is as it should be. There are now established programmes and expertise in
the region, and students who might previously have come to us from there
no longer need to do so. What is more, I am daunted by the information that
Southeast Asian scholars have at their finger-tips, their direct access to fieldsites,
and their command of the vernacular. So some Western modesty is
required.” What we now see, in the striking success of the international programmes
associated with the Vietnamese National Museum of Ethnology and the Institute of
Ethnology there, or with the well-established institutional collaborations between the
RCSD at Chiangmai with the Institute of Border Research at Yunnan University and
other institutes in Laos and Vietnam, or even in Yos’ study of a Tai community in
Yunnan, is indeed the forging of academic liaisons and collaborations within the region
which might have been thought to lead to the demise of projects like the Thai-Yunnan
project. Yet the fact is that it has not done so, and throughout the 2000s the project has
been continuously involved with collaborative research and scholarly visits and meetings
and publications on and with the region. This suggests that something else is going on; that scholars formerly associated with the project continue to appreciate our perceptions and outlooks, different though these may now be, while at the same time we continue to respect and value the knowledge of specialists from the region. As a pioneer in the understanding of the importance of cross-border flows and movements in the region, and of the centrality of origins (Tapp 1991), the Tai-Yunnan Project is now well poised to contribute to evolving understanding of the region in new ways, through a deepened appreciation of the complexities of border situations, the workings of state power, the intricacies of cultural identifications and reformulations of ethnicity, and the machinations of both formal and informal markets. There is a region here, both imagined by itself and by outsiders, and it is imperative to encourage further work on it. It is for that reason that the Thai-Yunnan project is now seeking to establish itself on a more regional, and collaborative basis, which we hope will take us further forward into the 2100s.

Nicholas Tapp

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