

## How Asia's wild west shakes up the modern world

James C. Scott, an anthropologist, shed light on an ungovernable region



Illustration: Lan Truong

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The seaports of Asia are synonymous with globalisation, trade and integration. The ships which go through the hubs of Shanghai, Busan and Singapore connect the world's producers and consumers at speeds which would once have been unfathomable. They are the sinews of the modern world.

But the continent's highlands, far from the distant centres of political and financial power, are a different story. Many have resisted the power of governments, officialdom and the formal economy for centuries. James C. Scott, an American anthropologist and political scientist, who died on July 19th at the age of 87, helped illuminate the lawless history of what he called Zomia, a region spread across upland South-East Asia, encompassing much of Thailand, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar, which spills into China's south-western and India's north-eastern corners. Mr Scott said that he saw the world not with an anarchist lens, but with an anarchist squint. He was not a doctrinaire opponent of government in all its forms, but took an interest in the way state power was established and how it was resisted.

On both the political left and right, readers of a libertarian bent (your guest columnist among them) have consumed his idiosyncratic work over decades. "Seeing Like a State", his anthology from 1998 on the unintended effects of government intervention in a variety of fields, is a particular favourite. "The Art of Not Being Governed" (2009) is a distillation of his work studying the highlands of South-East Asia. "Against the Grain" (2017) explored the way agriculture was used as a tool of control.

Zomia was a natural fit for Mr Scott's squint. He made the case that over centuries the lifestyles and social structures of the region's residents had been shaped by evading the power of the states—whether Chinese, Burmese or Thai—which hemmed them in. Their sustenance relied on “escape crops” which grew quickly, were tolerant of poor soil and did not require consistent labour.

Mr Scott believed that Zomia was becoming less unruly. But the region's lawlessness persists in different ways. Consider Dali, in Yunnan province in China, a relatively easy-going corner of an increasingly authoritarian country. A government campaign to eradicate the local supply of cannabis and magic mushrooms has blunted the city's vibe, but the products are impossible to wipe out.

The lawlessness can be more malign. Khun Sa, a drug kingpin and military commander from Myanmar's hilly Shan state, exercised control over as much as half the world's supply of heroin during the 1980s. The warlord was a product of one of the region's defeated military forces, beginning his ignominious career with the Chinese Kuomintang who had fled after their defeat by Mao Zedong's communists. In a better-known part of the world, Khun Sa would have been as famous as Pablo Escobar. Much of Myanmar's civil war is being fought around these borderlands.

Some of the region's anarchic nature has been formalised, in strange ways. The hill peoples of South-East Asia from centuries past would find the neon-lit, bustling Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in northern Laos and eastern Myanmar quite unfamiliar. But the zones are a bizarre hybrid of the region's historical disorder and the growing reach of official power. Pumping billions of dollars from China into the sezs has been encouraged under the Belt and Road Initiative. The money has brought corruption, but none of the safety usually associated with state power. The SEZs are hubs of gambling, money-laundering, and trafficking in humans and wildlife.

They are also home to the scam compounds which have blossomed in recent years. Victims, lured from across the world with the promise of work and other opportunities, are instead put to work in a form of modern slavery, where they craft online scams to swindle people globally. Zomia's lawlessness touches the rest of the world as never before.

Mr Scott was right that the process of Zomia being subsumed by the countries around it is well under way. Revolutions in transport and communications technology made that transformation inevitable. But he also made clear that the ungovernable hills and strait-laced valleys were complements to one another, rather than opposing forces. Each had something that the other wanted: whether something benign, or something destructive. To understand that, the anarchist squint will remain a very useful tool, and is Mr Scott's lasting legacy.