

Citation:

Claire H. Griffiths (2016) French women and the empire:  
The case of Indochina, *Modern & Contemporary France*, 24:2, 224-226,

Over the past 40 years the combined forces of gender and subaltern studies have successfully challenged many of the discursive narratives underpinning Europe's colonial archive. While India, South Africa, and indeed the global Anglophone academy as a whole, have witnessed the rapid rise in colonial historiography that seeks to reposition the history of empire in relation to the erstwhile silenced populations in the shadows of the archive, rarer have been studies of French colonial rule that have served a similar agenda. The historiographical ambition of integrating 'women' into the colonial archive remains very much work in progress. As such, *French Women & the Empire: The Case of Indochina* is a timely and welcome addition to the field of colonial gender studies.

As it transpires, Marie-Paule Ha locates the original inspiration for this very readable study of women in the empire less in the historiographical debate alluded to above than in a fascination with accounts of hardship among French colonials related in the literary oeuvre of French author Marguerite Duras, whose Indochinese childhood and adolescence were spent, it would appear, in penury. Given her own experience of life in Vietnam, Ha's scepticism led her to seek corroboration for these claims: 'I started looking up writings on French women in Indochina,' she confides on page 2. 'But to my surprise my search yielded no results.' While there have been works that shed some light on family life in the Indochinese colony, some engaging directly with Duras, Ha's endeavours at identifying research projects dedicated to the key themes of her enquiry proved fruitless. To underscore the point, she notes the relative abundance of historiographical material from the British and Dutch Indies.

Given the transnational context of this enquiry, an opportunity to frame the discussion within the wider ideological and philosophical debate thus presented itself at the outset. That this opportunity is not entirely embraced in the book does not negate the immense value of the abundant historiographical material assembled between its covers. Rather the ensuing chapters, presenting the result of Ha's meticulous archival work, provide rich opportunities for further research into gender ideologies, their impact on, to date, undocumented lives and crucially on current historiography. The particular research journey recounted in this volume is conveyed in a somewhat conversational style, peppered with anecdotes, some of which have significance well beyond the confines of this project and raise salient issues for historians of empire generally. At the Archives d'Outre-mer at Aix-en-Provence, Ha worked from an Indochina catalogue organised and accessed according to the racial politics and administrative priorities of the era in which the original documents were produced. The holdings 'hardly [bore] any relation to the colonial world in Duras' writings. [...] Where I asked myself among this profusion of series and sub-series of documents on the construction of roads, railways and bridges [...] could I find signposts that would lead me to the Durassian gynaecium [...] where Mme Donnadieu [Duras' mother] supposedly dwelt?' (6). The labour required to extract relevant material from these dossiers turned a short research trip into a project of several years. The results are incorporated in detail into Ha's discussion of how the Third Republic integrated French women into or sought to exclude them from the colonial project, and serve, she claims, to overturn entrenched misapprehensions. The image of a bourgeois world recreated in the tropics is demolished through her evidence of the personal and working lives of French women from all classes and backgrounds.

While this recreation of past lives provides a new vista on how women lived in French society at home and abroad, little is glimpsed of these women from beyond the French

archive. Drawing as she does on official correspondence between women and the colonial authorities, the published letters and diaries of three notable French women, nine memoirs written by ex-colonials and interviews with 12 women returners from Indochina, Ha's account of what French women were doing while men fought wars, served in governments and generally 'made history'; is provided wholly from French sources. Notwithstanding the meticulous research that lies behind this well-presented publication, the job of uncovering the realities of life as it was lived beyond the official and unofficial colonial archive is, as Ha herself concludes, still in progress.

*French Women & the Empire* is the fruit of an enormous research undertaking and it goes far in filling lacunae in our knowledge of how French women lived and worked in Indochina. The myriad lives documented so vividly in this book engage the reader in new encounters and make a substantial contribution to deconstructing the multiple misrepresentations, historical, literary and cinematographic, that still persist in the collective memory of *la Perle d'Asie*.

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**French women and the empire: the case of Indochina**, by Marie-Paule Ha, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2014, 304 pp., £68, hbk, ISBN: 978-0-19-964036-2

DOI:10.1080/09639489.2015.1113942

Submitted October 2015

Published March 2016

To link to this article:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2015.1113942>