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Cyberzomia

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Cyberzomia

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

This paper aims to broaden our conceptions of what constitutes urban/global insurgencies toward a new Public City, by reflecting on what we could learn from contrasting a Southeast Asian Zomia against its Chinese cyber-urban variation. What, indeed, can an “anarchist history of upland Southeast Asia” (Scott, 2009, subtitle) teach us about the ways in which we see and interpret culturally conceived contemporary urbanity, in Information Age China and beyond? It is high time for scholarly emphasis to be placed on the ways in which ‘real’ cities and their people have come to encompass and embrace cyberspace, on the interdependent and reciprocative interplay between the ‘virtual’ and the urban-physical, i.e. how people’s virtual worlds are emplaced in physical urban space and how urban space is augmented by cyberspace. Reverting the trend of imposing an imagined dialectic divide between virtual and physical space, both ought to be re-conceived as the ‘lived spaces’ (Lefebvre, 1991) of late/post/hyper-modern urbanites — i.e. as representational space “which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate” (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 39). After all, much societal change happens through concrete actions based on intentional behaviour, appropriated against any imposed or intended meanings.

Both Zomia and Cyber-urban Zomia (‘Cyberzomia’ below) are virtual place metaphors. Metaphors as useful literary and conceptual tools in that they convey an understanding about connected issues and processes by figuratively asserting the existence of something which we associate with or which bears resemblance to something we know. Moreover, metaphors confront us with our own ontological and epistemological biases (i.e. our preconceived notions of what we know and how we know it), and hence make us question assumed crystallized conformities, thus facilitating shifts in our ways of seeing which (ideally) allow for new knowledge to emerge. Comparing two metaphors adds an additional layer of differentiation.

The paper’s other working assumption is that *all* online activities by urban Internet users, in China a.k.a. ‘netizens’ (网民 *wangmin*), are at the same time *inherently* urban and are augmenting traditional understandings of urban space in the sense that the bodies and minds of the people involved are inhabiting and performing urban space, breathing (polluted) city air. After all, an autonomous, active, self-assertive, situated, sensible, bodied self “is the only aspect of our being – individual or collective – capable of performing place, that is to say, making place a living reality” (Casey, 2001, p. 718). At the same time, our (human) capacity to envision depends on our ability to develop a phenomenal consciousness based on phenomenal experiences, i.e. on making things known to our senses (*ibid*). While the ‘network’ has (accurately, I think) been identified as dominant organizing principle for society (see for example Manuel Castells’s work), the realities of place-based experiences are too varied to be consistent with any meta-narrative, as individuals continue to craft who they are with one foot in their physical and the other in their virtual everyday lives (cf. Castells, 2004, 2007, 2012; Castells, Caraca and Cardoso, 2012). Just like actions and structures created by Zomians are inherent to the highlands, Chinese ‘Cyburbia’ or ‘Cyberzomia’ is inhabited by people with the desire to explore and re-create heterogeneous and exciting places ‘of their own’. It is their urban living environment which provides them with the cultural images and imaginaries that underlie and spark these desires.

Amazingly, the inability of cyber-scholars to imagine and deal with actual geographical space seems to match the inability of scholars of actual geographical space to imagine and deal with cyberspace. Contributors to urban theory and -studies on the one hand, and Internet- and communication studies on the other have laid the basis for identification and symbolic extension among scholars who often seem blissfully unaware of literature by other disciplines. That the 'cyber' and the 'urban' have been augmenting each other for more than a decade has thus remained beneath the radar of all but the most observant. Until now, attempts to bring cyber into space are few and far between, and are often as rare and flimsy as attempts to bring space into the cyber (notable exceptions are Lim, 2006, forthcoming; and Kidder, 2012, 2009). Clearly, there's Internet infrastructure such as routers and services such as Cyber-Cafes that may be declared as 'inherently urban' -- but what about the less tangible parts? Are they a-spatial? Non-urban? Cyberspace is like an iceberg, ten percent of its volume is visible through the (metaphorical) fog, but the fascinating 90 percent that sank the Titanic are not. Hard to grasp with the traditional tools of rigorous social science, and often deliberately hidden, scholars are hesitant to map out or even imagine the shape of the whole iceberg.

My own interest in Zomia was sparked in 2009 by Scott's book and by my long held belief that if we take philosophical, political, economic or academic paradigmatic narratives and their institutions too seriously, we might overlook all kinds of insurgent efforts underway by which people, having woken up and broken free from the shackles and restraints of authority and their sanctioned narratives, are changing the(ir) world(s).

This paper, after briefly introducing Zomia and distilling some of the lessons that it teaches us, demonstrates conceptual commonalities between Southeast Asia's Zomia and China's Cyberzomia. I feel compelled to leave the task to provide clear cut linkages between the meanings and engagement in cyberspace and the physical structures of specific urban places to others. As much as I would love to provide such empirical corroboration, at least in China it seems to be too early for such linkages to become visible; even more importantly, even if they were visible, in the current restrictive political climate in which activists are frequently 'disappeared' or silenced, I am hesitant to make them more so.

WELCOME TO ZOMIA

"*Zomia* is a new name for virtually all the lands at altitudes above roughly three hundred meters all the way from the Central Highlands of Vietnam to northeastern India and traversing five Southeast Asian nations (Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, Thailand, and Burma) and four provinces of China (Yunnan, Guizhou, Guangxi, and parts of Sichuan). It is an expanse of 2.5 million square kilometers containing about one hundred million minority peoples of truly bewildering ethnic and linguistic variety" (Scott, 2009, p. ix) (see fig. 1). Zomia is a neologism where the 'zo' carries a geographical connotation of remote or highland, and the 'mi' of people. The linguistic roots can be traced to some of the minority languages spoken in Burma, India, Bangladesh (ibid). Scott describes Zomia's boundless diversity: "In the space of a hundred kilometers in the hills one can find more cultural variation--in language, dress, settlement pattern, ethnic identification, economic activity, and religious practices--than one would ever find in the lowland river valleys."

Figure 1. Scott's Boundaries of Zomia (in red)

Source: <http://understandingsociety.blogspot.sg/2010/03/zomia-james-scott-on-highland-peoples.html>

Zomia is metaphorical in the sense that it does not appear on any official map and is not defined by nation state boundaries or ethnic or national identities. At roughly the size of Europe (Scott's view is geographically more delimiting than others'), Zomia is also "the largest remaining region of the world whose peoples have not been fully incorporated into nation-states" (Scott, 2009, p. ix, also cf. Van Schendel, 2002). Complaining about how the predominance of the modern nation-state often delimits historical/academic inquiry, and that a national lens does not suffice when it comes to understanding peoples that live outside the state's grasp, Scott renders the highlands not only as zone of political resistance, but also of "cultural refusal" (Scott, 2009, p. 20). Whether people were expelled by the state or actively chose to avoid it, Zomia's elevation and isolation have not only provided its inhabitants significant freedom from state control, it also allowed them to develop "state-evading or state-distancing practices" (Scott, 2009, p. 128). Importantly, Scott holds that it were these practices that sent them to these remote upland regions in the first place (ibid), i.e. that over the past two millennia, highland peoples have made the deliberate choice to live 'outside the state', building communities in the hills as a response to oppressive state-making projects in the valleys. He argues convincingly that in order to understand the lowland states, we need to examine the role played by Zomia in both their formation and collapse (Scott, 2009, p. 16-17). In this sense, Zomia comprises and delineates the limits of state influence, so that the contestations that are happening in Zomia can tell us a lot about the kinds of state and societal power that lie inside as well as outside its borders.

Providing an important corrective to a dominant view of benign and benevolent state-building, Scott argues for a view from the margins, and demonstrates that the state is often less benevolent than it may appear. Interestingly, this interpretation renders ‘civilized life’ in the lowlands as dreadful to the extent that people’s desire to live autonomously frequently becomes stronger than the lure and conveniences of living in a so-called ‘civilized’ land of state-rule. At least temporarily, Zomia provides the ‘zones of refuge’ for people who chose to “evade the manifold afflictions of state-making projects in the valley” and “to place themselves out of the reach of the state” (Scott, 2009, p. 22). Moreover, Scott argues that once we change our way of seeing, we can see subjects not as victims to circumstance, but (also) as autonomous and intentional actors in charge of their own fate and determined to thrive in their own ways. People who are normally described as excluded and irrelevant outsiders without much agency, are now actively creating a way of life that is a “strategic adaptation to avoid incorporation in state structures” (Scott, 2009, p. 39). These interactions and negotiations have helped Zomians to devise strategies to escape and keep the state at bay.

Overall, Zomia provides the Lefebvrian ‘lived spaces’ that enable ‘social learning’ and ‘place-making’ (cf. Friedmann) practices geared at creating alternative ways of life and of seeing the world. The peoples of Zomia can be interpreted as ‘free subjects’ (Foucault) who have made an intentional choice to defy assimilating forces of authority and live a stateless existence, and this choice is rooted in direct (both symbiotic and oppositional) interaction with the state. Incremental changes, initiatives, and capacities to act (cf. Simone, forthcoming) were necessary to create Zomia out of thin air and to truly live in unrestrained ways and form shared meanings and networks and spaces crucial for (lowland urban) insurgencies. At the same time, we ought to be mindful about applying the Zomia paradigm to other contexts, and that there is a difference between the theoretical idea of Zomia with its *in-principle* free subjects imbued with *in-principle* capacities to act, with what its inhabitants actually do and the various constraints and realities under which they operate.

ZOMIA : LESSONS LEARNED

Lifting Zomia from an existence as distant and uncivilized hinterland existing only at the margins of scholarship to the realm of theory-generating problematique, is paradigm-breaking work that comes with offering vastly new sets of questions and methodologies. Scott shows that good scholarship is not just about getting your data correct and proceeding in a cookie cutter fashion; changing a paradigm must begin with a daring and imaginative overreaching that perturbs received knowledge rather than making a waterproof case for an alternative view. Scott also reminds us that determinism can take different shapes and forms, and is often disguised in narratives of cultures following teleological or technological paths of progress. He makes conceptual space for reversals of assumptions regarding such ‘progress’ with regard to physical location (from valleys to mountains), subsistence practices (from sedentary to nomadic), and language (from written to oral). He also makes conceptual space for the fact and the reasons why people would deliberately and strategically remain outside, and actively resist incorporation/absorption into, organized state structures. Scott also allows for historical forms of what Manuel Castells calls ‘media politics’, by arguing that state-led lowlanders and anarchist highlanders needed ‘the other’ to create their respective legitimating stories of moral high ground and supremacy.

Introducing us to Zomia as a “laboratory for an illuminative reinterpretation of familiar views and explanations” (Kreutzmann, 2010, p. 296), Scott shows that there is nothing natural about the shape and emergence of the modern state, and that people who are not willing to subsume under the umbrella of state control and instead make an effort to keep it at arm’s length are not necessarily misfits or mavericks. Eliminating unsuitable lenses (nation-state) or dichotomies (state/society) may provide us with novel ways of seeing and understanding. Civilization is no longer something given

and unchangeable. Rendering Zomia as place-in-itself, provides the undergrowth that allows not only for alternative coherent portraits of history, but also for a better understanding of the complex and contradictory political processes that pervade these 'liminal' spaces. Therefore people, if they are afforded space and agency, have the potential to build communities that are not necessarily chaotic and uncivilized, but could become the roots for alternative economic cultures and spaces of hope. Scott teaches us to look at the highlanders as people who chose to pass on what 'civilized society' had to offer and who compensate for the hardships that come with autonomy by forming convivial communities around a search for alternative ways of seeing and living. People are interpreted as (what the later-day Foucault calls) 'free subjects', i.e. individuals imbued with conscious agency capable of reflexivity and autonomous action and expression, empowered to shape their own existence (e.g., Foucault, 2000; cf. Paras, 2006).

Whether Zomians are motivated by an anarchist drive to avoid control (Scott) or by gaining access to unevenly distributed benefits in a possibly benevolent welfare state; whether highlanders seek to flee from oppression (Scott) or are simply exploring their selves by creating space or by seeking improvement; whether 'zones of refuge' (Scott) are also 'zones of insubordination or resistance'; or whether cultural traditions and decision-making are rooted in political (Scott) or rather in economical or ecological or cultural necessities or preferences, or spring from happenstance, spur-of-the-moment intuitions: what is important is that if people have the capacity to create a place for themselves, they also have the capacity to build alternative communities and economic cultures around alternative sets of shared meanings and values. Emerging 'spaces of hope' (Harvey) are not automatically doomed to self-destruction and chaos as many state narratives of autonomous projects want to make people believe. And small-scale projects might be well worthy of close examination in terms of what can be learned for other, often larger and better known, groups and societies.

Scott's rendering of the state is similar to what he presents in his "Domination and the Arts of Resistance" (1998), with the caveat that Scott now (2009) expands on this by arguing for the need to include the necessity of a better understanding of the commonalities of life in the highlands. The new book picks up on an argument Scott began making a decade earlier (Scott, 1998): that it is a central problem of statecraft to render its society "legible", i.e. to identify and control its subjects, "to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion" (Scott, 1998, p. 2). This is achieved by stating and promoting that peripheral and sedentary peoples are antithetical to the needs of a state, hence "the state has always seemed to be the enemy of 'people who move around'" (Scott, 1998, p. 1). In many ways, Scott's treatment of the state reminds me of Max Weber, who taught us that a state controls its society by three factors: coercion, remuneration, and by manufacturing legitimacy through manipulation. The predatory and manipulative nature of Scott's 'state' and its logic of appropriation and control manifests in population gain (often by raiding slaves — the 'cash crop' of the era — from Zomia) and population loss (mostly through people who either were or felt expelled from nation-state proper) but also in myriad forms of interdependences and alliances around symbiotic relationships (such as trade) devised to achieve differing agendas in the name of mutual benefit. Looking at contemporary events in Tibet and Xinjiang, regions that may not be part of Zomia in Scott's narrower sense but do match its defining criteria, the Chinese party-state with its manipulative (media) strategies and forms of cultural imperialism seems to fit this description very well.

What I found missing in Scott's story is how actual everyday life as well as the natural and built environment in Zomia have shaped the ways of seeing of its inhabitants, and the extent to which unexpected hardships or benefits may have formed or swayed their decisions. I would also highlight that fleeing from the state or from societal processes is a strategy that is not irreversible by design

— depending on changing views and strategies, remote peoples could always leave the hills for the state, or maintain contact with the lowlands in other ways, should they so desire. This weakness of Scott's Zomia is linked to its foregrounding of conceptual scholarship rather than providing a (more) comprehensive account of empirical actions and everyday life — however, I would argue that while the latter is indispensable for revising the former, the former is important in that it 'makes space' for the latter.

The introduction of a civilizational discourse with clear delineations of what is good (state, lowland life) and what is bad (highland anarchy) served to persuade its people(s) that they have a privileged position. According to Scott, steady civilizational progress is a myth based on a narrative whose creators often have an agenda. Zomia is thus not only metaphorical in the sense that it does not exist on our maps. It also is a metaphor for an alternative way of living and an urgent reminder that we need to change our way of seeing the world. I suggest that Zomia is thus a suitable point of departure indeed for an illuminative reinterpretation of China's cyber-urban terrain and for Chinese Internet studies broadly conceived.

WELCOME TO THE CHINESE INTERNET

China's 18th Party Congress that ended (as usual) with the party-state presenting its new seven-headed leadership was a big event extensively covered in both national and international media. On the days of the event, state security measures to ensure an uninterrupted spectacle were extraordinary: Beijing's taxi drivers were told to remove window handles from their doors and avoid 'sensitive parts' of the city as much as possible; kitchen knives and pencil sharpeners were pulled from store shelves; the usual suspects (activists and petitioners) were rounded up ahead of the event; web searches for information pertaining to the Congress were blocked. However, circumstantial evidence has it that on 15 November 2012, when the new line-up of leaders was at last publicly announced, people riding on Beijing buses in which the news were transmitted live via state-of-the-art mobile television systems could not care less. And neither did the vast majority of China's half a billion netizens. By remaining 'the same' while the world around it has changed, party-state politics no longer captures the attention of the masses. Chinese no longer see themselves as subjects of or in opposition to a state; after the political turbulences of the 1960s and 70s, many have begun to reinvent themselves as people in their own right, staying away from lofty political spectacles.

At the same time, China rides on the wave of an unprecedented boom largely based on economic reforms, but without corresponding social or political renewal. China also drifts into the tyranny of an increasingly technology-savvy authoritarianism while disenfranchised and outraged masses are losing trust in their leaders and institutions and in the political system they embody. Recognizing present cultural values as increasingly empty and meaningless (cf. Gries and Rosen, 2004; Rosen, 2004), Chinese society is becoming deeply fractioned, and the Chinese state and its mouthpiece media increasingly lose their ability to influence the younger generations' minds. In the quest for new values, the Chinese-language Internet has become a contested space for information and interaction, allowing for a proliferation of value systems based on an emerging polyphony of voices that express and negotiate viewpoints different from the official stories (Herold and Marolt, 2011; Marolt and Herold, forthcoming).

For the first few years after the Internet was opened to the general public in 1997, cyberspace was neglected by the state. Authorities with insufficient surveillance capacities and knowledge, not knowing where to look, understaffed and inexperienced, were facing equally naive users who largely had no clue about even the idea of deliberately remaining under the radar of observation. After the

realization hit that (at least after Mao's and Deng's passing) widely shared belief systems can no longer be evoked or maintained through China's debilitating and fear-mongering state-sanctioned mouthpiece media alone, this has changed. Now discourse is censored or self-censored (not articulated) and manipulated, by a regime that deploys subtle and highly flexible multi-pronged forms of control and censorship to prevent the spread of undesirable content (Marolt, 2011). Even not censoring has become a political tool, with data-mining surveillance geared at controlling and actively 'guiding' conversations of what has happened and what might be possible. Over the past few years, regulators have stepped up their efforts to control cyberspace, increase censorship, 'guide' public opinion, and install measures to manipulate online discourse and co-opt leadership. It has become as clear as crystal that virtuality is by no means 'liberated space', but is structured by norms and practices that often mirror those of the material world. Insiders describe state-netizen interactions as high-stake cat-and-mouse game and state authorities (or their corporate or academic collaborators) render Internet activity as entertainment and play with addictive potential.

Nevertheless, within only 15 years, the Chinese Internet has become a huge and poly-vocal space. The cacophony of voices and information young Chinese minds are exposed to via the Internet also tells a story of an existential commitment to stateless spontaneity, free expression and social learning — the success story of the Chinese Internet, with now more than 500 million 'netizens' (*wangmin*), of which almost 75 percent are equipped with computers, 70 percent with mobile devices, where 'Weibo' (Chinese microblogging services) channels have become the or one of the major news source for almost half of China's netizens, and where growth rates still exceed 10 percent annually (CNNIC, 2012).

It is no coincidence that in the context of China, for many centuries some of the same circumstances that Scott describes (a region of refuge beyond the reach of the government, where one is safe from laws and regulations) have been captured by the well-known phrase: The mountains are high, the emperor far away (山高皇帝远 *shan gao huangdi yuan*). Metaphorically speaking, present-day Chinese netizens are heading for the mountains, and the vast expanses of the Internet contain spaces of refuge where disparate groups find that freedom of expression is less inhibited and where there is a diversity of thoughts and ideas and a participatory capacity to share (and learn from) one's views that was previously unknown. It is in these highlands where Chinese netizens create ever more imaginative ways to bypass — rather than engage — the hegemonic state narratives they came to question. For Chinese netizens are not so much interested in contesting the control of the Chinese state over Chinese society, but rather in avoiding, ignoring or bypassing the surveillance and control mechanisms of the state in their own everyday lives, thus dodging unwanted influences on their thoughts, practices, and actions (Marolt, 2011, 2008). According to de Certeau (1984), a state aims to force people to play the game by its rules just as the public continually seeks to find or create their own places. Resistance thus emerges not from specific places with overpowering practices of domination, but rather from the state's exertion of power on everyday life and its practices of survival, enjoyment, etc. These practices, according to de Certeau, are constantly 'refashioned by this combination of manipulation and enjoyment' (de Certeau, 1984, p. 18).

In an urban China short of free and unsupervised public spaces such as urban green spaces, pedestrian zones, workplaces and schools, government bureaucracies, corporate media institutions, etc, the Chinese Internet has become a vast and highly complex public space inhabited by myriad individuals and groups, permeated with particular places of playful and serious consent and dissent, with thoughts and ideas that are continuously produced, remixed, and reproduced across space and time (Marolt, 2011). This is significant because such free public spaces are where people talk to each other, learn to define a situation on their own terms, and ultimately develop a capacity for independent thought and concerted action (Goldfarb, 2006). The Internet creates for Chinese people

a 'lived space' around the places where they can compensate for what they are lacking in their material lives and express what cannot be expressed elsewhere.

Now where doth the truth lie? Are the powers of individual and shared agency indeed reduced to dissident criminals (who can be co-opted, 'invited to tea', 'disappeared' to be 'persuaded' or tortured, or convicted of subversion) and otherwise diluted by creating ever more docile and powerless victims to the omnipresent possibilities of entertainment and play? Or does cyberspace make space for 'free subjects' to act as the heroes of their own stories, winning over what Bey calls "the ludicrous minions of a despised & irrelevant Order" (Bey, 2003, p. 64)? As so often, the truth lies somewhere else entirely. Not in grand finales, but in small-scale beginnings and often transient and happenstance processes. The process of creating social change works best when its inceptions go unnoticed. Changing ideas is less visible than changing societal structures, forming groups and shared meanings online is less visible than organizing mass protests. The clandestine nature of aspiration and inspiration can, at least temporarily, enhance the organic, grassroots capacities of autonomous self-organization. Of course, what matters in the end will be whether anarchist decentralized efforts will jump scale and whether emerging social movements will be able to create broader commons and change current dominant political practices and institutions (or create their own) (Harvey, 2012). The political priority afforded to controlling physical bodies on streets or squares is due to the fact that demonstrations are the only power the masses have left. Yet in China, where open confrontations are violently suppressed and the Internet is strictly controlled, stealthy and subversive projects and tactics emerge in the perennial conflict around a convivial urban life.

Capturing at once the serendipity and the deeply transformative potential that lies in all our virtual worlds, Hakim Bey wrote: "Pick someone at random & convince them they're the heir to an enormous, useless & amazing fortune--say 5000 square miles of Antarctica, or an aging circus elephant, or an orphanage in Bombay, or a collection of alchemical mss [manuscripts]. Later they will come to realize that for a few moments they believed in something extraordinary, & will perhaps be driven as a result to seek out some more intense mode of existence" (Bey, 2003, p.2). Pinning down those 'few moments' will be contingent on access to activist leaders' memories of revolutions and social movements that, at least in China, are still to come. But Cyberzomia's transformative potential may not express itself through key moments of revolutionary zeal at all, but rather through immersive practices and gradually less conformist information and networking that, through learning and social learning, creates an altered mental state. To make space for this, a variety of efforts indicative of a fleeing from and ignoring the state and of an active seeking and fighting for a 'more intense mode of existence' have long become a Chinese reality. Many early adopters and practitioners corroborate that actively engaging (with) the Internet has become their "exit" from a closet of conformity. Now the question becomes, what happens when 500 million people exit a closet of conformity? Both in terms of disruptive and generative potential, this question leads us back to the two key components: people (agency) and space (place).

Rebecca MacKinnon, among others, documents how the Chinese government as well as private corporations, through regulations, manipulation, and more or less subtle forms of censorship, actively diminish the Internet's capacity to contribute to democratic political revolutions (MacKinnon, 2007, 2012). Yet we ought to remind ourselves that what we are seeing is only the top of the iceberg, made visible not despite but because of our scholarly (and publicity) blinkers. Practices of emplaced cultural subversion and transcendence enable us not only to live in the present age, but also to face and renew the structures aimed at perpetuating the past. This readies us to perceive new experiences in new ways — a (real or imagined) distance from governing structures, whether in the virtual or physical highlands, facilitates an appreciation for our ever-faster changing surroundings and selves.

CHINA'S CYBERZOMIA

Virtual and physical urban spaces have indeed become interdependent dimensions of political insurgencies and control (Lim, 2006, forthcoming). Insurgencies are often referred to in the context of uprisings — often violent — against military or religious dictatorships or rendered and retold as clashes between activists and police (Northern Africa, Middle East, Occupy). Yet insurgencies could — and should — actually be better understood by putting them in a broader context, including peaceful grassroots practices around the formation of alternative economic cultures or the emergence of urban spaces of hope, around local projects through which new ways of seeing and forms of community emerge beneath the radar of state and corporate omnipresence (Douglass, forthcoming).

Trying to move beyond rendering urban space in terms of a dialectic of the physical and the virtual (both being equally 'real'!), this paper applies and extends the framework of a Scottian 'Zomia' to the urban (more than 50 percent of Chinese now live in cities) and the Chinese Internet (of which close to 70 percent of urban Chinese are users). Looking at some of the commonalities and differences between Zomia/ns and Cyberzomia/ns, cyberspace emerges as the *locus* where China's '80 hou' and '90 hou' generations (i.e. those born after 1980 and 1990, respectively) 'hang out' these days, until their bodies crave food or sleep. Indeed much of contemporary nomadic urban cosmopolitanism is lived in an inherently urban Cyberzomia, by people who maneuver multiple identities as they move with one foot in virtual and the other in physical space.

Cyberzomia provides and constitutes a public space that lies outside traditional forms of state control and where action and 'social action' is mostly free of immediate oversight and control. As I show below, many of the characteristics of Zomia/ns can also be applied to specific urban areas and pockets of cyberspace. In China and elsewhere, it is urbanites who dominate the Internet both in terms of usage statistics and ideas. Even if they hail from a rural background, many netizens and practitioners have moved to cities, and urban and global cultures and processes comprise and dominate the topics discussed online (cf. CNNIC, 2012 and 2013).

Scott shows that valley people head to the hills when conditions in the valley became more restrictive or onerous. China's cyberspace is telling the same story. There is no survey data to corroborate their reasons for going 'up online' (上网 *shang wang*), but half a billion people heading to the 'highlands' (as an augmenting superimposed space, rather than an underground subversive one) can hardly be incidental. The sheer numbers also indicate that in a quest to escape state tyranny it is beneficial that there is no need to set off on a prolonged and arduous trek and leave everything behind. Simply adding a virtual extension to their urban spaces and identities suffices. And just as what happens in Zomia may be of relevancy to adjacent regions rather than to faraway 'area cores' (cf. van Schendel, 2002), what happens in at least some of these Chinese online spaces is relevant for other linked online spaces. Social structures in the highlands are suited to life in the highlands, and as such are not simply emerging in response against a state-led society. At the same time, highland ways of life cannot easily be brought to lowland cultures. The same could be said about the unique and often less hierarchical social organizations and proto-institutional forms that emerge in cyberspace.

Language and communication are also tools of state control (and subversion). According to Scott, many Zomian societies have made an active choice to do away with written language (in many agrarian societies, writing was seen as tool of state oppression) in order to ensure that coercive practices (such as tax-paying, military service) do not follow them to the newly formed highland societies. This is a somewhat dubious claim, and I doubt it can be translated directly to Cyberzomia. However, much of the Internet is based on written language. And there are many subversive

linguistic strategies, satire, neologisms and redefined meanings that can be interpreted as consciousness-raising and subversive practices. To give just one brief recent example, the 18th Party Congress (十八大 *shibada*), a phrase that was blocked during the event, has been mockingly referred to online as similar-sounding 'Sparta' (斯巴达 *sibada*), sometimes with allusions to similarities with the strict and slave-based military-dominated social system of that prominent city-state in ancient Greece.

In Internet Age Cyberzomia, as elsewhere, communication has been identified as the dominant ideology (cf. Castells, Habermas, and others), in the sense that talking about work (a.k.a. 'managing') has come to replace doing the work. Supervision and surveillance are executed in the name of making sure that everything goes smoothly. In the Zomia of the past, slave traders and informants made a living by deploying communicative rationality in negotiating with and 'managing' the lowland state. In contemporary urban China, owners and managers of Internet platforms, alongside state agencies in charge of propaganda, do much of the same. Keeping an eye on the communications of charismatic leaders, the state's goal is to keep things simple and prevent alternative and complex meanings from spreading. To achieve this, the state maintains a general narrative of Internet activities as potentially addictive, and thus legitimizes its requiring of (often corporate) informants to notify them if boundaries of 'harmony' are breached. This may be a process intrinsic to life in Cyberzomia and elsewhere, but it is also aided by state intrusion and censorship practices. Furthermore, if someone in Cyberzomia is doing something that is deemed or portrayed as politically or morally wrong, a Human Flesh search (人肉搜索 *renrousousuo*) identifies and punishes the culprit. This search for hitherto anonymous people's name and address details (then used to shame and blame and demand explanations or justice) is an online collaboration between many people to find out as much information as possible about a certain topic. It is often initiated in a grassroots fashion, and can be directed at a variety of issues, linked to videos of a woman who kills cats with her high heels, or pictures of officials wearing wristwatches that cost many times more than they could feasibly afford on their salaries.

Consequently, a (nameless) state equivalent to Human Flesh search also leads to identification and harassment of the people involved in unwelcome activities, in other words, there are state campaigns geared at assimilating 'their' highland regions. In Zomia this is often achieved by sending settlers loyal to the national government into the hills. In China's Internet, it is an army of so-called 'Web commentators' (网络评论员 *wangluo pinglunyuan*) — better known as 'Fifty-Cent-Party' or 'Five-Mao-Party' (五毛党 *wumaodang*), referring to the money they are allegedly paid for each pro-government comment they post online — that actively manipulates Internet discourse on public opinion. Furthermore, in Zomia, people preferred a nomadic lifestyle around swidden agriculture to fixed agriculture. This made it easier to move on when political or other circumstances changed or became invasive. Cyberzomia's equivalent to this are blogs and weibo/twitter accounts that can easily be reopened elsewhere (on a different platform, under a different name) when shut down. Netizens' physical shelters, of course, can not. However, wide-spread IP-level surveillance that makes it easy to track down the actual computers used for specific online activities, limits people's online mobilities. Therefore, it is hardly surprising that politically active netizens pay much attention to not crossing the line that could lead to harassment extending to the flats they inhabit and their physical livelihoods.

This said, with regard to 'the state', Scott's interpretation of the highlands has rightfully been criticized as being too focused on state oppression, and thus as neglecting agency and processes that emerge independent of a predatory state (Lieberman, 2010, p. 343). A corresponding argument has been made with regard to Chinese Internet studies (cf. Marolt, 2011, 2008). However, we do need to take into consideration that evading the state also means evading the scholars, as conventional

sources and methodologies (such as interviewing government officials or known dissidents) fail us. Another complication arises from the fact that everything is in flux — neither state nor non-state constructs are constant, homogeneous and clearly delineated phenomena (cf. Sadan, 2010). It is therefore helpful to refrain from superimposing a dichotomous relationship of state control vs. civic resistance. As Scott argued in the case of Zomia, the scale of the nation-state is less than helpful when it comes to analyzing activities in Chinese-language cyberspace — as it would encourage such a dichotomous perspective rather than help us transcend it. In other words, scholars need to remind themselves that reality is more complex than it appears, that a state-centric view of looking at China and its people is not the only way of seeing, and that underneath the visible censorship vs dissident resistance to censorship, many confusing things are transpiring.

Last but not least, both Zomia and Cyberspace are seen and rendered as areas of political marginality — due to a statist orientation of area studies where borders often conveniently demarcate the outer boundaries of a study area, or correspondingly, due to a discriminating view of the ‘virtual’ as not being quite as real and significant as the physical (see ‘meta-reflections’ below). Yet through the placeless place of Zomia, irrelevant minorities are rewritten into conscious agents of change. As it turns out, ‘isolated’ highland peoples and communities may be less isolated and marginal than we assume. This seems to be even more so for Cyberzomians, as they live in urban spaces that can be traced to their online activities (*and vice versa*).

If we adopt (as we should) Scott’s bold but sensitive claim that “The dialectic or co-evolution of hill and valley is the essential point of departure for making sense of historical change in Southeast Asia” (Scott, 2009, p. 16-17) to a contemporary cyber-urban conceptual context, it would mean that we can only understand where China is headed if we grasp the central role of cyberspace in the development of Chinese society as a whole (or at least its urban subsegment). Doing so would mean dealing with uncertain and often contradictory circumstances and trajectories, and what emerges is certainly no linear narrative from less to more progress, less to more ‘civilized’ or ‘harmonious’ (the preferred narrative of the Chinese party-state), or from less to more ‘democracy’ (the preferred narrative adopted by ‘Western’ scholars and media practitioners). Yet adopting this way of seeing to Cyberzomia might provide a useful hedging against technologically or otherwise deterministic trajectories.

METHODOLOGICAL COMPLICATIONS

Scott’s Zomia unsettles both historical narratives telling of an increasing civilization and the ‘geographies of knowing’ (Gregory, 1993) that have emerged due to academic knowledge production privileging some spatial configurations over others. Van Schendel (2002) argues convincingly that area specialists and their career-driven reference circles and rituals, have divided and compartmentalized Zomia and thereby rendered it increasingly irrelevant, as “an area of no concern” (Van Schendel, 2002, p. 651). The rendering of Zomia as isolated and irrelevant may indeed be attributed to the ‘conceit of the lowland’s elite’ with regard to the highlands (Wolters, 1999, cited in van Schendel, 2002, p. 656). It may also be related to the fact that it is an urban elite that is writing the scholarly (history) books, often overreaching in their theorizing ambitions beyond areas of intimate expertise. As for the realm of Chinese Internet studies, one can observe a similar trend and draw similar conclusions. With online effects not being easily quantifiable and often seemingly disconnected from the spatial political economy (and therefore deemed negligible or outright irrelevant), scholars are frequently derided for not conducting ‘rigorous social science’, and publications even marginally pertaining to online phenomena in renowned China journals are few and far between. As a result, evolving reference circles are limited to specific journals, are often self-referential, seldom connect their online analyses to (or ground their knowledge in) offline space, and

do not bother or dare to see or write about how their findings connect to the bigger picture. Furthermore, while digital natives may still lack real world experience and are not (yet) in a position to get influential monographs written or published, much of the theoretical literature on cyberspace is written by people who have not experienced much of it first hand. This said, the idea of Zomia has proven capable of generating debate, which has contributed to “disembedding minority studies from the national straitjackets that have been imposed by academic research bounded by the historical, ideological, and political limits of the nation-state” (Michaud, 2010, p. 187). Cyberzomia might contribute to doing the same for Internet studies.

Scott popularized Zomia as lying yonder narrow criteria of physical space, focusing instead on shared ideas, cultural ties and ways of living. He affords Zomia both the quality of symbolic space (as basis for theoretical problematiques) and of institutional space (with clearly visible scholarly lineages, reference circles and efforts of delineating and protecting one’s ‘turf’) (cf. Van Schendel, 2002). Arguably, this is true also for (Chinese) Internet studies, where much work is done on studying and describing specific online phenomena and networks, but without much progress when it comes to Internet theory or to connecting the online and offline worlds in coherent conceptual frameworks. This is stunning in a context where people have long started crafting their identities in an augmenting amalgamation of the virtual and the physical.

Another methodological complication lies in bringing the state back in. According to Scott, state power has made itself felt weakly in Zomia until the more recent past — but ‘the state’ has begun creeping into the highlands over the past 60 years. Therefore, Scott holds that the Zomia as he described it is fading away and ultimately vanishing (Scott, 2009). Aside from large-scale infrastructure projects and modern technologies that have blurred the boundaries and diminished the distances between highlands and lowlands, states have also sent lowlanders to the highlands (in a Tibetan or Xinjiang context sometimes referred to as ‘cultural imperialism’). A similar case can be made for Cyberzomia, where over the past five years or so state authorities have implemented advances in (often Western) surveillance technologies to increase control and power over their cyber territories. But is this an indication that Zomia/Cyberzomia are disappearing? Or does it simply mean that negotiations and resistances take on renewed urgency and develop faster than our capacity to track them?

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is of course utopian and illusionary to assume that cyberspace even remotely resembles Scott’s highland wildernesses. Clearly, oligopolistic capitalist colonization has proceeded to all but domesticate the Internet as we know it. This is where the boundless flexibility of cyberspaces comes into play: new public spaces can be created anywhere in the virtual highlands as long as there are people who care to do so. It is in the minds of people where these spaces of autonomy come to fruition, and it is in these spaces of autonomy where the ‘new’ is imagined and where resistance against the ‘old’ is forming. Much like the remote highlands, cyberspace makes space for new thoughts and ideas, new ways of seeing and doing things. In spite of restrictive state and corporate actions, in contemporary urban China the virtual has nonetheless become a space of relative freedom in which people can develop their faculties to think independently and learn from each other. Inhabiting an environment with countless professional limitations, Chinese people compensate by going online, to an everyday space where they can find themselves and others, vent or express their own views. In other words, cyberspace augments China’s pre-Information Age physical public space.

In this context, it is crucial to bear in mind that insurgency, however conceived, always starts with an insurgency of the mind. Inhabited and remade by autonomous ‘free subjects’ who do not (only) define themselves in opposition to a ‘state’, Cyberzomia allows for less deliberative and more playful connections and practices that mediate between private individual consciousness and emplaced urban and political action. Humans are meaning-seeking and meaning-making animals — and if they lack the spaces to find and make these meanings in the lowlands, they are drawn to the (metaphorical) highlands. However, actual political and geographical change depends on a leadership that is willing and capable to tap into the boundless imagination that is available online, to image a transcendental ideal of how a vernacular Public City of, by, and for the people can and should look like, and to build spaces of hope that may eventually network with each other in an intentional attempt to mobilize around outrage and hope, in a concerted effort to convey that the right to make the city into a convivial urbane cosmopolis is the most likely path toward a just society.

Remaking the Public City in China (or Asia) will not be orchestrated from above. It will also not happen without those comparatively autonomous online spaces and projects as they reach out to touch people and spark specific forms of action that manifest in specific urban places. More importantly, the ideas that will eventually lead to a new Public City will form in the minds of people and rise from the depths of consciousness. Arguably, freedom and authentic choice are only possible with consciousness. And human consciousness thrives on diversity. Zomians and Cyberzomians alike can sing a song about diversity, cultural, economic, or religious, of expression, of opinion, and of narratives. Much will depend on whether a fragmented playground of ideas creates more than short-lived and forgettable movements of the outraged, as a moral protest that is an end in itself, and moves toward one of manifest hope. Much will depend on how people learn to leave behind spaces of despair, disgust and desolation, spaces that delude, divert and diminish them. Much will depend on our (scholarly) ability to locate these people and ask them about their projects of hope, about what they are doing and why (and for the activists among us, link them up and point to what they could learn from each other’s projects).

Wherever one looks, Chinese Cyberzomia is permeated with expressions of both the dissatisfaction with existing values and the willingness for a search for new values. And theoretically, what starts out as escapist pirate utopias has the capacity of civic repair, resulting in solidaristic togetherness (cf. Alexander, 2006) in a convivial cosmopolis (cf. Douglass, 2012; cf. Douglass & Huang, 2007). So (how) is this happening? Through spaces of individuation (Giddens, 1991) where individual projects form that might eventually network into shared spaces of hope? We can perhaps (and should certainly try to) track down those insurgencies that through peaceful action lead to alternative economic cultures or spaces of hope. However, although the Internet provides opportunities for expanding the space for political participation in China, the actual realization of such a public civil sphere depends on intentional human actions that move from a virtual ‘e-sphere’ into everyday urban realities. Research efforts should focus on how specific urban spaces and environments are re-imagined and re-imaged through virtual worlds (cf. Kidder, 2012). But let’s face it: Given the sheer amount of information and its ephemerality, even if we manage to intuit or even account for netizens’ private worlds and often hidden manipulations by ‘the state’, in many ways, what happens in the highlands is and may remain sorcery.

Zomia and Cyberzomia have one more thing in common: Once we assume that ideas and their spreading play an independent and important role in the shaping of political outcomes, then the influence of Zomias on the urban ‘lowlands’ must be assessed against the backdrop of ideas that emerged and travelled together with their creators and actors, and against the collective actions these ideas sparked. At the end of the day, all political subversion first requires intellectual subversion (cf. Hayek 1949), and the latter is based in questioning dominant representations of ‘reality.’ Subsequent emancipatory spaces (cyber- or not) come into being – and can thus be

perceived – before deliberative action emanates from them. Mapping out the specifics of such spaces is becoming a daring task deserving of rigorous scholarly attention.

In the meantime, Cyberzomia offers a reprieve from restrictive patterns and boundaries and adequate spaces of autonomy where people can breathe, think, imagine and make space for something ‘new.’ In many ways, repression only works when we feel repressed. When we feel free, then freedom may come. A scholarly focus on Asia’s Cyberzomias would amplify the connection between people and the processes of social learning, and allow for new shared meanings and values to emerge and be recognized. If done with subtlety and imagination, it might even be possible to show meaningful aspects of urban lives that are thus far neglected by both urban studies and Internet studies. In China (much like in the United States of the late 1960s and again now in the early 2010s), where the trend goes toward a repressive police state – with evermore declining civil liberties, the state’s growing aggressiveness toward its citizenry, ever-increasing inequalities and generation gaps, what lies ahead is a ‘revolution by consciousness.’

Once we escape from a suppressed and censoring (including self-censoring) environment, we are empowered to forge new types of consciousness, identity, shared meanings, communities, relationships, space and place. Psychological empowerment ensues, with obvious connections to physical urban space. Will we choose to ignore or escape rather than transform the world we live in? Fanciful speculation abounds. One thing is certain: It is humans who determine how cyberspace is used — just like it is humans who determine how to live in the mountainous highlands of Southeast Asia. Different forms of interaction and commitment enable people to address ‘sensitive’ issues and realize their aspirations. Cyberspace challenges traditional ways in which people think about themselves and the world around them. Once we understand these changes, we realize that dreams of adventure and renewal and solidaristic togetherness in a convivial New Public City can become reality.

I hope that these metaphorical musings provide useful starting points for further discussion.

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