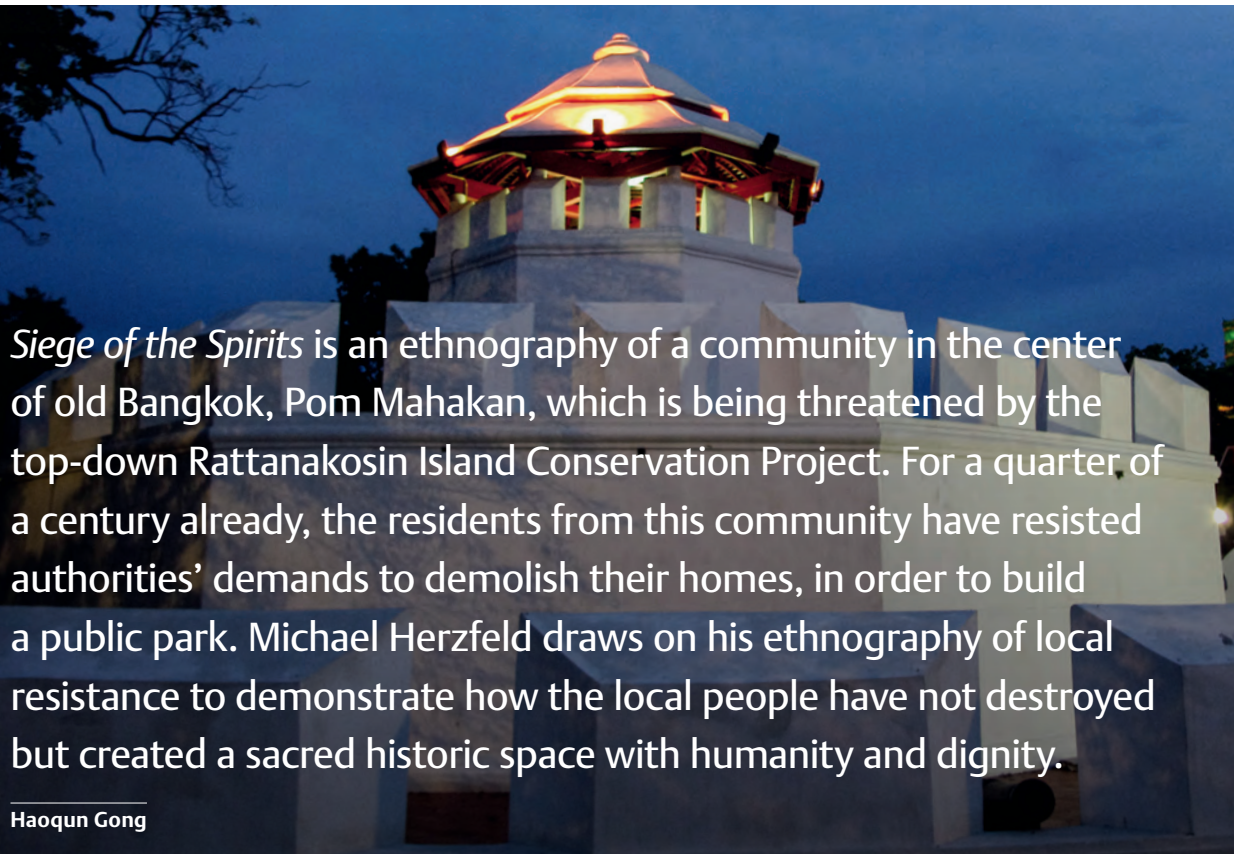


Fighting for the future of the past in Bangkok



Siege of the Spirits is an ethnography of a community in the center of old Bangkok, Pom Mahakan, which is being threatened by the top-down Rattanakosin Island Conservation Project. For a quarter of a century already, the residents from this community have resisted authorities' demands to demolish their homes, in order to build a public park. Michael Herzfeld draws on his ethnography of local resistance to demonstrate how the local people have not destroyed but created a sacred historic space with humanity and dignity.

Haoqun Gong

Left: There were originally 14 forts in Bangkok. Pom Mahakan is only one of the two remaining forts that have been preserved, besides Phra Sumeru. (photo courtesy Aaron Toth on Flickr)



Reviewed title:
Herzfeld, M. 2016.
Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok
Chicago: University of Chicago Press
ISBN 9780226331584

A tiny community between two polity models

Pom Mahakan, a tiny community with about 300 residents, sits beside a main avenue leading down to the symbolic heart of old Bangkok, the City Pillar. As the main avenue reflects a Western European's city style and the embracement of modernity, the City Pillar represents the center of mandala cosmological image. Herzfeld tries to use the case of Pom Mahakan as a mirror to reflect the entangling of two polity models: "pulsating galactic polity" (*moeang*) and a clearly demarcated territorial nation-state (*prathaet*). The older polity model, the *moeang* was reproduced at multiple levels from the local to the national, and it signifies a place where people regard it as a moral community. On the contrary, *prathaet* was designed according to the Western state model, which adopted well-defined geographical frontiers and a pyramidal bureaucracy (p45). The difference between two polity models provides the root of contradictions, and also the space for social performance. Herzfeld points out: "Pom Mahakan inhabits both polities, the *moeang* and the *prathaet* [...] and the play of difference between these two models is crucial to understanding the community's ability to chart a course through political upheavals at every level" (p44). Rattanakosin Island Conservation Project, claiming to "preserve the historic appearance and the connections and linkage between the past and the society of today" (p68), has attempted to evict the local communities since the 1990s, but the people from Pom Mahakan have applied agile strategies to create a community culture inside state culture, i.e., to keep the *moeang* as part of the *prathaet*.

Resilience and agency

How can such a small group of people, with such few resources, maintain the fight for so long? Activists, NGO networks, media, academics including the author, and a few conscientious politicians have all joined in the long-term struggle; but as Herzfeld tells us, it is the people from Pom Mahakan who really make the difference. When the government decided to clear the area,

THIS BOOK MAKES a significant contribution to the anthropology of politics, both in a general sense and in the context of the violently political conflicts of Thailand. Much of the prevailing discourse on politics in Thailand focuses on the contradictions between two different kinds of political systems, and treat Thailand as a country swinging between monarchy and democracy. Herzfeld, however, not just revives the anthropological discussion of how "pulsating galactic polity" and nation-state polity coexist in post-colonial times, but stresses the agency of the local people to move between the two polity models when they are fighting for their community. Tracing the community's strategy and leadership style, this book demonstrates the deep tension and dynamics in Thai political culture. With his involvement in the local resistance for more than ten years, Herzfeld also shows us how engaged anthropology can be as one part of the real political society.

the local people showed their resilience and tremendous creativity in self-education, self-gentrification and self-management, and their ability to construct a political identity beyond class division and political polarization. And when the government denied the existence of Pom Mahakan as a genuine community, people from Pom Mahakan set about defining themselves as quintessentially Thai, appealing to the romantic image of rural life.

Self-education is the key to winning the battle of recognition in the arenas of way of life, culture, community, and history (p108). These residents have learned much from NGOs, academics and even opponents, in order to confirm the value of their community, which represents the past of the *moeang* as the heritage of national culture. Self-gentrification is an insightful concept in this book: "[they] adapt to their own purpose the aesthetics and social values of the bourgeoisie and the state it governs" (p85). For the local residents, the best way of staying in place is to not escape from, but to become involved in the gentrification. This participatory style has been strongly supported by NGOs. By improving their living area according to the standards of the middleclass, attracting tourists who seek the 'true Thai experience', and by associating themselves with the Democrat Party, Pom Mahakan residents have managed to blur class boundaries, and increase their chances for survival (p201).

The ability to self-manage is crucial to Pom Mahakan's survival. This tiny community is well organized in different ways: the community is divided into five zones, and the head of each zone keeps villagers and leaders in close contact; the elected community committee includes both community members and experts from outside; a community savings fund has enabled the building of new houses. As for the leadership style in Pom Mahakan, Herzfeld shows the oscillation between authoritarianism and egalitarianism, which reflects the characteristic of Thai political culture. In short, the residents of Pom Mahakan have managed to build a moral community by practicing their rights. "The social rhythms of everyday life thus disrupt the pretensions of the state to a reified permanence. They are not always violent or disruptive; but when they are consensual, they challenge officialdom's exclusive claims to being the arbiter of order" (p165).

Engaged anthropology today

Herzfeld advocates anthropological engagement in "the politics of mereness" by asking who defines what matters in residents' lives (Herzfeld 2010). In *Siege of the Spirits*, Herzfeld gives us a great example. We can see his every kind of endeavor to hear, understand and help the community, and at the same time, he always focuses on the agency of the people themselves, which is the hope for the future of the past.

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Herzfeld, M. 2010. "Engagement, Gentrification, and the Neoliberal Hijacking of History", *Current Anthropology* 51(supplement 2):S259-67.

Amnesia is a state-sponsored sport

The 1989 killings in Tiananmen Square awakened my global conscience. I was barely thirteen years old, uninterested in world events, yet tears were falling down my cheeks as I followed images of the students calling for freedom and democracy and then the response of the rumbling and chaos of tanks. Born to a deeply Catholic family with Irish and Dutch ancestors, and living in New York, China was somewhere far away, but it was the word "students", that struck a chord. They were older than I was, but still like me. "Why were they doing this?" I asked, exasperated, staring at the column of tanks.

Peter Admirand



Reviewed Title:
Louisa Lim. 2015.
The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited,
Oxford: Oxford University
ISBN 9780190227913

JOURNALIST LOUISA LIM initially published her brave, insightful reporting on the legacy of the Tiananmen Massacre (here I choose the term from poet Liao Yiwu) in 2014. *The People's Republic of Amnesia: Tiananmen Revisited* was received with general great acclaim. The 2015 paperback version includes a new epilogue, reflecting on the 25th anniversary of the violence in 2014. Surprisingly, the cover or back-cover blurb does not address this stellar addition.

The book revolves around interviews Lim carried out with a number of seminal or representative figures linked with June 4th or how that event has been remembered, (mis)interpreted or forgotten. Many chapter titles therefore are terms like soldier, student, mother, patriot, official. These include a soldier-turned-artist (Chen Guang) trying to make sense of the June 4th violence; a Chinese patriot (Gao Yong) eager to denounce Japan in a recent protest; former student protestors (like Zhang Ming, who has a wife who knows about but cares little about