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Marie-Paule Ha, *French Women and the Empire: The Case of Indochina*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. 304 pp. \$72.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN-10: 019964036X.

Review by Jayne Werner, Long Island University.

After the first wave of colonization in Indochina, from 1885 to the 1900s, French officials and colonial societies started to actively encourage women to emigrate to the colony, for several reasons. They wanted to reduce the “excess” unmarried female population in France and to curb concubinage between French military and civilian men and Vietnamese women. By facilitating “purely” French marriages in the colony, they tried to keep the races separate and stabilize and assure the future of colonization, sustaining a French life for French citizens away from home.

This is the first book to examine the colonial gender politics of the Third Republic in Indochina and sort through the assumptions, myths and misconceptions surrounding this topic. In so doing, the author aims to move beyond “the narrow confines of the imperial family romance to the wider arena of the colonial public sphere” (pp.18-19).

The book succeeds admirably on many counts. The archival record is detailed and surprisingly has information on the lives of women who lived in the colonies because many of them worked for the colonial administration and their dossiers contain employment and other information. Period newspapers reveal women’s entrepreneurial activities. In addition, the author found numerous diaries, memoirs, and letters of women who were married to military and civilian officials. She located and interviewed at length expatriate women in France, many of whom believe that the film “Indochine” misrepresents the “real” Indochina and wanted to set the record straight. There are important narrative literary works, most notably by Marguerite Duras. The author also makes good use of the abundant historical secondary literature on French Indochina, as well as statistical bulletins, vital records and ship passenger lists.

In uncovering this source material, the author finds a number of conundrums. While women had become part of a “colonial feminine mystique,” as the author puts it, and were meant to bear a “white woman’s burden” by bringing civilization to the natives, in fact reality on the ground proved to be a lot more complicated (p. 48). Indeed colonial officials often contradicted themselves and worked at cross-purposes. According to the prevailing discourse of the colonial feminine mystique, as the author terms it, women were meant to exemplify the bourgeois housewife—good wives, exemplary mothers, keepers of the French table, guardians of French dress and manners, supervisors of the French home with a well-disciplined native staff. The *coloniale* was to live “la vie large coloniale,” while serving as a role model for those under her charge. How well did this ideal play out in practice?

First, the assumption that women were reluctant to emigrate, as colonial officials argued, is not borne out by the facts: the author discovered that many more applicants for passage to Indochina submitted applications than were accepted. Those turned down were done so because they didn’t have a job upon arrival or due to insufficient funds, or similar reasons. It seems that local officials were paralyzed by the thought that they would have too many metropolitan women on their hands, while they already had a

contingent of widows, divorcees, orphans, and unmarried daughters on hand who needed work. Most local French women were not the bourgeois archetypes of *la colonial*. Without a source of income, they were one step away from destitution. This class of women staffed the colonial service as postal clerks, customs agents, and teachers.

How to support these women was not just a financial problem as far as the colonial administration was concerned. The administration was obsessed with losing prestige in the eyes of the local native population if indigent whites, especially women, were seen at loose ends, not to mention the fact that the administration felt a moral obligation to provide for the families of employees who had lost their lives in service to the Empire.

Second, by analyzing marriage records, the author discovered that, contrary to the belief that interracial unions would decline with French female emigration, this did not happen. Although the French gender ratio improved, French men continued to cohabit with and marry Vietnamese women; the European marriage rate remained low and the number of single French women in the colony high, some of whom were widows, divorcees and orphans. Indeed, the author discovered that they were single because the terms of their employment required celibacy. Widows, for instance, were given certain jobs and benefits that ended if they remarried. Daughters could inherit some civil service jobs with generous benefits from their deceased fathers if they remained celibate.

Third, contrary to the myth of *la coloniale*, many, if not most of the French women in Indochina worked as employees of the colonial administration, in private businesses, or as entrepreneurs. There was a great deal of diversity in their occupational profiles. In addition to working for colonial agencies as typists, bookkeepers and clerks, they were employed as seamstresses, laundry workers, domestics, shopkeepers, teachers, nurses and other health care workers. Some women were in the religious orders. Others worked for the railroads, hotels, banks, for lawyers, commercial or transport companies. Census records show that up to half of colonial women officially worked, but that is probably an incomplete picture. Teachers were the largest group of employed women in French Indochina and many enjoyed long careers due to favorable terms of service. Marguerite Duras's mother, Marie Donnadieu, was a widow who worked as a well-paid *institutrice* and had reached the top of her profession. In addition to a good salary, she received a widow's pension. Thus, Mme Donnadieu was by no means indigent, contrary to Duras's claim of childhood poverty, which was fabricated for purposes of poetic license.

Female medical personnel consisted of a dozen doctors (the profession was very male-centric). Auxiliary health care workers favored local hires and the religious orders to control costs. Some French women achieved distinction such as the scientist, Madeline Colani, who was an expert on Hoabinhian archeology and Madame de la Souchere, who owned a rubber plantation in Cochinchina (among others). It is doubtful that many of these women were spending much time living "la vie large coloniale."

Fourth was the question of who qualifies as being "French" and what it meant to be "French." Many women had grown up in Indochina and lived their entire lives in the colony; they had no conception of what it was like to live a bourgeois lifestyle or maintain a "French" home. Others were Eurasian and their domestic spaces were culturally hybridized; in fact even the women who fit the *coloniale* model often decorated their houses in an Eurasian style, although the Japanese occupation during World War II forced them to abandon the last of their French ways and dress and even cook *à la vietnamienne* (squatting in front of a makeshift barbecue outside on the patio floor). Children under the care of Vietnamese nannies became extremely attached to their caregivers and often learned the Vietnamese language, with no objections of "cultural contagion" raised by the adults.

The contact zone between colonizer and colonized in fact comprised a hybridized domestic space, not a purely French space as envisioned by colonial promoters. It was both an intimate and a public space. By promoting women's emigration, imperial racial politics sought to end interracial coupling and segregate

the races, but it did neither. The domestic sphere, supposedly a private sphere, was a public space where the cultural politics of imperialism became a stage where master and subaltern interacted. Sustaining colonization by creating a hermetically sealed French domestic zone was not only an impossibility and a contradiction, it was a complete fantasy.

Did French women contribute to the polarization between the colonizer and the colonized, thereby hastening the downfall of the colony? It seems clear from this book that the twin discourses of the colonial feminine mystique and the white women's burden didn't gain much traction among many of the French women in French Indochina. The minority of women who fit the model of *la coloniale* was also half-heartedly engaged. The obsession with maintaining white prestige was primarily a military and male civilian preoccupation. In any event, if women had fulfilled the task of uplifting and educating the local population, it is highly unlikely this would have saved the Empire. At any rate, by undertaking a methodical, systematic, and fine-grained investigation of the myths, obfuscations, and prescriptive discourses surrounding colonial gender politics, this book sheds light on a new topic, women's colonial history, that deserves wider scrutiny, giving us a fuller understanding of the history of French Indochina, the Third Republic, and colonialism at large.

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