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*French Women and the Empire* is the first book-length study on the topic of French women in French Indochina, based on published material, archival material in Les Archives Nationales d’Outre Mer (CAOM) in Aix-en-Provence, interviews, and private memoirs. In an introductory chapter Ha points out that the male-centered orientation of the French colonial archival system resulted in the scattering of files on women, producing certain challenges for research. Chapters two through four focus on the place of women in French imperial ideology, the promotion of emigration, and women’s emigration to Indochina. Chapters five through eight treat aspects of French women’s lives in Indochina, including matrimonial patterns, familial and cultural practices such as trends in home decoration, cuisine, and childrearing, as well as women’s professions.

The book’s main argument is that French women in Indochina constituted a strikingly diverse group with respect to “class, ethnic, cultural, and educational backgrounds.” This is in contrast to the image widespread in “promotional and advice literature,” of the *coloniale* as a bourgeois homemaker hailing from the metropole (18). The reality of women’s existence, Ha argues convincingly, was much more complicated and variegated than such representations would have it. In this regard, Ha provides much fascinating information. Many French women in Indochina were from other colonies, or were born in Indochina; many were *métisses*, and a significant portion worked. Large numbers, particularly in Tonkin, were unmarried.

Chapter two, one of the strongest chapters, examines how and why French official conception of colonies changed from “no woman’s land” to “women’s haven” (21). Ha demonstrates that as the economic potential of colonies was increasingly felt abroad, more immigrants were drawn to Indochina. This demographic shift can be explained by the end of concubinage and the promotion of French racial purity in the colonies. The chapter then analyzes the activities of institutions promoting emigration from the metropole, one of which functioned as a “de facto matrimonial agency” (39).

Chapter three treats the gradual *embourgeoisement* of French women in promotional and advice literature through the interwar years, and also explores fiction. In the early period of colonization, Ha shows, French physicians recommended that French women in Indochina adopt indigenous clothing and cuisine. This finding is consistent with trends in other facets of the early colonial period such as architecture. Chapter four shows that the government was in a double bind, encouraging female emigration to Indochina in the hope of ending interracial concubinage, yet rejecting many applications due to the fear of white indigency in the colony, the “maintenance of white prestige” (113) being of primordial importance.

Although some of the arguments in the second half of the book tend to be less cogent than those of the first half, chapters five and six provide much valuable and new information. An analysis of marriage patterns in chapter five shows that about a third of French men in Indochina married women who were ten to twenty years younger, and that many of the brides were very young, on average younger than in the metropole. Ha points out that the government “sabotaged” marriages between white brides and Vietnamese men (139–40). Many of the French women who worked for the government, especially the large Douanes et régies, were widows and daughters of deceased French citizens from modest backgrounds who petitioned the government, as shown in chapter six. The last two chapters concern professionals and homemaking, respectively.

*French Women and the Empire* would have benefited from consultation of material in the national archives of Vietnam or Cambodia, which might have supplemented or nuanced the book’s arguments. Considering that the French left behind in Hanoi about half of the colonial-era documents from Tonkin, and, in the case of Cochinchina, left behind the entire archives, much of which can be accessed in Ho Chi Minh City, Ha has started a critical debate to which others may contribute. In this regard, Ha provides an incorrect piece of information (6n17): the Boudet system is not used for most documents from the colonial era in the national archives of Ho Chi Minh City.

*French Women and the Empire* makes a substantial and stimulating contribution to the study of the French empire. Asking very good questions such as whether there were poor white women in colonies and how metropolitan governments’ changing views of Indochina affected women’s emigration, the book provides in many cases well thought-out and sustained analyses regarding the diversity of French women in Indochina and the institutional and ideological context of women’s emigration.

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Page 1 of 2
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