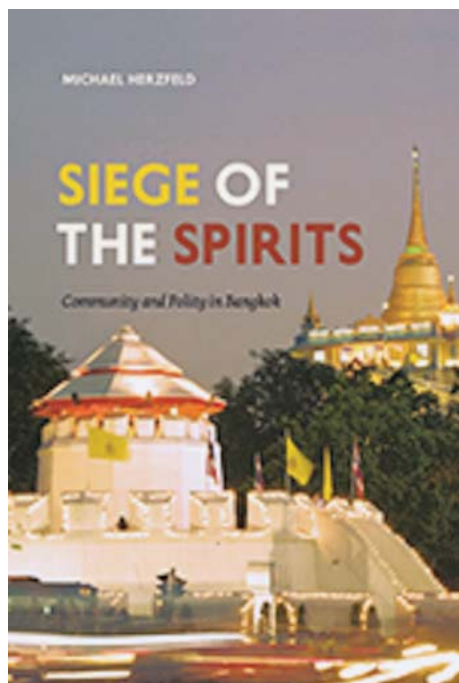


Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok, by Michael Herzfeld (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016). ISBN 978-0-226-33158-4 (cloth); ISBN 978-0-226-33161-4 (paper); ISBN 978-0-226-33175-1 (e-book). Cloth US\$90.00; Paper US\$30.00; E-book US\$10.00 to US\$30.00.



At a Thai Studies conference in 2002, Michael Herzfeld, professor of anthropology at Harvard University, announced a new interest in Thailand. Herzfeld had been a key figure in developing approaches to anthropology, which moved beyond structural functionalism without plunging into postmodernism. His research in Greece, and elsewhere in southern Europe, had focused on tensions between communities and bureaucracies, especially in relation to heritage in the context of tourism, most famously in the elegantly titled book, *A Place in History*.

A year later, while trawling for research sites among the communities threatened with eviction under plans to develop the historical centre of Bangkok, Herzfeld did not really *choose* his research site; rather the site chose him—the embattled residents of the Mahakan Fort community astutely recognised the potential value of a Harvard professor. Over a dozen years later, this book is the result. It traces the extraordinary story of the community’s protest, and offers many subtle insights on the relations between the state and people in contemporary Thailand.

The Mahakan Fort community, along with many others, was threatened by a development plan with two main aims: to clarify the old centre on Rattanakosin Island as an essentially royal space; and to improve its attraction to tourists by developing its “beauty.” The Mahakan Fort Community, clustered against the city’s original wall, was to be replaced by a park that would improve the vista of the old fort and its environs. Opposing this project was tricky on many grounds: the redevelopment project could claim to be serving modernity, monarchy, and the tourist income so important for national prosperity. Moreover, the Mahakan Fort community is tiny. The site is only five *rai*, and the population hovers around 300 people. Most are genuinely poor, hence the resources available for mounting resistance are scant.

The Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA) gained an early advantage by taking ownership of the land under the law of eminent domain, and paying many of the community’s members a first instalment on compensation for eviction. On legal grounds, the community does not have a foot to stand on, and the courts have consistently ruled against its petitions to stay. Yet, a quarter of a century after the first attempts to remove the community, it is still there. The community has been fighting in the public space of the media, and in the knuckle-to-knuckle space of confrontation and negotiation with

the bureaucracy. Herzfeld concentrates on the latter.

He describes these scenes of negotiation in great detail, analysing the body language, the vocabularies deployed, the use of aggression, deference, contempt and humour. He discusses the politics and poetics of sound amplification.

The BMA argued that the Mahakan Fort residents had no legitimacy as a historic community. The area had been occupied as residences since the Third Reign, but had no association with a valuable craft or a prominent family. There are records of performances of the traditional musical drama, *like*, there in the late 19th century, but that is hardly unique. Few of the residents can claim a long historical association with the site, and many have arrived recently, from Isan among other places. However, the BMA's plans for redeveloping the site were vulnerable. They intended to replace the community with a park, to remove the people in order to create an empty space. In one fractious confrontation, they sent in soldiers who tore down a row of houses. In another, they dumped truckloads of garbage over an area that the community members were developing as a garden. The BMA commandeered part of the area and planted a lawn, which quickly became an eyesore.

In face of the BMA's aggression, the community gradually redefined itself as "a community of ancient wooden houses," highlighting their rare physical asset. They argued that the diversity of their members' origins made the community a microcosm of the nation. They claimed a role for themselves as curators of this unique location, as guardians of the legacy of the ancestors who occupied the many spirit houses on the site (thus giving Herzfeld his delightful book title). By this deft manipulation of discourse, they repositioned the BMA bureaucrats as threats to Thai heritage, lacking in compassion and cultural sensitivity, and hence unworthy of being Thai. Moreover, while the residents had varied backgrounds and many internal disagreements, under the pressure exerted by the BMA they developed into a community with a robust organisation, strong leadership and extraordinary tenacity.

In many respects, the Mahakan Fort community has followed a pattern seen in other protests over the last three decades. Faced by authorities claiming to act on behalf of nation, modernity, monarchy and progress, the protesters imitate the authorities' vocabulary, techniques, claims and practices. The Mahakan Fort site now has its own museum, signage which closely copies the official signage at tourist sites, and a hierarchical internal organization which can be every bit as authoritarian as the bureaucrats.

How has the Mahakan Fort community survived repeated threat of eviction for almost a quarter of a century, where many other communities have failed, either disintegrating in the face of pressure or surrendering from exhaustion? Part of the reason, Herzfeld argues, is because of its central location. The community is built up against a wall and fort built at the origin of the city. It lies next to the point where Rachadamnoen Avenue, the "royal walk" built by King Chulalongkorn, "smashed through" (Herzfeld's term) this wall as part of the modernisation of the city. A few steps away are the museum of King Rama VII and the Crown Property Bureau's museum of Rattanakosin Island. Above looms the Golden Mount, and across the way lies the "metal temple" with King Rama III's statue. In such a location, the community cannot be quietly destroyed by

the bureaucrats without anyone noticing. The community has exploited this centrality to make its protests known by banners hung over the walls, and amplified messages that float out into the streets. The community has attracted many useful or influential sympathisers, including architects, city planners, academics, people within the Crown Property Bureau, and the short-lived head of the BMA, Apirak Kosayodhin.

But there is more to it than centrality. Herzfeld has studied several wrangles over heritage between communities and state in southern Europe, but cannot imagine a case similar to the Mahakan Fort community occurring there. For explanation, he invokes the conceptualisation of Asian states that was popularised in slightly different forms as mandala (Wolters), segmentary state (Stein) or galactic polity (Tambiah, who was Herzfeld's teacher). He suggests that: "Thailand oscillates between its historical antecedent as a 'pulsating galactic polity' and its modern incarnation as a clearly demarcated territorial nation-state." In the pyramidal structure of the bureaucratic nation-state, a small, scruffy community with no legal rights, like that at Mahakan Fort, is at the bottom of the heap. But the mandala/segmentary state/galactic polity works on different principles. The units, whether a neighbourhood, village, city or kingdom, are conceived as moral communities or imagined families. The units are nested inside one another, like concentric circles, rather than arranged in a vertical formation. The same principles operate at different levels of scale, from neighbourhood to kingdom: the kingdom can claim to be a family, and a minute community can claim to be guardians of the principle of 'Thainess'. In Herzfeld's telling, the Fort Mahakan community has learnt how to slip free from the hierarchy of the nation-state and play the politics of the mandala. In every formal battle in the courts of law, they lose. But in face-to-face negotiation, witnessed at some distance by the nation, they win every time. This is a result of "the residents' self-conscious efforts to portray themselves as a microcosm of the country as a whole." They claim to be guarding a little sliver of the national heritage on behalf of the nation.

As this review is written, the community is again back in the news as the threat of eviction has recently resurfaced. On Herzfeld's analysis, they should survive yet again. However, there is one factor that emerges from Herzfeld's telling, although he does not comment on it. This community (and others) has always been most vulnerable when the military is in power, perhaps because the military as an institution, as a result of its characteristic internal culture, is less susceptible to the politics of the mandala.

This book is a delight to read, full of subtle insights and blissfully free of jargon. It contributes to the growing subgenre on the anthropology of protest, while at the same time offering new ways to think about issues of state and people, history and heritage.

Chris Baker