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The Crypto-Colonial Dilemmas of Rattanakosin Island

Michael Herzfeld

It is now over a decade and a half since Marc Askew published an influential critique of the rise of heritage discourse in Bangkok (Askew 1996). In an argument that reverberates sympathetically with my own critique of modernist planning a decade later (Herzfeld 2006), he suggests that the current planning regime has chosen to ignore existing, on-the-ground social arrangements in favor of a Western-derived and locally unappealing concept of “heritage,” now officially enshrined in state discourse as *moradok haeng chaat* (“national heritage”). While the term is etymologically cognate with the Lao *moladok*, its exponents in Thailand have never succeeded in promoting its potentially affective appeal in the way that has made significant inroads in the Lao consciousness (Berliner 2010).

In order to understand why the concept has so little appeal and how its implications nonetheless suffuse current urban politics in Bangkok, I propose in this brief exploration to address some key issues both from the intimate perspective of ethnographic research and through the telescopic lens of trans-national comparison. Through this typically anthropological convergence of apparently opposed viewpoints, I hope to tease out some traces of the key dynamics so long obscured by the myopic grandiloquence of formal historiography.

The conceptual dilemmas and practical difficulties of promoting the idea of a national heritage in Thailand are exemplified in Rattanakosin Island, where the imposing plans envisaged for the area’s reconstruction have been mired in bureaucratic foot-dragging, inter-agency rivalry, contradictions within the legal provisions for eminent domain and expropriation, and popular resistance. Some of the official dreaming has simply been unrealistic, as in the continuing promotion of Ratchadamnoen Avenue as the “Champs-Élysées of Asia,” a throwback to the Phibun era (Wong 2006: 65) that was revived with considerable enthusiasm by Thaksin Shinawatra. That naked instance of emulation of the West, taken in contrast to the ongoing threat to the vernacular (as opposed to royal and religious) architecture of earlier times, would seem to suggest that an attitude of disdain for poor Thai

communities and the uncritical embrace of “Western” models of town planning and design are two sides of the same coin. But what do the attitudes that have shaped the official face of the area look like from the perspective of people who actually live there?

There is little to suggest that these people – who represent a complex mixture of classes, religions (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus, and Christians as well as Buddhists), and ethnic and regional backgrounds – evince any disaffection from the official rhetoric of Thai national identity. Rather, they dispute the moral authority of its current representatives. Residents of some of the poorer communities in Rattanakosin Island, for example, complain that the BMA bureaucracy perpetuates the ideology of *sakdina*, the old feudal system with its distinctions between nobles and commoners. That charge may be a somewhat exaggerated invocation of history to explain away the often openly contemptuous stance of individual bureaucrats – a common device of critical discourse in Thailand (see Reynolds 1987: 150) – without admitting that the structure of the BMA bureaucracy is largely modeled instead on Western notions of city governance. Nonetheless, the contempt – or, at least, the indifference – is a reality; there are numerous civil servants in the BMA who care deeply about the fate of the urban poor, but they are collectively described as not being “the people with power” (*phuu mii amnaat*) and they exercise little if any influence on the way in which poorer residents are treated by the institution as a whole. On the other side of the fence, that perceived lack of sympathy and respect provokes a matching rhetoric from community leaders, one of whom told me that he deeply respected the “institution” (*rabop*) of the BMA, but not those who currently staffed its offices.

While Thai bureaucratic and political life is indeed marked by strongly hierarchical social arrangements, the impetus for democratic reform also has a long history. The emergence of a middle class sympathetic to, and indeed committed to, NGO interventions, but also jealous of its new gains, has progressively reinforced both tendencies. The NGO movement itself displays some of this internal paradox (see Missingham 2003). More generally, I have argued elsewhere (Herzfeld 2012) that Thai political culture is marked by a tension – or perhaps “oscillation,” recalling Leach’s (1954: 8–10 *et passim*) analysis of political and cultural dynamics in Highland Burma – between extremes of egalitarianism (“democracy”) and hierarchy (“feudalism”). In contemporary cultural terms this means that one swing of the pendulum identifies “Thainess” (*khwaam pen thai*) with centralized authoritarian rule, while the reverse swing allows local communities to invoke the same ideal of Thainess in order to attack what they treat as the “un-Thai” and “uncompassionate” (and hence “un-Buddhist”) indifference of some functionaries, especially of those who clearly do have considerable power at their disposal.

Thailand has a long history of experimenting with democratic systems. But the fact that communities have to resort to the rhetoric of Thainess means that, for all intents and purposes, they are always forced to calibrate their local history to a national standard. It would be easy to treat this as simply a form of acquiescence

in a dominant national discourse. The proliferation of formal temple and palace architecture on Rattanakosin Island and the relative dearth of vernacular architectural forms strengthen this sense of a national “high culture” to which all else must be adumbrated. It is obvious that no community is going to get far by resisting the formal image thus generated.

What local people do resist is the separation of functions I have called “spatial cleansing” whereby religious, commercial, and social spheres are separated from each other in a legalistic logic that culminated in a court decision to deny the people of the Pom Mahakan community the right to remain as residents in a public park, on the grounds that private residences and public parks were mutually incompatible. In other words, while they may accept and even embrace the outward forms of official Thainess, they rework its socio-political implications by disrupting and delaying the processes by which officialdom promotes it. In part this is just a matter of “buying time” (*seua welaa*); in part it consists of tactically using the forms of official discourse and style while pursuing locally relevant ways of living together.

The emergence of Pom Mahakan as a compact, largely consensual community doubtless owes a great deal to the pressures exerted on it by the authorities.¹ Its claims to being a community are contested in various ways; one BMA official told me, for example, that it was not a real community in the traditional Thai sense since its inhabitants were not united by a common profession (such as the production of begging bowls or paper umbrellas, to cite two well-known examples that fit this criterion). Yet it is important to remember that the term *chumchon* is itself a neologism in the Thai context (Anan 2001: 111); indeed, one well-informed local commentator who has had active interests in the Rattanakosin development has repeatedly told me that he does not know what the word means or whether such a thing really exists (although he was more willing to concede that it did in the case of Pom Mahakan than in those of some of the middle-class and politically more fractious districts such as Phraeng Phutorn or Wat Saket).

That said, the claim to identity as a community is often made in terms that model official discourse. In one attempt to contest the right of the BMA to evict the residents in favor of a public park (*suan sattharana*), the residents constructed their own garden (also *suan*), neatly labeled as a collective achievement with elegant greenery forming the letters that proudly announced the community’s name. And in an invocation of the newly fashionable concept of “local knowledge,” a concept originally popularized by anthropologists such as Anan Ganjanapan and more recently coopted by, or made to resemble, official discourse in much the same way as has happened with “local history” (see Thongchai 2001), the residents erected an A-frame community museum with the inevitable stylized gable finials and a

¹ The story of the Pom Mahakan community’s struggle against collective eviction, now over two decades long, has been the subject of considerable media attention. Scholarly and activist accounts include Ariya n.d.; Bristol 2009; Chatri n.d.; Herzfeld 2003, 2006, 2012; Thanapon 2007.



Figure 1. Pom Mahakan: A venerable house overlooking the community's meeting space (photo: the author)

Figure 2. Vernacular architecture and community renewal (photo: the author)





Figure 3. Modalities of heritage: handicraft and the old city wall (photo: the author)

Figure 4. Spiritual symbiosis: a new home for the spirits, and old home for the living (photo: the author)



formal red shingle with gold lettering that read “pavilion of the community’s local knowledge” (*saalaa phumipanyaa chumchon*) (Figure 4). Local acquiescence in this officializing discourse (Bourdieu 1977:40) does not automatically mean conformity with its semantics, but it does entail a risk of cooptation. One should ask how far even the well-intentioned recognition of local knowledge might represent a successful imposition, however strongly resisted from within, of an interpretative framing that reproduces the hierarchical colonization of knowledge that has been analyzed in many colonial and postcolonial settings (e.g., Gupta 1998; Raheja 1996).



Figure 5. The Pavilion of the Community’s Local Knowledge (photo: the author)

Like the idea of “community” (which is not without its local critics), the contested nature of “Thainess” also feeds off an internal paradox: in its very nativism, it exemplifies a conceptual framework of largely foreign origin. The difficulty any critical analysis must face is indeed the fact that much of the vocabulary of resistance to official forms is similarly derived from external sources; it, too, in this sense risks being crypto-colonial.² Yet with that proviso in mind, we can still attempt the analysis on the grounds that such devices are arguably the only viable responses to the overweening power of state and municipal authorities. Those authorities, moreover, are openly claimed (in the persons of the modernizing monarchs Rama IV and Rama V) as having directed the process whereby Western civilizational models became the norm.

Such efforts were spectacularly successful. While – in both ideology and architecture, which reinforce each other’s messages – national rhetoric does sport elements that local and foreign people can easily recognize as stereotypically Thai (such as the gable finials on the community museum), that very conceit of

² “Crypto-colonial” countries claim to have avoided colonial domination but in reality are heavily dependent on, and indirectly but materially subject to, intrusive control by Western colonial powers. The term signals “the curious alchemy whereby certain countries, buffer zones between the colonized lands and those as yet untamed, were compelled to acquire their political independence at the expense of massive economic dependence, this relationship being articulated in the iconic guise of aggressively national culture fashioned to suit foreign models. Such countries were and are living paradoxes: they are nominally independent, but that independence comes at the price of a sometimes humiliating form of effective dependence” (Herzfeld 2002: 900–1).

homogeneity is an imitation of the European model of “national culture” as a common possession (on which see especially Handler 1985; Macdonald 2013). This imitative capacity – an affectation of Occidentalism that in any postcolonial society would easily be recognized as a remnant of “colonial mimicry” (Bhabha 1994: 85–92) – is a clear sign that Thailand, for all its vaunted independence from the might of the colonial powers, has actually, for most of its modern history, accepted as a condition of national survival a thoroughly Western-derived concept of the nation-state as bounded by clear frontiers (Thongchai 1994) that contain within themselves a single national culture led by a self-appointed but foreign-supported elite.

The physical manifestations of that dependent condition are everywhere to be seen in the area of the Rattanakosin Island project. Just as Greece, that other paradigmatic case of “crypto-colonialism” according to my original formulation of the concept (Herzfeld 2002), used neo-Classical architecture to create the illusion that the people’s hearts and minds were already wedded to a national image closer to Bavarian fantasies of high antiquity than to their own everyday experiences in the present, so also in Thailand the relentless pursuit of the “typical” Thai architecture was a way of clothing, perhaps even of straitjacketing, the body politic by wrapping it tightly in a uniform representation of temple architecture. But such strategies have a way of backfiring simply because they provide effective cover for all sorts of reassessment. In Greece today the ancient past is invoked *against* the dominant, Eurocentric rhetoric of power by increasingly vocal critics of the country’s current, humiliating status (see Plantzos 2012). Invocations of Thainess by the marginalized residents of Rattanakosin Island may similarly suggest a concealed capacity for inverting long-established meanings from behind the cover of apparent conformity with official cultural norms.

The implications of crypto-colonialism as a concept deserve a brief parenthetical word of explanation. When I originally coined the term, I knew far more about the Greek case than the Thai, and so I was fascinated by the speed with which Thai scholars and journalists adopted it. When a journalist became aware of my interest in the Rattanakosin Island project, he titled the entire article, complete with a rather menacing photograph of this author with videocamera in hand superimposed on a shadow drawing of the Temple of the Golden Mount, with the banner headline “Crypto-Colonialism: ‘Western Perspective’” (Pornchai 2003).

The Greeks were far slower to adopt either the terminology or the model, reluctant as they perhaps were to admit either to sharing common ground with an Asian country or indeed to having submitted at all to the pressures of the Western Powers’ colonial schemes. Even in Greece, however, perhaps in part because of the naked use of economic force against that country by the so-called troika of European institutions, there has lately been a noticeable shift toward considering the concept’s relevance to the Greek case (e.g., Plantzos 2011). In Thailand, Thongchai Winichakul’s lectures on the topic and his early use of the term (which in

publication date precedes my own [Thongchai 2001]) in its Thai form (*aanaanikhom amphraang*) evidently exercised a strong influence on the architectural historian Woranuch Charungratanapong, whose application of the term to the architecture of Rattanakosin Island deserves more consideration because she explicitly links stylistic features to the demands of the tourist industry and thus to the economic realities undergirding the cultural rhetoric.

The model of crypto-colonialism is not simply a re-hash of older ideas about indirect rule, although it more closely approaches recent analyses of the Thai case in particular. It is specifically a model of *cultural* imperialism, and that is why it is especially germane to the politics of representation involved in historic conservation efforts. It does not require its subjects to obliterate all traces of an independent identity. On the contrary, what makes it so insidious is that it insists on the glorification of a specifically national culture. Here, the rhetoric of “heritage” is especially relevant; the term *moradok haeng chaat* stands precisely for this unifying concept. But it is a concept that signals its own Western derivation more clearly than it does any strong local interest on the part of the citizenry.

Rattanakosin Island – whether in its original form as a national capital calqued on the formal Buddhist polity and *mandala* format of its predecessors in Sukhothai and Ayutthaya (see Tambiah 1976: 102–131) or in the Disneyfied version envisaged in successive Masterplans promulgated by the BMA in association with various other bodies – was clearly the emblematic model for a process intended to ramify throughout the nation as a whole. Although on the surface the present-day authorities’ “high-modernist” (Scott 1998) attempt to reproduce an idealized simulacrum may strike purists as a betrayal of the original form of the settlement, it does at least share one – albeit ironic – feature with that model: both are devices for securing power, whether in the cosmological terms of the old Buddhist polity or in response to Western pressure. The difference between the two phases, however, is important. First of all, the latter phase is, in Baudrillard’s (1994) terms, deliberately intended as a simulacrum of the earlier, but with none of its implications of fluctuating authority (although these may persist among ordinary people). And second, the very idea of historic conservation as presently conceived, with its origins in debates that were dominated by European thinkers and planners (see, e.g., Macdonald 2013), runs counter to Theravada Buddhist understandings of materiality – not so much because the material is irrelevant, as because material *additions* to the fabric may elaborate the original design and absorb its sanctity without necessarily allowing the original material to be visible at all (Byrne 2007: 153–154).³

³ There is a direct parallel here with Eastern Orthodox Christian practices of encrusting icons with gold and silver and repainting them in ever more garish colors and stereotyped outlines. Given the parallels between Greece and Thailand noted in this brief essay, further investigation of the implications of the parallel might be suggestive in regard to the fate of commemoration and conservation under crypto-colonial systems of culture.

Existing habits did not entirely reject the re-use of older materials, but principles of respect for religious buildings demanded ever more elaborate encrustations on original structures (or their wholesale replacement), while the preservation of old materials for domestic architecture, as in some community projects, owed less to archaeological considerations than to the fact that re-use is generally a cheaper option. Thus, until recently there were few constraints on radical reconstruction and very little painstaking restoration. This tendency was reinforced, in the more recent plans, by a desire to create public spaces that had more to do with European and North American modernist ideals about parks and traffic flow than with the dense social multifunctionality of the older *yaan* (neighborhoods) of Bangkok.

If colonial planners desired to create a clear demarcation between the seemingly aimless “oriental” quarters of local residents and the neatly grid-ordered sections intended for the European colonizers (Rabinow 1989), the Thai planners were instrumentally involved in the project of convincing Western observers that there were, quite simply, no uncivilized “natives” in the new Siam. In this they were following a pattern of cultural politics that centered around the goal of achieving “civilization” in terms acceptable to the West (Thongchai 2002) – the defining condition of crypto-colonialism.

Moreover, the Rattanakosin Island project was clearly intended as a model for emulation throughout the land, the underlying intention being the homogenization of the imagined past of Thailand. The recognition of local peculiarities of architectural design did not disguise this overarching translation of a “unity in diversity” model of national identity into architectural terms.⁴ Indeed, the clearest evidence of that intention lies in the progressive transformation of the original Rattanakosin Island Committee, which was initially charged solely, if exclusively, with the restoration of the old dynastic capital to its former glory, into a committee responsible for all the historic cities (“old cities,” *moeang kao*) of the Kingdom.

The cultural attitudes thus evidenced have not changed very much in the past century or more. Stylized Thai motifs and haughty bureaucrats remain the expected norm; people and objects conform to established expectations, or are at least perceived to do so. Occasionally the authorities overstep the limits of credibility, as when the Thaksin administration tried to enforce the use of itinerant food vendors’ handcarts with stylized Thai ornamentation (especially that of self-exoticizing “spirit hooks”); these were hardly practical, and the vendors basically voted with their feet and the project was quickly allowed to wither away. But by and large the cultural models

⁴ It is worth noting that the construction of highly material images of Thai culture were given strong impetus by Luang Wichit Wathakan (Byrne 2009: 84; Wong 2006: 60), who was also strongly influenced by Italian fascism – a doctrine that countenanced enormous regional variation by treating this aspect of Italian culture as expressive of a transcendent unity and genius (see also, variously, Barmé 1993; Herzfeld 2005: 107–108).

still remain those of a crypto-colonial system, with European classicism defining “structure” and stereotypically Thai ornament the “surface.”

The Corinthian capitals that grace the interior of the Rattanakosin Hotel in combination with murals depicting temples and palaces of clearly and aggressively Siamese design (Figure 6) offer a striking illustration of this mixture, in close association with the royal name (the hotel is called “Royal Hotel” in English) and a location in the heart of Rattanakosin Island, just where Ratchadamnoen Avenue



Figure 6. A meeting of two crypto-colonies: “Greek columns” and the Siamese city (photo: the author)

ends at the holy royal ground of Sanam Luang. There is a nice irony in the use of a Greek architectural feature in a Thai hotel, especially in such a symbolically dense location; it is a feature that the colonial esthetic had already transformed considerably from the original Greek model, but its presence is an unmistakable sign of that same esthetic’s penetration of Thai taste (much as similar devices appear around the globe in colonial and post-colonial architecture).

Architecture gives an impression of permanence, but that rhetorical claim must be re-cast in each religious, ideological, and cultural context according to local concepts of time. What is projected here is supposedly an image of the Thai polity and of Thai culture that defies the corrosion of temporality but that also, consistently with Buddhist teachings about the impermanence of the material world, transcends the mere physicality of its realization as a built environment. One supposes that the anticipated destruction of trees and shrines (e.g., Figure 7) deemed sacred by Pom Mahakan residents slated for eviction would also not be justified in terms of

the irrelevance of the material, but on the grounds of the presumed incapacity of such humble objects to contribute to the highly material streamlining of the image of Thai culture (see Byrne 2009: 84). To the residents, by contrast, such moves are simply sacrilegious, and an attack on their standing as a representative fraction of the Thai nation. In the same way, the *rabop* of municipal administration transcends the alleged iniquities of those who staff the institutional framework, permitting popular judgment on their performance even though such judgments rarely translate into



Figure 7. Ancestral presence, threatened future (photo: the author)

popularly generated reform. They do, however, frequently translate into resistance.

That resistance is perhaps the most forceful of numerous and increasingly insistent signs that the “feudal” image of municipal management in Bangkok has slowly begun to change, as local communities challenge the authority of the municipal leadership and as much clearer patterns of class conflict have emerged from 2009 on. Moreover, with regard to historic conservation, several academic planners and architects have expressed strong views in favor of a more inclusive conservation policy, recognizing the significance of vernacular architecture and of minority styles. Yet the subservience of the Siamese state to “Western” interests in the nineteenth century lives on for the moment in a pattern of emulation that typifies the crypto-colonial cultural regime; even when they argue for the preservation of old houses – a difficult task in a city where even the powerful have found this to be an uphill battle and where the majority of residents simply have no desire to inhabit elderly dwellings – they must do so in terms of a chronology that is set by the

sequence of “reigns” (*rachakaan*) rather than of artistic styles or popular events.⁵ At the same time, when they turn to plans for renovating or replacing those dwellings that are beyond repair, they tend to invoke “tradition” at the same time as they show a deeply rooted desire for “Western” domestic arrangements and their attendant comforts (Figure 8).

In Pom Mahakan, for example, there has been a great deal of discussion (from 2004 on) about what kinds of house would replace the slum dwellings if and when the residents dared to attempt that transformation. While there was some sentiment in favor of row houses, a design familiar from the Chinese-inspired shophouses of other parts of Rattanakosin Island, the interiors were to be furnished in largely



Figure 8. Modernist dreams of the future: a model house at Pom Mahakan (photo: the author)

Western style. In this way, just as in the BMA’s own official plans royal models of temples and palaces were to be combined with a Haussmanesque understanding of the military advantages of clearing away narrow, winding streets and focusing the whole area toward a broad central avenue (the “Champs-Élysées of Asia”), so the residents of Pom Mahakan sought salvation in calibrating a few spectacularly beautiful or well-preserved houses to the royal chronology – and to a broader sense of world history by means of their formal designation as “ancient houses” (*baan*

⁵ This is the way in which the history of architecture is taught, implying, not inaccurately, that the monarchy provided the lead in determining esthetic principles and changes; although some vernacular architecture appears in the standard works, it is clearly dependent on more aristocratic models. See characteristically Phusadee 2002a, 2002b, 2003a, 2003b.

boraan) – while bringing to their own dwellings the accoutrements of a materially comfortable “civilization.”

What is the solution? In a very real sense, the authorities have now been hoist by their own petard, at least in the case of Pom Mahakan. In a country where earlier ages saw no great interest in what is today called heritage, the desire to emulate an imagined West – but on Thai terms – has created a hybrid cultural and conservationist ideology. Because the driving desire is to create monuments to a unified national culture, this is the rhetoric – as well as the practice – that infuses resistance to authority and critiques of its legitimacy. Just as Greek owners of old houses learn to play on the authorities’ sensibilities about “Turkish” versus “European” elements in their culture in order to achieve either demolition (in the first case) or refurbishment (in the second) (Herzfeld 1991), so the people of Rattanakosin Island, led by what was originally the poorest and weakest of communities, have learned under pressure how to play the game of nationalist emulation – an emulation that, in a crypto-colonial situation, itself emulates external models and so compromises the very goal of cultural independence.

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