

Landscape, Culture, and Belonging. Writing the History of Northeast India. Ed. by Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy L.K. Pachuau. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2019. viii, 343 pp. Ill. Maps. £75.00. (E-book: \$80.00.)

Landscape, Culture, and Belonging is a well-crafted and long-needed collection of essays on Northeast India. As the large colonial administrative frontier, as the region of the seven sister states, and as the notion of a region's alienation and exception from "mainland India", the Northeast comes together in the thirteen chapters written by senior scholars and members of the growing generation of younger researchers on the "Northeast". The editors, Neeladri Bhattacharya and Joy Pachuau, introduce the readers to these processes and show how tightly knit the notion of the Northeast as a region and the notion of the exceptional are. The chapters are thematically organized but simultaneously overlapping, and a reader would do best to study them together, as they speak to and complement each other.

To be exceptional and to be characterized as such is a claim often made to explain the fate of Northeast India. As part of identity, such a notion contrasts with and challenges the "mainland" for continuing harsh colonial policies, manifested in the constitution's sixth schedule and in keeping a large armed force under state control. At the same time, such perceptions also risk locking up the region in perpetual exclusion and exclusionary treatment. The authors here engage with questions of the exceptional from various viewpoints. The volume presents studies of colonial ethnography that defined a significant difference of people and geography. It includes investigations of identity and identification based on race-theory classifications, and of political and religious movements and legal practice. Duncan McDuie-Ra echoes Willem van Schendel in arguing that the "distinctiveness" of the Northeast has become a necessity in scholarship. One is somehow forced to locate the region as India's frontier by pointing to particular events, narratives, and structures. McDuie-Ra discusses the case of Meghalaya, one of the seven states, and advocates removing this hill state from the peripheral location that the entire Northeast has been given in political and scholarly debate, and placing it closer to the centre of a transnational, multilingual, and shared "zone", which is also a key position in Borderland studies.

Like many of the authors, McDuie-Ra hints at the spatial reconceptualization, now a couple of decades old, of connecting Northeast India with what Willem van Schendel and James C. Scott, in different ways, define as "Zomia". This is a debate that tends to divide scholarship on the Northeast between those who prefer to understand the present and the past in terms of binaries or as characterized by a complex and multi-varied socio-political texture. According to Scott, Zomia is a "shatter-zone" and a refuge for people escaping an oppressive state. It is a region "in the strong sense of the term" that can be identified topographically and unites people in a great variety of polities in central Southeast Asia's mountain areas, which also partly includes Northeast India's hill areas. For Van Schendel, Zomia is the large highland region that never qualified as an area in area studies since it lacks all the qualities specific of states. It is a non-state space. But as a lived reality, he argues, Zomia is better understood as a socio-political rather than as a geographical space. Scott's line of argument is most explicitly carried on by David Ludden in this volume. He structures his study along Scott's elaboration of Zomia as a region, "an area poised in between Asian territorialisms" to be entered via the "doorways of Zomia" in Assam, Sylhet, Tripura, and Chittagong. He even gives Zomian conflicts with modern states a starting year, 1826 (Treaty of Yandabo), when the uplands are said to have "entered their modern historical phase [...] with struggles by hill people to maintain their own space of survival against ever more powerful lowland

states". The empires were closing in, in Ludden's words, giving Asian geography its "modern territorial framework".

Such frameworks, made of bounded spaces, are discussed at length in the different chapters. Not only geopolitical boundaries are discussed; so, too, are administrative, legal, ethnic, religious, and identity-based bordered spaces. These are discussed as formed, fought over, and controlled. Bodhisattva Kar contributes an empirically detailed study of the transformation of agrarian relations in Assam whereby colonial revenue settlements classified, ordered/reordered, and controlled a revenue-producing population. Such revenue classes were tailored to the existing terminology in Assam. While claiming the old order to be inefficient, the settlement officers emptied the meaning of terms such as *khel* and *paik* and redefined them to represent classes of settled agricultural producers, making them into fiscal subjects under the colonial government. Kar warns against using stagist notions when relating swidden to settled cultivation. These forms of cultivation were intermixed and coexisted, as when the Cacharis ("a migratory race" according to the Ainslie Committee, 1868) were growing mustard for export on the *churs* (the river beds). Kar writes: "it is difficult to agree with James Scott's romantic generalization of shifting cultivation as 'agriculture of escape' with an 'inherent resistance to appropriation'".

David Vumlallian Zou keeps to a more Foucauldian logic in his study of the technology of mapping British Assam. He argues that using this technique objectified nature and territory and became a means in the hands of the Survey of India by which the colonial state could define and exercise control. Mentioning though not engaging with his work, Zou echoes Matthew Edney's important study *Mapping an Empire*.¹ The drawing of the Inner Line border (1873), Zou argues, insulated hill people and, with a clear reference to Scott's hill-valley dichotomy, "[a]s the colonial state climbed the hills, the local societies would never be the same again". The valley kingdoms and modern states in their nation- and state-making projects thereby produced the frontier.

Anandaroop Sen and Yengkhom Jilangamba have a different take on the question of frontier making. Both enquire into the brutal conquest of cutting up societies and kin groups under different control systems and jurisdictions. They place their studies closer to the ground and to practice. Jilangamba does so by studying how, in the Naga area, surveys, politics, and military operations forced a border into place. Sen focuses on the Chin-Lushai tracts for researching the contradictory forms of government in the never-ending elaboration of overlapping jurisdiction in the newly conquered areas. Here, the "exceptional" has a particular and formal connotation in the temporary *ad interim* laws. They were applied to the non-regulated districts while some areas even fell outside also this legal framework. Sen's is a study of a frontier on the move and of how legal elaborations were made to invent laws that legitimized and suited particular conditions. As the British legal system was not alien to customary law, this was a familiar exercise. Sen asks how elastic a contingent law was allowed to be when British lawmakers were pondering whether to implement military commissions, intended for wars (giving generals enormous liberty to exercise power), and whether they suited also situations without warfare.

But law could only reach so far. In a social history of licit and illicit arms trade all over the Northeast, in the footsteps of the military operations, Lipokmar Dzüvichü shows how the British officers themselves contributed to the spread of firearms. In their ambition to create

1. Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765–1843* (Cambridge, 1997).

strategic alliances by arming groups, especially in Manipur, they created increasingly well-armed forces of resistance that were hard to contain by means of regulation.

Arupjyoti Saikia also seeks to understand the representation of a region from the viewpoint of surveyors, here of the medical surgeon John Peter Wade, who wrote historical and geographical essays about Assam. Saikia's work gives an insight into surveyors' careers and how their observations shaped imperial ideas. Wade also translated Assamese *buranjis*. These texts are, at times, used in historical studies as a source to Assam's past. However, Saikia remarks that this modern writing practice of history must not be treated as a primary source but read with an eye to their production and reproduction. The *buranjis* are one of the sources for information that Alban von Stockhausen refers to in his essay on the etymology of the word "Naga". He traces the name back to a text by the Greek polymath Ptolemy (also referred to by early twentieth-century ethnographers) up to the present. Von Stockhausen's final sentence reads "[o]nly by historicizing our conceptions can we deepen our discussion of Naga identity". Along these lines, his own study about the name "Naga" can usefully be read against those of Arkotong Longkumer and Yengkhom Jilangamba. Whereas von Stockhausen reads the reports of the British officers Pemberton and Carnegie (1832 and 1873 respectively) for what they say about the meaning of "Naga", Jilangamba studies a "frontier regime" of control in the devastation of the British punitive expeditions into Naga areas and the policy of inflicting injury and fear on people. These expeditions and the application of the policy take place between the writing of the two reports. It would be interesting to know what impact this political history had on the notion and usage of naming a people. Likewise, Longkumer's careful analysis of what "Naga" has been made to represent in its modern usage, as imperialist nostalgia and as a strategic branding of Naga unity and identity in the Hornbill festival, shows how dynamic and changeable names of communities can be – not just over time but within one and the same event. Jilangamba makes the important observation that if we focus only on policy shifts at the level of the colonial state and its initiatives we will underplay the colonial practices.

The emphasis on practice, place, adjustment, and adoption is characteristic of many of the essays in this volume. Also, the formative process and central place of Christianity in movements of cultural and political assertion and collective identity is explained by such locally rooted experiences that are unique to a particular context. Joy Pachuau argues that the relationship of Western and Mizo Christianity and their mutual contribution to shaping a localized Christian cosmology created a colonial modernity as a particular socio-cultural milieu based on ideas of modernity and progress. Conversion movements that were mediated by Protestant missions followed on from the violent British "expedition" in the Lushai hills (Mizoram) in 1891. Pachuau notes that Christianity was both a handmaiden for colonialism and a critical agent opposed to it. Active engagement with the Western form of Christianity generated different responses, from those of Mizo chiefs who resisted conversion or were actively hostile to it, to the growing emotional charismatic Christian movements that took Christianity away from church control. Lanusangla Tzüdir explains how Ao Naga religious concepts, doctrine, and cosmology were appropriated and accommodated into a Christian universe. It was a social process with many actors who created a distinctive Christianity.

John Thomas, who writes the final chapter, disagrees with such a merger of indigenous and Christian beliefs. Where Pachuau sees fusion, Thomas sees contrast and incompatibility. He argues that the two belief systems are fundamentally different as they have different conceptions of time and space. In line with Pachuau, he states that indigenous religions in Northeast India are rooted in particular places of dwelling and in the human relationships linked to that place. But in contrast to Pachuau's argument, Thomas maintains that

Christianity has universal claims and a temporal notion of a “certain finality”. He argues that, driven “by the need to know and understand the governed”, missionaries and anthropologists identified and classified religions of each ethnic group and, therefore, “the particular came to be masqueraded as the universal”. Thus, Thomas downplays the role of indigenous movements in the formation of a Christian cosmology of communities in the Northeast.

Taken together, the essays in *Landscape, Culture, and Belonging* are an important contribution to the scholarship of Northeast India. They should be essential reading for graduate students and scholars alike and stimulate a wide readership in the study of the formation of modern south Asia.

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ASO, MICHITAKE. *Rubber and the Making of Vietnam. An Ecological History, 1897–1975. [Flows, Migrations, and Exchanges.]* University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill (NC) 2018. xvii, 405 pp. Ill. Maps. \$90.00. (Paper: \$32.95; E-book: \$23.99.)

By the end of the nineteenth century, capitalism and colonialism had established new series of complicated interactions influenced by the advances of the industrial revolution and the consolidation of Western Europe as the centre of the global economy. Nowhere were these new interactions more prevalent than in Southeast Asia. Here, economies had long been defined by their level of international trade, particularly the export of spices and dyes to the Asian regional market and increasingly to the global market through trade with Western Europe. The advent of direct European colonial intervention in Southeast Asia from the middle of the nineteenth century saw a metropolitan encouragement to expand these export economies with a vigorous focus on raw materials to be used as inputs for Western industry. This focus led to the cultivation of large amounts of previously unused land in order to maximize the output of these raw materials. The scope of this newly cultivated land fundamentally altered the landscapes of Southeast Asia, while profit seeking mechanisms designed to encourage labour participation in these raw materials export sectors had profound effects on the indigenous population. Aso's book is an attempt to tease out the extent to which these changes affected Southeast Asian economies and their subsequent development by viewing the political and economic development of Vietnam through the lens of one of its primary export commodities: rubber.

Aso perceives of Indochinese rubber plantations as both a commodity frontier and a battleground. This focal point facilitates a gripping narrative of the pervasive nature of French colonialism in Indochina. The text is largely chronological, taking the reader from the introduction of *Hevea brasiliensis* by Alexandre Yersin at the end of the nineteenth century to the early statecraft of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1975. However, the simplicity in its structure creates room for a broad analytical scope using rubber cultivation