

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-07339-5 - The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India
Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willem Van Schendel
Excerpt
[More information](#)

I

Becoming Mizo

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-07339-5 - The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India
Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willem Van Schendel
Excerpt
[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07339-5 - The Camera as Witness: A Social History of Mizoram, Northeast India

Joy L. K. Pachuau and Willem Van Schendel

Excerpt

[More information](#)

1

Introduction

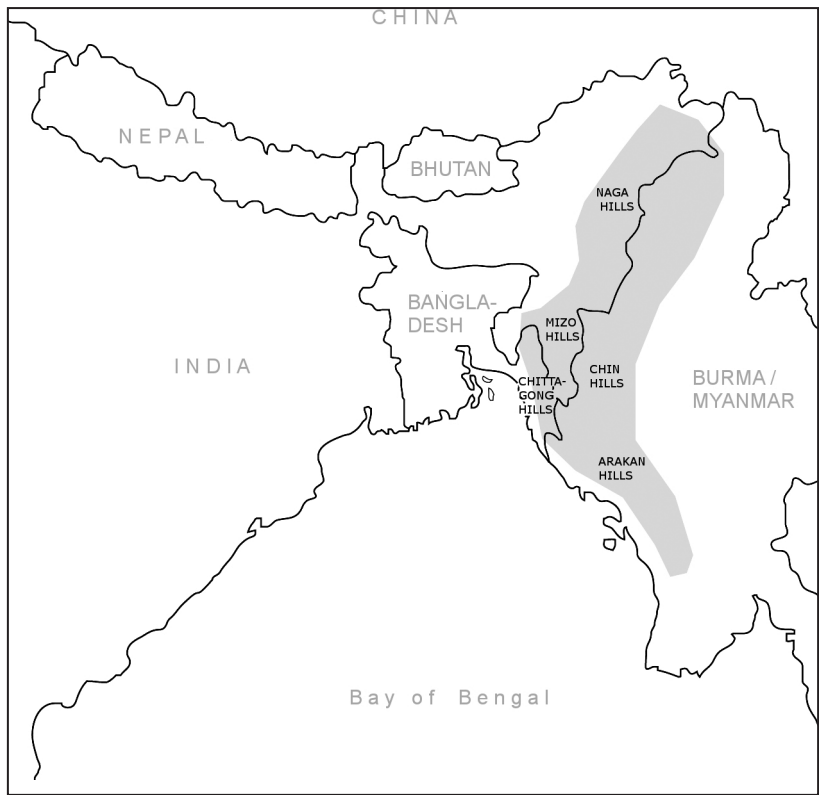


Tectonic plates move across the surface of the earth. One of these is the India plate. Slowly but relentlessly it pushes its way underneath the Eurasian plate to the north. This produces wrinkles on the earth's surface. The best known of these is the long ridge of the Himalayas that separates South Asia from Tibet. This book focuses on a related wrinkle. At their eastern end, the Himalayas are linked to a range of mountains that run south from Tibet (China) to Arakan in western Burma. Crescent-shaped, these steep mountains are often seen as the boundary separating South Asia from Southeast Asia. They do not have a single name, and despite their height (the highest peaks reach over 3000 m), they are often referred to as hills. Thus, they are known as the Naga Hills in the north, the Mizo, Chin and Chittagong hills in the centre and the Arakan hills in the south (see Map 1.1).¹

Why this book?

For many years, social scientists and historians have overlooked the societies of these hills. This is partly because state-imposed barriers severely hampered access. The lack of new research has resulted in the survival of problematic colonial-era images – mainly regarding primitivism, exoticism and stagnation – which have long been challenged elsewhere. The historian's task has been described as that of a hunter of myths, or an eradicator of false conceptions; that task is an urgent one for this large region covering parts of India, Burma (Myanmar) and Bangladesh. Many myths and misunderstandings about these societies continue to swirl around public discourses and policymaking at national and international levels, whilst local voices are largely unheard, if not actively silenced. The consequences have been tragic. As the national armed forces of India, Burma and Bangladesh waged war on local populations,

The Camera as Witness



Map 1.1: The mountain ranges known as the Naga, Mizo, Chin, Chittagong and Arakan hills – and today's international borders.

and inhabitants confronted each other violently, outdated ideas of ‘tribal’ backwardness merged with security thinking to create an atmosphere of despair, repression and recrimination. This is why researchers were not allowed to work here and this is why such research is long overdue.

This book reveals a different world, little known outside the region. It highlights the remarkable transformations and multiple forms of modernity that have flourished here. It seeks to show how local people produced these, how they engaged with them and how they established and used links with the world beyond their region. In this book, we use visual sources, largely created by local people, especially in the more recent period, to uncover unknown themes and trends. These images show local agency in the creation of vibrant contemporary societies that have as little to do with obsolete ethnographies as they have to do with the security gaze.

Introduction

Constructing histories of the region

In this book, we focus on the central part of the mountain range running south from the Himalayas. Humans have long lived here but reconstructing their histories before the late nineteenth century is difficult. One reason is that, until recently, these areas were beyond state control, and another that the languages of the region were not written down. Historians of the pre-state period have to rely on oral traditions, artefacts, and the odd mention in documents produced by outside observers. The evidence is thin, highly fragmented and contradictory, so much remains uncertain about this period.²

The central section of the mountain range did not become incorporated into a larger state until the late nineteenth century. Incorporation happened in two phases of military expansion from the plains below. These plains had been under the control of successive states for centuries. By the mid-nineteenth century, the plains formed part of the colony of British India and it was from here that the mountains were invaded. The British occupied the western section in 1860 and named it the ‘Chittagong Hill Tracts’. The middle section followed in 1890–1892 and received the name ‘Lushai Hills’ – today the Lushai Hills are known as Mizoram. At the same time, the eastern mountains, or ‘Chin Hills’, were added. Each occupation had been preceded by punitive expeditions and each had to overcome local resistance. It took the British until 1896 to crush all resistance and to feel that they were true masters of the country; they did not issue a proclamation of annexation until 1895.³ Even so, a part of southeastern Mizoram – then known as Lakherland and today as the Mara Autonomous District – remained ‘unadministered’ and was not ‘pacified’ by the British until 1930. Up to 1940, government officers could not enter without military escort.⁴

Resistance and occupation produced a sudden increase in historical source material. At first it was decidedly one sided – British understandings of the societies they encountered – but soon sources diversified and local perspectives became more prominent. Today we can access the dialogue of these different voices through two types of historical source that arrived simultaneously in these mountains: writings and visual images. Considerable work has already been done on the basis of written material but the visual material remains largely unexplored. This is why we highlight what visuals have to offer. There is, of course, no sharp distinction between visual and textual evidence: they often coexist in a single source, for example, a photograph with writing on the back, or a letter with drawings in the margin.⁵



The Camera as Witness

Cultural complexity and administrative fragmentation

Looking at the visual record – from its beginnings in the mid-nineteenth century to recent times – poses several challenges. How to decide what to include and what not? It is a large and varied area that the British occupied between the 1860s and 1890s, a cultural ‘shatter zone’ in which many linguistic and ethnic groups coexisted and which presented a variety of mutual engagements and understandings. After annexation, this cultural complexity proved to be both persistent and very dynamic – the region has seen astonishing ethnic and religious transformations, splits and fusions over the past 150 years. As a result, the identities of the late nineteenth century hardly resemble those of today. This poses a challenge for historians who are used to following a particular social group through time – we are dealing with moving targets here.

A second challenge, related to the first, is the impact of administrative division and permutation. Even though they all belonged to British India, each of the three sections – the Chittagong, Lushai and Chin hills – was administered differently and each fell under another regime.⁶ The Chittagong hills were allocated to the province of Bengal, the Lushai hills to the province of Assam and the Chin hills to the province of Burma (see Map 1.2).⁷

This administrative partitioning of the hills had far-reaching consequences for the present. In 1947–1948 the British departed, leaving behind a fragmented post-colonial landscape consisting of three successor states. The Chittagong hills now fell to Pakistan, the Lushai hills (today: Mizoram) to India and the Chin hills to Burma. In 1971, there was a further transformation when Pakistan broke up and the Chittagong hills became part of Bangladesh. Today the hills are administered by three different independent states – India, Bangladesh and Burma (Myanmar).

The scope of this book

Covering all these cultural and administrative shifts is beyond the reach of this book. Instead we wish to demonstrate the possibilities of using visual sources by looking at a subset of people in this region. And this presents us with an initial problem. How do we refer to the people inhabiting the region? They formed a loose assemblage of people. According to colonial records, in the late nineteenth century, some of these people, especially in the southern sections of the region, used the term Zo (or Zo-mi, Mi-zo or



Introduction



Map 1.2: Colonial fragmentation: The hill country divided between three provinces of British India: Bengal, Assam and Burma.

Zo-fate and variations⁸) to refer to themselves.⁹ They did not form a sharply defined society, let alone a nation, often even warring against each other. But we can think of them as sharing a sense of commonality based on linguistic affinities and on inhabiting a hilly terrain vis-à-vis the plains to their west and north. They were also very aware of sub-group differences and fluid group affiliations. Even today outsiders have no single term for them and often refer to this group clumsily as ‘Kuki-Mizo-Chin’. In addition, ethnic labels have been remarkably unstable, making use of the same ones for the entire period problematic.

So how should we refer to this dynamic assemblage of people? Other writers have had the same problem. As one scholar has suggested, ‘finding an acceptable nomenclature has become a heated quest for an elusive El Dorado’.¹⁰ We are aware that any overarching term has its drawbacks, for example, the



The Camera as Witness

term *Zo*. It has been used extensively throughout the region covered in the book, and therefore, it seems a good candidate.¹¹ But today *Zo* is somewhat controversial because it has been incorporated into recent nation-building projects of various kinds. Two influential ones are ‘*Mizo*’ – a term that is well established in Mizoram¹² – and ‘*Zo*’ – which is more popular in the Chin State (Burma), Manipur and northeastern Mizoram (both in India).¹³ These two comprehensive projects – *Mizo* and *Zo* – vie with each other but also with numerous nation-building projects that reject both of them and instead cluster around subgroups, for example, Mara, Lai, Hmar, Zomi and Chin.¹⁴ As a result, vigorous debates about *Zo* identity and politics take place in both India and Burma as well as on the Internet.¹⁵

In this book, we deal with much more than these contemporary nation-building projects. While it is true that self-representations have never been stable, for most hill dwellers, the terms *Zo-fate* (*Zo* family, *Zo* children) and *Zo-bnahthlak* (branches of the *Zo* [tree]) have indicated a broad ethnic classification. We will use the terms ‘hill people’ and ‘*Zo-fate*’ interchangeably to refer to the assemblage of related sub-groups who inhabited the hills when the British invaded. We will also use the adjective *Zo* – as in ‘the *Zo* region’.

In the pre-colonial period, the hill people shared four characteristics: (1) they spoke related languages; (2) their lifestyles were based on the specific forms of agriculture and hunting that the hills allowed; (3) they had common cultural and religious principles and (4) they lived beyond the reach of states.

The linguistic complexity of the region merits mention. According to current linguistic classifications, the languages of the *Zo-fate* belong to the Kuki-Chin branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family.¹⁶ This branch consists of some 50 languages, subdivided into a northern, central and southern branch. The groups we will encounter in this book speak no less than 12 different languages:¹⁷

- ◆ Mizo (previously known as Lushai), Haka (Lai, previously known as Pawi or Poi), Bawm, Hmar and Pangkhua – central branch
- ◆ Zou, Paite, Thado and Tedim – northern branch
- ◆ Mara (previously known as Lakher or Shendu), Khumi and Khyang – southern branch¹⁸

These groups inhabited all three sections of the hills – the Chin hills, the Lushai hills and the Chittagong hills.¹⁹ Geographically we concentrate on the middle part of the region (the Lushai hills), and this emphasis becomes more pronounced as we get closer to the present. For the post-colonial period,



Introduction

we mainly follow one large subset of the people, those from the Lushai Hills, who began speaking of themselves as belonging to a broader grouping of ‘Mizo’. The colonial designation as ‘Lushai Hills’, however, often led outsiders to refer to the inhabitants as Lushai, despite the fact that they themselves recognized clan and tribe differences. Today this area is known as the Indian state of Mizoram. For the sake of clarity, we will use the term Mizoram throughout this book, even though the term Lushai Hills was in official use up to 1952.

Mizoram means ‘Mizo Land’. Most Mizos belong to the subgroup of Lushai, and the official language of Mizoram is the Duhlian language or, more precisely, the Duhlian dialect of the Lushai language.²⁰ The Mizo category comprises members of subgroups of the *Zo-fate* (Zo family), especially those in Mizoram, although the adoption of Mizo was not complete. In Mizoram, many members of various subgroups have joined the Mizo category but others have not. Together with groups that are not seen as branches of the *Zo* – notably Chakma, Bru and Gurkha – these groups now form minority populations in Mizoram; most of them have links with larger populations in other territories. In the course of this book, we will come across these inhabitants of Mizoram as well. To simplify the nomenclature, we will refer to all groups by their current endonyms (names they use for themselves) as much as possible.²¹ Thus, we use *Mizo* (known to the colonial-era British mostly as Lushai), *Mara* (known to the British as Lakher), *Lai* (known to the British as Pawi, Poi or Chin²²), *Chakma* (known to the Mizos as Takam) and *Bru* (rather than Rieng/Reang, or the Mizo version Tuikuk).

This book does not purport to be a history of Mizoram and its surrounding regions. It is merely a preliminary exploration of how the visual record allows us to trace certain types of historical change. Some of these changes can also be studied by means of other sources, others cannot. Our exploration will touch on, and refer to, non-visual sources – and bodies of academic and popular history writing – wherever these connections are relevant, but it stays close to the visual source material.

Jointly, these visual sources provide a corrective to many received ideas about the history of this region, both among historians of India and among Mizo historians. For example, the way in which Mizos write about themselves ‘does not place their narratives against or in conjunction with the larger “Indian” ethos. To a large extent Mizo identity construction is inward-looking, self-referential, with the “other” being invoked only in cross-boundary contact’.²³ The visual material presented in this book highlights the necessity of paying more attention to external connections in the evolution of Mizo identity.



The Camera as Witness

The images

Over a number of years, we have been gathering visual material from a wide variety of collections. The majority of these images are photographs – over 17,000 of them, covering the period between the 1860s and the 2010s. About a quarter of these photographs can be found in archives in the United Kingdom – notably in London, Oxford, Cambridge and Aberystwyth – but most come from well over 100 private and some official collections in India. Some of these images are technically superb and in mint condition but most are neither. In our selection for this book, it was the historical importance that we assigned to individual photographs, rather than their aesthetic or technical qualities, which we have prioritized. This is not a random sample of the entire collection. The selection reflects both the authors’ decision to highlight certain historical processes and the limitations that image quality imposed on our choice. The collected material allows for many more historical themes to be developed, but the format of a single volume imposes clear limits on the breadth of presentation.

Many of the photographs that we have collected have had a tough life and are now in a poor condition. Some are simply too damaged to be reproduced. Mizoram has a moist climate that is harsh on paper. Despite this challenge, numerous photographs have been lovingly preserved in family albums, cardboard boxes, envelopes, cloth wraps, tins and desk drawers. Even so, many have suffered considerable damage over the years. The most common problems we have come across are discolouration, stains, mildew spots, fading, folding and tearing. Political upheavals have also taken their toll. We have collected photographs that were scarred and partly burned during the *Buai* (The Troubles), the period between 1966 and 1986 when Indian armed forces fought the movement for the independence of Mizoram. During this war period, many houses went up in flames and many photographs were lost because their owners had to flee or were forced to move overnight (see Chapter 17).

The photographers

Working from visual material, it is far easier to analyse some aspects of historical change than others. We have to follow the interests and concerns of the photographers and those who collected and preserved the images. This is a varied group: in Mizoram, as elsewhere, photography was never a unified

