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, 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. 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. 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 these 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 1996s, 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, the local people showed their resilience and tremendous creativity in self-education, self-gentification 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-gentification is an insightful concept in this book: “they adapt to their own purpose the aesthetics and social values of the moeang 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 characteristics 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 menonnity” 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.

Haoqun Gong, Minzu University of China, Beijing. (mollygong@yeah.net)

Reference