

who have together produced a model for future work transcending the divisions traditionally separating Islamic from Southeast Asian Area Studies.

R. Michael Feener

Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies, Marston Road, Oxford OX3 0EE, United Kingdom;
email: michael.feener@oxcis.ac.uk.

DOI: 10.1355/sj34-3g

Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778. By Nhung Tuyet Tran. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2018. xii+257 pp.

Even though women’s history has been an important component and a defining marker of Vietnamese history, a monograph dedicated to studying early modern Vietnamese women in depth has been missing. For this reason, Tran’s *Familial Properties* is long overdue. It fills a huge gap in the historiography of Vietnamese and Southeast Asian women, and hence is especially welcome.

Employing her hard-gleaned sources in multiple languages (classical Chinese, Vietnamese demotic script or chữ Nôm, French, etc.), Tran has painted a detailed picture of Vietnamese women’s lives during the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries. Setting her research against the war-torn period between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries in Vietnamese history, one can discern two main threads in Tran’s book. One is that the Vietnamese states (the Lê, Mạc, Trịnh and Nguyễn regimes), in varying degrees, regulated the gender regime by employing neo-Confucian ideology imported from China. Female behaviour from birth to death became a paramount concern of these states, which employed their apparatus (mainly law codes) to implement externally derived ideals from the top down, to the village level. Women’s bodies and their sexuality were the primary concerns of the states. The second thread demonstrates how the implementation of state ideals of women fell short of

their objective, as women employed various means granted by military-cum-socioeconomic circumstances to negate the impact of neo-Confucian regulation.

In the “Introduction: Vietnamese Women at the Crossroads of Southeast Asia” and chapter 6 “Visions of the Future, Constructions of the Past: Paradigms of Vietnamese Womanhood” (these two parts should have been combined into one), Tran traces the development of the various paradigms in the historiography of Vietnamese women, from the different French colonial schools to modern nationalist interpretations, and to post-war academic views which stress gender equality and the pan-Southeast Asian pattern, especially bilateralism (both sexes could succeed and inherit). Tran’s stated goal is to challenge three reified forms in the study of Vietnamese women and in the popular imaginary: Vietnamese women as a symbol of (1) Confucian oppression; (2) Vietnamese uniqueness (with comparisons to China); (3) Southeast Asian cohesiveness or cultural commonalities.

Chapter 1 “Articulating the Gender System: Economy, Society, and the State” provides the setting for women’s lives in both the Northern Realm under the Lê-Trịnh families and the Southern Realm under the Nguyễn family. At the state, village and family levels, especially in the North, self-Confucianization led the governments to delineate the role of women in society, to tighten control over women’s conduct through laws and to promote teaching materials that regulated women’s behaviour. Chapter 2 “Dutiful Wives, Nurturing Mothers, and Filial Children: Marriages as an Affair of State, Village, and Family” discusses married life and the lack of it for a very special group, a Catholic sisterhood. Utilizing all possible sources, Tran painstakingly reconstructs the marriage process for both the elite and the non-elite. Tran’s major point in this chapter is to demonstrate that despite the ideal characterization of a woman by neo-Confucianism as a diligent daughter, faithful wife and nurturing mother, Vietnamese women did not simply embrace these ideals. This was particularly so for the lower classes who had to work in the fields, on the roads and at the markets because of the departure of

male labour for war. Tran shows that there was a big gap between the state's gender ideal and reality in early modern Vietnam.

The main goal of chapter 3 "Female Bodies, Sexual Activities, and the Sociopolitical Order" is to demonstrate that due to the dislocations of the civil wars, women filled the labour gaps left by men and thus gained more economic capital and social prominence. This, in turn, alerted the state elites to tighten regulation to control women's place and bodies in society because "the regulation of sexuality is thus a central feature of the relationship between state and local communities" (p. 88). As a result, "[w]omen's bodies and what they did with those bodies stood at the apex of the relationship between family, local politics, and state order" (p. 89).

Chapter 4 "Inheritance, Succession, and Autonomy in the Property Regime" is a keystone of the book and, hence, is crucial to Tran's central argument. Tran stresses that the economic transformation from agricultural production to large-scale commercialization in silk and ceramic production was the backdrop for the state's greater assertiveness in curbing female power in the property regime. As women gained more monetary capital and economic power through commerce and trade, the Vietnamese states promulgated laws and regulations to restrict their claims to property. Through a study of Vietnamese prescriptive legal codes and descriptive testaments, Tran shows that the fundamental rule in Vietnamese law was to promote and protect patriarchy and patrilineal succession, and daughters never received equal shares in family inheritance, thus challenging the prevailing view that Vietnamese society was bilateral or cognatic in terms of family succession and inheritance, and that Vietnamese law guaranteed equal property rights for daughters and women/wives.

Chapter 5 "Buying an Election: Preparing for the Afterlife" focuses on how women without sons donated money and land to the local or village community (normally the communal houses but mostly the pagodas) in the northern Lê-Trịnh realm so that they would be elected as an "after-spirit" or an "after-buddha" (p. 166). The community would promise to maintain ceremonial sacrifice to their spirits after their death (after services to the tutelary spirits and

buddhas). The community's male elites (headmen, village council members, and officials) would erect stele to testify to these events, serving as contracts between the donors and the communities. Tran shows that even though living under a restrictive neo-Confucian social structure, women could still strategize to play "much more prominent roles ... in village economic and religious life" (p. 177; cf. pp. 173, 178–79).

In the conclusion, Tran summarizes the book and sets out the limitations of her work, such as the uneven treatment of north and south Vietnam because of the imbalance of sources, and the possibility that she had misinterpreted some of her sources.

The strength of Tran's book is that she admirably weaves a great variety of sources together to present the first full-length monograph on early modern Vietnamese women. In the existing historiography on pre-modern Vietnamese women, only a small number of notable women have received attention, while the vast majority, particularly ordinary women, have been ignored. Although there is still a lacuna, Tran has successfully painted a much fuller picture of early modern Vietnamese women, be they queens, princesses, peasants, prostitutes, Buddhists or Catholics. Thus, for the first time, one moves beyond the conventional portrayal of Vietnamese women either as heroines fighting foreign aggressors or as power-wielders involved in state politics to obtain a much better understanding of the life of early modern women. Tran's efforts are extremely praiseworthy.

Nonetheless, Tran's book is not without problems. The biggest one is that Tran has completely ignored several important articles published between 1996 and 2017 by Japanese anthropologist Miyazawa Chihiro, especially "Re-Thinking Vietnamese Women's Property Rights and the Role of Ancestor Worship in Pre-Modern Society: Beyond the Dichotomies of Equality versus Non-Equality and Bilateral and Non-Bilateral". Miyazawa shares very similar interests with Tran and has focused on female inheritance and bilateralism in Vietnamese history. He has collected some very important and interesting testaments of the late eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries, clearly pointing to the existence of equal and nearly equal

distribution of family properties among children, including daughters, and a ‘bilateral-like’ system in pre-modern Vietnam. Tran also fails to cite Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh’s work, *Văn bia thời Lê xứ Kinh Bắc và sự phản ánh sinh hoạt làng xã* [Stelae of the Kinh Bắc Region during the Lê Period: Reflections of village life] (2003), which is a “particularly significant” (Dutton 2013, p. 25) work for Tran’s research as it covers exactly the same topic as chapter 5.

Vietnamese and Chinese accounts lend credence to Miyazawa’s argument. Miyazawa (2016, p. 60n8) cites an eighteenth-century genealogy saying, that “in our southern kingdom, land and other properties are inherited equally by men and women” (如我南国, 係男女其田產等物均分相齊) (I have modified Miyazawa’s English translation). An early nineteenth-century Chinese eyewitness account by Cai Tinglan 蔡廷蘭, *Hainan zazhu* (海南雜著) (A miscellaneous account of the country south of the sea) (year unknown), also records that “women equally divide family property; when making sacrifice to ancestors, parents-in-law must be also included” (女子均分家產。祀祖先, 必兼祀岳父母). All these demonstrate that daughters and women were probably not given equal property rights *in law* (as shown in detail and convincingly by Tran), but *in practice*, at least by some families. Thus, Tran’s denial of equal property rights and bilateralism in Vietnam and Southeast Asia is debatable. Accordingly, that early modern Vietnamese and Southeast Asian women enjoyed unique or higher status than their counterparts in China and India cannot be ruled out completely, and more investigation is needed.

To conclude, Tran’s book is an important contribution to the historiography of women’s history and the gender system in pre-modern Vietnam as it increases our understanding of the topic enormously and can serve as a valuable comparative study on gender systems in regions beyond Southeast Asia. I strongly recommend that it be used in classrooms for both undergraduates and graduates, especially in courses on women’s history in Vietnam, Southeast Asia and beyond. Although one might not agree with all of her conclusions, Tran’s pioneering monograph provides us with a stepping stone for further research.

REFERENCES

- Cai Tinglan. n.d. “*Hainan zazhu* 海南雜著” [A miscellaneous account of the country south of the sea]. *Guo xue da shi*. <http://www.guoxuedashi.com/a/2386ezof/110703d.html> (accessed 17 August 2019).
- Dutton, George. 2013. “Beyond Myth and Caricature: Situating Women in the History of Early Modern Vietnam”. *Journal of Vietnamese Studies* 8, no. 2: 1–36.
- Miyazawa Chihiro. 2016. “Re-Thinking Vietnamese Women’s Property Rights and the Role of Ancestor Worship in Pre-Modern Society: Beyond the Dichotomies of Equality versus Non-Equality and Bilateral and Non-Bilateral”. In *Weaving Women’s Spheres in Vietnam: The Agency of Women in Family, Religion and Community*, edited by Atsufumi Kato and Kirsten W. Endres, pp. 57–80. Leiden: Brill.
- Phạm Thị Thùy Vinh. 2003. *Văn bia thời Lê xứ Kinh Bắc và sự phản ánh sinh hoạt làng xã* [Stelae of the Kinh Bắc Region during the Lê Period: Reflections of village life]. Hanoi: Văn Hóa - Thông Tin.

Sun Laichen

Department of History, California State University at Fullerton, 800 N. State College Blvd., Fullerton, CA 92834-6846, USA; email: lsun@fullerton.edu.

DOI: 10.1355/sj34-3h

Mythbusting Vietnam: Facts, Fictions, Fantasies. Edited by Catherine Earl. Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2018. xi+234 pp.

On the front cover of this attractive and reasonably priced paperback is an image familiar to anyone who has visited Vietnam: a propaganda billboard showing a man in construction gear and a woman, textbook and blueprints in hand, standing confidently against a backdrop of factories and power plants. These people, of course, do not exist. They are idealized representations of one of Vietnam’s defining national myths: the narrative of unceasing progress, development and modernization.

This book, and particularly the introductory and concluding chapters by Catherine Earl, convincingly argues that understandings of Vietnam have been shaped by such pervasive myths, not just