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## <Book Review>

**Sophorntavy Vorng**

**Michael Herzfeld. *Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok*.  
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Center for Southeast Asian Studies, Kyoto University

offspring of such unions also were often married off to Chinese men. Thus, a pattern can be seen in which daughters repeated the practice of their own Chinese mestizo mothers of marrying back into the Chinese community, thus slowing down the “indigenization” process of such families when traced matrilineally. A similar pattern of Chinese mestizo daughters marrying Chinese men can be seen in the matriline of the respondent named Halley. Halley is a Chinese mestiza whose mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother—all Chinese mestizas like her—married “pure” Chinese men. These women’s lives thus challenge the traditional narrative of Chinese mestizos becoming Filipinos over time, as advanced by scholars such as Edgar Wickberg and Antonio Tan. Their histories also show that Chinese families utilized and continue to utilize their women to uphold Chinese patriarchy by opposing intermarriage with Filipinos while allowing their Chinese or Chinese mestizo sons to marry Filipino women.

My only quibble about the book is that structurally, it could have been edited so that it does not read like a dissertation. Also, it seems problematic for the author to use perspectives and approaches from cultural anthropology and ethnic studies that are critical of “regimes of truth and power” to create homogenized and monolithic identities, then conclude at the end of the book that Christian churches need to find ways to re-evangelize their followers so that the latter become “true” Christians. These shortcomings aside, the study has much to offer to scholars of ethnicity in general and the history of the Chinese diaspora in the Philippines in particular.

Richard T. Chu

*Department of History, University of Massachusetts Amherst*

### ***Siege of the Spirits: Community and Polity in Bangkok***

MICHAEL HERZFELD

Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016, xii+267pp.

Heritage is not the first thing that springs to mind when people think of Bangkok. Rather, modern skyscrapers, traffic snarls, glitzy shopping malls, chaotic markets, red light districts, and ornate temples dominate its popular image. Yet, the city’s pulse beats strongly in vibrant pockets of life that are often hidden amidst the urban sprawl. These distinctive localities give Bangkok a richness and complexity that make it one of the most fascinating cities in the world. Michael Herzfeld’s new book focuses on one of these neighborhoods, Pom Mahakan—a tiny community of 300 people adjacent to the fortress built in 1783 after which it is named. For almost 25 years, city authorities have attempted to evict the community’s residents in order to replace Pom Mahakan’s artisans and traditional wooden houses with a public park paying tribute to the monarchy and nation.

Although heritage conservation policies have existed since the early twentieth century, these

efforts have been directed primarily toward monuments, temples, buildings, and sites of royal significance (Askew 1996, 190). Simultaneously, local neighborhoods or urban communities (*yarn*) “have borne the brunt of the urban changes” as the city undergoes increasing development and modernization (*ibid.*, 194). *Siege of the Spirits* is therefore a significant contribution to the scarce literature on heritage and urban conservation in Bangkok. Herzfeld’s focus on grassroots activism is particularly important, as local public participation has crucially been lacking in this area in Thailand (Tiamsoon 2009). One of the few recent examples that does exist is the major public outcry over plans to demolish the Art Deco Lido and Scala movie theaters, two unique and well-known Bangkok institutions. However, in general there are a lack of financial incentives combined with lack of enforcement of conservation laws, meaning there is little to prevent Bangkok’s historic monuments, buildings, and neighborhoods from fading away.

In the first chapter of the book Herzfeld introduces the large cast of actors involved in the conflict, including the bureaucrats of the Rattanakosin City Project, the Bangkok Metropolitan Authority (BMA), NGOs, activists, political figures, academics, students, foreign and middle-class supporters, and more. He also describes the circumstances of his initial contact with the Pom Mahakan community, as well as the trust that he gradually earned from the residents and relationships that grew from his involvement in their struggle. This engagement included getting to know leaders and residents of the community, attending protests, writing op-eds and letters to politicians, speaking to journalists on behalf of the residents, and even making signs to help attract tourists to the neighborhood’s museum spaces.

In their efforts to survive, residents strategically focus on making the claim that the community is a microcosm of the Thai nation and its Buddhist heritage. In the second chapter, Herzfeld explores the notion of Pom Mahakan as a miniaturized version of the nation in further detail, arguing that such a perspective provides clues not only to the nature of Pom Mahakan as a community but also to the nature of the Thai polity itself. This polity, according to Herzfeld, comprises two polities, *mueang* and *prathet*, the former the historical, galactic form and the latter the modern territorial nation-state (p. 44). Reproduced from the local to the national level, the *mueang* model of polity signifies a sense of community in contrast to the bureaucratic, clearly demarcated *prathet*. The key to the Pom Mahakan residents’ strategy therefore lies in this reproducibility of *mueang* on multiple levels. This is captured in material form by the many shrines throughout the community. Residents connect the shrines with not only their own ancestors but also a past population that includes the original royal bureaucrats who settled in the area. Via this process, they render the space of the Pom Mahakan community sacred. This claim allows residents to “present themselves as guardians of a historically deep spiritual and national trust indexed and symbolized by the shrines,” so that any attack on the community “becomes a disloyal and sacrilegious attack on the entire polity” (p. 53).

In Chapter 3 Herzfeld addresses the topic of urban beautification, arguing that it reflects a

class-based aesthetic that captures both a sense of “Thainess” as well as Western standards of modernity. He notes that while Pom Mahakan residents are not necessarily antithetical to these aesthetics per se, they did reject “any notion of urban beautification that was purely monumental and uninhabited by ordinary people” (p. 70). The chapter also includes a discussion of the Rattanakosin Island project that emerged from a campaign launched by the military dictator Sarit Thanarat, who was prime minister from 1957 to 1963. The controversial project focused on buttressing monarchic and national prestige at the cost of ignoring or destroying local architecture and ways of life. In response, the residents’ projection of an image of rural romantic exoticism and preservation of tradition is used in a strategic manner to bolster the community’s legitimacy.

The fourth chapter delves into the everyday details of the residents’ struggle with the authorities. Examples Herzfeld draws on include an encounter involving residents and BMA officials regarding the removal of protest signs, a site inspection from the army and a delegation from the Fine Arts Department, and a meeting with the Department of Public Works. While the law is on the BMA’s side, the residents have the moral advantage as caretakers and guardians of the historical site. A key legal element on which the BMA rests its case is the acceptance of compensation to relocate by some members of the community. Yet, Herzfeld points out that the terms of the compensation were ungenerous and proposed alongside the threat of forced deportation if the terms were not accepted within three days. Furthermore, after inspecting alternative settlement sites and finding them unsuitable, the residents offered to return the first installment of the payment they had received and continue their resistance.

By Chapter 5, the intense pressure that the residents were under becomes increasingly evident. The pressure was alleviated somewhat by the election of Apirak Kosayodhin as governor of Bangkok in 2004. His support led to a contractual agreement in 2005 to recognize the heritage value of the community, restore many of the old houses, and incorporate them into the plan for a public park. However, BMA officials managed to convince the Administrative Court that private residences were incompatible with the definition of a public park. This led to the end of the previous, promising agreement. Furthermore, Apirak was succeeded as governor by the less amenable Sukhumbhand Paribatra in 2009. This led to further pressure on Pom Mahakan residents in the form of a renewed eviction threat.

Chapter 6 draws attention to the importance of prevarication and delay tactics on the part of all parties involved in the ongoing dispute. One noteworthy tactic that engaged notions of “time” involved residents’ adoption of the language of historical conservation and cultural resource management, for instance by describing old houses in the community as “ancient” (*boran*) and pointing out that the styles of certain houses could be attributed to various dynastic reigns (*ratchakan*). In Chapter 7 Herzfeld examines the politicized distinction between positivistic “data” as opposed to “local knowledge.” He also highlights the adaptability of the community to outside threats. This, in combination with other elements that Herzfeld identifies in this chapter, such as

an effective and functional leadership collective, served to strengthen the community's resistance efforts.

The final chapter of the book captures some of the residents' cautious optimism in their construction of new houses on the site. However, this optimism was quashed with the news in 2009 that the BMA was once again threatening imminent eviction. Summarizing his reflections on why Pom Mahakan has endured for so long in its struggle against state officials, Herzfeld identifies the most significant factors as the "resilience" of residents, their skill in "buying time," and, most important, their flexibility and adaptability to the various circumstances and events that have punctuated the conflict. Herzfeld also raises a number of important questions, including whether or not the residents' project comprises a form of "self-gentrification" and whether or not the "participatory process of self-management" is leading community members "along an ineluctable path of embourgeoisement" (p. 201).

The book is filled with absorbing ethnographic material that draws the reader into the plight of Pom Mahakan's residents (examples include the description of protest on pages 28–29 and the description of the tense buildup to a confrontation between residents and authorities that never came on pages 32–34). These accounts could have been made more vivid with additional details about the backgrounds of individual community members, many of whom are compelling figures who have lived in the neighborhood for decades. A bit more focus on the shrines themselves would also have been welcome, especially in regards to the role that they play in daily life at Pom Mahakan, and the discourses and practices they are embedded in. Such information would have been especially useful in the form of quotes or examples illustrating how the residents connected the spirit shrines to original aristocrats and courtiers who lived in the area. Furthermore, since the narrative does not always proceed in a linear fashion, a timeline of events in appendix form would have been helpful for the reader in order to trace the events of the conflict.

Today, the struggle continues for residents of Pom Mahakan. On March 28, 2016, another eviction notice was posted requiring residents to relocate by April 30. Public discussions took place in June, and evictions were delayed once more. A tense showdown occurred in early September when BMA authorities and a demolition crew attempted to breach the neighborhood walls. The ensuing siege ended with residents allowing 12 houses whose occupants had agreed to leave to be knocked down. Meanwhile, amidst allegations of embezzlement, Sukhumbhand was replaced as the governor of Bangkok in October 2016 by Aswin Kwanmuang. The outcome of the conflict under Aswin's leadership remains to be seen, although his successful battles against the Saphan Lek toys and electronics market and Pak Khlong Talat flower market are telling indications of his uncompromising approach.

*Siege of the Spirits* is an essential resource for understanding Pom Mahakan's past and present—as well as its uncertain future. Herzfeld paints a picture of a complex community that subverts numerous assumptions and stereotypes that are common to urban eviction narratives.

The result is an important work of scholarship that will appeal to a wide audience outside of scholars of Thailand and Southeast Asia, especially those interested in engaged anthropology, urbanism and development, heritage and conservation, civil rights, and grassroots movements.

Sophornvaty Vorng

*Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Göttingen*

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## *Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam*

PAMELA D. McELWEE

Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016, xxvi+283pp.

*Forests Are Gold: Trees, People, and Environmental Rule in Vietnam* is made of gold, both the woody and the intellectual kind. Its title is drawn from a remark supposedly made by Ho Chi Minh in 1962 at the opening of North Vietnam's first national park (p. 3). The story is apocryphal, but the real source of this saying is rather revealing. At a 1963 meeting about the mountainous region, Ho gave a speech to 200 participants that focused on the climatic and agricultural impacts of forests and on the work of spreading socialism to the hinterlands. Tellingly, Ho valued forests not for their biodiversity but as a resource for a new society.

Pamela McElwee's book explores the imbricated projects of governing society and nature articulated in Ho's speech. She argues that "environmental policy is at times aimed not at nature, but at people, and failing to acknowledge this fact has resulted in numerous unintended, not to mention some intentional, consequences" (p. xiii). She urges her readers to be cognizant of both the social and environmental effects of what she terms environmental practices. In her analysis, McElwee develops the concept of environmental rule "whereby states, organizations, and individuals use environmental explanations to justify policy interventions in other social areas, such as populations, markets, settlements, or cultural identities" (p. xiii). McElwee's careful reading of the history of Vietnam's forests calls into question the standard explanations for their currently degraded state. The author shows that neither the Vietnam War nor Malthusian pressures, so often invoked as the explanation for environmental destruction in Vietnam, had as great an effect as the outcomes of various projects of environmental rule (p. 223). As McElwee reminds us, the Ke Go Nature Reserve was created in 1996 "out of the ashes of over-logged former timber