

Book Reviews

MICHAEL HERZFELD. *Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok*. Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2016. 267 pp.

When a nation's political system has been deeply polarized between electoral democracy and military rule, how has the sense of polity – means of governance, patterns of bureaucratic order, state authority, and civil participation and resistance – been remade, and how is it lived in messy and historic urban settings such as Bangkok? *Siege of the Spirits* provides comprehensive and insightful answers to these questions. Michael Herzfeld has been an important scholar of bureaucracy, cultural identity, and state power for many years with a gift of being able to traverse different cultural worlds. This book brings together his long-term engagement with the residents of Pom Mahakan, a squatter community in the centre of old Bangkok that has spent more than two decades dealing with the threat of eviction, and his elaborate understanding of Thai cultural logic. This refined ethnography invites readers to the very heart of Thai political life, in which compromise and negotiation play a prominent part, by providing a detailed illustration of the community's struggles to secure their livelihoods. The community's skilful evocation of their national belonging marked by “the quintessence of Thainess” (p. 42) reveals a significant dimension of cultural politics in which resistance becomes possible not as oppositional alterity but as resolute incorporation.

The survival tactics that this tiny squatter community has crafted and that Herzfeld examines are not separable from the heterogeneous conception of the Thai polity. The difference between *prathaet* and *moeang* is crucial in grasping how the political unit can be expanded and contracted. While *prathaet* denotes a “clearly demarcated territorial nation-state” (p. 44) based on the Western European model, *moeang* is what can exist at multiple scales, from nation to city and to community, sharing a common moral ethos that creates an alignment between different units of the polity. This older mandala-style conception is pivotal for the people who have claimed their rights to the minute piece of land that they cannot legally own, because this segmentary and pulsating model of the polity offers them another source of legitimacy that can defy the centralized bureaucratic structure of the *prathaet*. Within the vision of Thai *moeang* as a moral and spiritual community, Pom Mahakan residents can effectively justify their belonging and ownership to the government authorities through their discursive and ritualistic practices, and most importantly, through their daily care for the space.

As Herzfeld chronicles Pom Mahakan's repeated battles with the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration (BMA), enmeshed throughout the chapters with

the larger issues of urban planning, heritage management, and participatory development, his careful attention to temporal dynamics within this spatial dispute allows readers to grasp the importance of the conduct of life. The people who have struggled to live on in this historical space seem to master the “management of temporality” (p. 64). While the national narrative of development imposes a linear historical time and only values the “ancient” architecture, they creatively appropriate this term and find a use for it for “a living population and with the spirits still inhabiting the shrines” (p. 157). The gentle and polite gestures that Herzfeld captures in communal meetings also reveal rare moments where the quiet rhythm of routine actions – such as “the fanning of the older women” (p. 166) – rather than a protest march opens a space for disagreement and democratic engagement.

This book invites readers to seriously rethink the concept of *moeang* as not only having its own metaphysics (Davis 1984) as a symbolic entity but also its own way of governance as a polity. Considering the fact that Thailand has been oscillating between democracy – in varying degrees – and authoritarian constellations inflicting serious violence upon its citizens, what struck me was how *moeang* governance enacted in Pom Mahakan has auspiciously evaded direct confrontation with state authorities and prevented their use of force, although the dispute has not been settled. Herzfeld suggests that this not-permanent but solid success originates with the communal “sense of living in a microcosm of Thainess” (p. 186). The remaining question, then, is what comes with such faithful adoption of ‘Thainess.’ If the imagined and lived Thainess is what makes *moeang* governance tangible and protective, its potential alteration needs to be further examined. I suspect that not only “the curious symbiosis of democratic and authoritarian values, or resistance and subservience” (p. 27), but also the antibiosis of these two ideologically different forces might be ingrained in this realm of cultural governance.

In everyday debates and government discourses, Thai-style democracy has often been employed as the only viable answer rather than asking hard questions about the country’s deep polarization. Against this problematic simplification, *Siege of the Spirits* offers a new understanding of how various modes of power and their cultural and historical baggage are competing with each other in contemporary Thailand. At a time when the question of who should and who can define the nation’s own style of political system looms large, Herzfeld’s exploration of the tangled textures of Thainess is both timely and prescient.

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Reference

Davis, Richard B. 1984. *Muang Metaphysics*. Bangkok: Pandora Press.