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China's political system

Jaroslav Zapletal and Shane J. Barter

For political scientists, China is as important as it is elusive. It has developed into one of the world's leading economies, with officials guiding market forces and state enterprises through long-term planning. Politically, China remains a single-party authoritarian state with few signs of democratization, although it is also relatively decentralized, responsive, and adaptable. Chinese politics are ever-changing, with our understanding limited by opaque party hierarchies. In light of these and other challenges, we applaud Sebastian Heilmann and his colleagues at the Mercator Institute for China Studies in Berlin for their new book, *China's Political System*. The authors provide a comprehensive, authoritative account of the contemporary political landscape of the Middle Kingdom.

An authoritative account

China's Political System is notable for its overall clarity, with clear writing and organization, and key terms provided in both Chinese and English. Given that the book is a product of several authors, its tone is remarkably consistent. The book is organized in terms of different areas of political science: political institutions, political leadership, political economy, state–society relations, policy making, and political development. Each chapter contains several specific subsections, ranging from food safety and disaster management (in terms of policy) to autonomous regions and public finance (in terms of institutions). Each discussion

provides rich details, at many points aided by clear tables. Of course, a few topics are not discussed in detail—for instance, the book opts not to look at international relations or political history. However, given the enormity of the topic, there are remarkably few stones left unturned.

Readers will appreciate how the authors parse the formal and informal worlds of Chinese politics. Here, personal connections and party influence often determine political outcomes. The book also discusses several sensitive topics in a diplomatic manner, including social unrest, environmental degradation, and corruption. Throughout the book, the authors discuss several interesting themes, including relations between the central and subnational governments, regional inequality, and shifts between 'normal' and 'crisis' modes of political leadership. Another key theme is the growing power of President Xi Jinping. Unlike his predecessors, whose leadership involved consultation and delegation, Xi has demonstrated a more centralized, personalist approach. In Chapter Seven, Heilmann and his colleagues present a thought-provoking

discussion of the implications that Xi's consolidation of power may have for the sustainability of China's political system, as it may be less able to adapt to changing circumstances.

Potential critiques

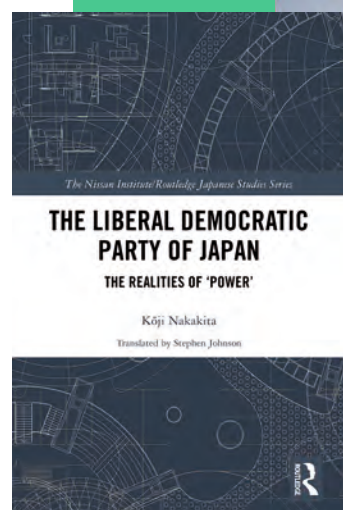
Despite our enthusiasm, we would like to raise some potential critiques. For one, in the book's encyclopedic approach, it sometimes reads like a reference volume. There is limited engagement with major concepts or academic debates surrounding China, as the emphasis is more in painting a thorough, somewhat descriptive portrait. Another potential critique is that, in an effort to provide a neutral, diplomatic account of Chinese politics, the authors may have acquiesced too much. Regarding the pro-democracy movement in Hong Kong, the authors observe 'a lack of journalistic distance' by the West (p. 97), noting that many Hong Kong residents felt the protestors' criticisms of Beijing to be excessive. Regarding Tibet, the authors note that China justifies its claim 'due to the fact that the region has

been an inseparable part of China since ... the thirteenth century' (p. 284). For some, this tone will be refreshing. For others, however, it may be seen as pro-government.

Our major substantive concern relates to how the authors frame the study of China. On several occasions, the authors emphasize China's distinctiveness. The authors suggest that the "rhythm" of Chinese politics is completely different from that of most other political systems' (p. 396). One potential danger here is that an excessive sense of Chinese exceptionalism may be used to sidestep accountability to international norms. Throughout the book, the authors suggest that Western models are unsuitable for understanding China. We are told that policy making procedures in China are 'markedly different from those in democratic constitutional states' (p. 300), and that Eastern European Communist systems 'do not help to understand developments in the PRC' (p. 298). For one, it is unclear if Western experiences are not useful – for any particular case, we can expect varying levels of applicability. It is also unclear which models might work better. Heilmann labels China as a 'learning authoritarian system' (p. 42); if China learns from international experiences, but not from the West, it would be useful to explain from which countries China is learning. Western cases should not represent our only comparative lenses, as we can also approach Chinese politics in regional context. The authors do so to some extent in terms of political economy, framing China as an Asian developmental state. At several points, the authors note that it seems impossible to have a single-party authoritarian state ruling over an educated society and globalized economy. This is only a puzzle if we focus on Western countries, whereas Asia provides several rich examples. Singapore, which is hardly mentioned in this lengthy study, could serve as a useful comparison. In future editions, the book might wrestle less with how China's politics are novel in Western terms, and instead acknowledge its similarities with its Asian peers.

Such quibbles should not detract too much from what is an authoritative overview of politics in China. Due to its thorough account of the many aspects of Chinese politics, Heilmann and his colleagues effectively moderate the discourse on the topic, dismissing many misconceptions. *China's Political System* promises to stand as a key text for various audiences, including advanced undergraduates, graduate students, policymakers, and even professors who hope to refresh or enrich their knowledge of the People's Republic.

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Explaining political dominance in Japan

Shunji Fueki and Shane J. Barter

Reviewed title
The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan: The Realities of 'Power'

Kōji Nakakita, translated
by Stephen Johnson. 2020.

London: Routledge
ISBN 9780429053931

For students of Comparative Politics, Japan stands out as a fascinating case. It is one of Asia's few liberal democracies, although one with little turnover in government. Japanese politics have been known for overlapping business ties, powerful internal party factions, limited women's participation, and recently, a rightward turn. At the core of this distinctive political landscape has been the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP), whose dominance and ability to recapture power have been extraordinary.

Kōji Nakakita's *The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan: The Realities of 'Power'* provides readers with an authoritative guide to the LDP's inner workings and evolution. Nakakita is a renowned expert of Japanese politics, authoring many books and articles. Already a highly popular book in Japan, the English translation was provided by Stephen Johnson, who is to be commended for such a readable translation of a complex book.

The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan features six chapters. Chapter One dives directly into the decline of factional politics in Japan, a product of electoral and finance reforms. Chapter Two looks within the LDP, examining internal party elections and the distribution of offices. In Chapter Three, Nakakita focuses on policymaking, which is increasingly dominated by the executive due

Familial properties

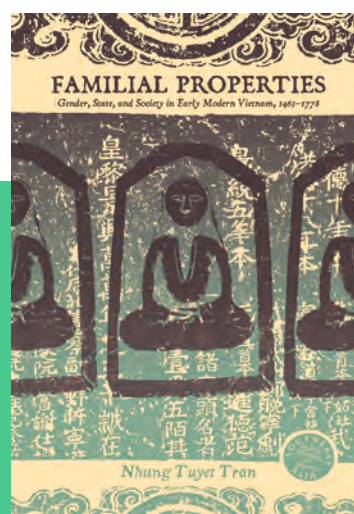
Ha Chau Ngo and Shane J. Barter

Reviewed title

Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463–1778

Nhung Tuyet Tran. 2018.

Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
ISBN 9780824874827



In introductory courses on Southeast Asia, many researchers focus on the relative strength of women as a definitive regional trait compared to neighboring South Asia and East Asia. The focus often lies on Vietnam as a regional crossroads, with a Chinese Confucian order transposed upon a Southeast Asian peasantry. Nhung Tuyet Tran's *Familial Properties: Gender, State, and Society in Early Modern Vietnam, 1463-1778* sheds new light on gender in Southeast Asia. Utilizing a wide range of primary sources, Tran provides an ambitious historical-political anthropological account of gender systems in precolonial Vietnam, citing official laws alongside sites of resistance in a highly readable study.

Vietnam's gender system

Chapter One lays out what Tran refers to as the gender system of historical Vietnam, a state-articulated vision of proper womanhood from childhood through death (and beyond). Subsequent chapters focus on adolescence, marriage, sexual relations, property, death, and the afterlife, charting the life course of womanhood. Tran interprets Vietnam's gender system in economic terms, with Vietnamese society as a market and its participants as economic actors. The Vietnamese state has promoted its gender system in its quest for stability, as stable families and the continuation of elite agnatic lines were intended to produce a stable social hierarchy as well as a secure tax base. This gender system placed significant pressures on women as responsible actors, making them the key figures in Vietnamese culture and nationalism.

One of the book's great strengths is that Tran lays out official gender systems, but always remembers that lived realities often varied significantly from state visions. Such a feat is difficult in contemporary studies, but is especially impressive in historical work. Each chapter notes different experiences over time, by ethnicity and geography (with the Cham-influenced South featuring distinctive gender systems), and class. Class is especially important, as elite women were expected to conform to stricter rules for the sake of social stability, whereas poor women were afforded more flexibility in areas such as remarriage and the workforce. However, this did not always

benefit lower-class women, who were sometimes expected to fulfill sexual roles for more powerful men. All told, Tran manages to document gender systems across Vietnamese history while paying attention to the diverse experiences of women, successfully painting a general picture while not essentializing.

This nuance is made possible by impressive, meticulous research. Tran bases her discussion on a wide range of sources, including laws, textbooks, early colonial accounts, folk stories, village steles and records, and more, many of which are primary sources written in Vietnamese demotic script. Tran differentiates between prescriptive sources (the laws, textbooks, dictionaries, and guides that lay out what the state thinks should be) and descriptive sources (the legal cases, folk poetry, short stories, missionary letters, and other observations of what was). Particularly impressive is Tran's use of village steles, slabs erected in honor of various patrons. These steles show that Vietnamese women were able to amass resources and maintain influence within a Confucian legal system and veneration in the afterlife.

Other themes

By examining the application of neo-Confucian laws under the Lê Dynasty and how they affected gender systems in Vietnam, *Familial Properties* informs debates surrounding Southeast Asian versus East Asian influence, state capacity, urban/rural societies, northern versus southern Vietnamese societies, tradition versus modernity, and Vietnamese nationalism. If the question is whether gender in Vietnam was more Southeast Asian, featuring relative autonomy for women, or more Confucian, subordinating women in a patriarchal order, then the answer is that it was both. Vietnam saw both the successful application of Confucian

laws that influenced Vietnamese society, but also resistance to these laws, which often failed to shape local communities. One source of disruption was various civil wars, which necessitated women playing public role. Another was changing markets, with the 'Age of Commerce' creating new areas of female power and wealth. Women were also afforded more autonomy where the state was weakest, namely in rural areas and in the south, and among poorer classes. Tran shows Southeast Asian agency within a Confucian structure, with the Lê state possessing significant, but not total power.

In terms of other topics, Chapter Three discusses legal discourses related to rape, sex work, chastity, and homosexuality. In both, class status mediated crimes and punishments. Homosexuality is notable by its absence in Vietnamese law, with greater attention paid to whether same-sex relations violate class lines or not. Punishments were dealt in cases where poor servants penetrated more powerful partners – where sexual orders overturned socio-economic orders, thus inviting social instability.

The book's final chapter examines the contemporary relevance of historical gender systems in Vietnam. Tran notes that French colonizers framed Vietnamese women as oppressed by Chinese laws to help legitimize colonial power. At independence, Vietnamese leaders promoted similar tropes, noting that Chinese and French forces oppressed women, unlike traditional Vietnamese culture. With one of the great promises of communism was also to uplift women. Today, Vietnamese leaders mix communist and nationalist rhetoric about women's equality, often aimed at denigrating China for political gain. The story told is that ancient traditions of Vietnamese matriarchy were transformed into 'a totalizing, oppressive, misogynist Confucian society' (p. 186), with

the Vietnamese government working to restore Vietnamese traditions. Tran makes a case for greater complexity, challenging the basic trope and locating patriarchy early in Vietnamese history. As Vietnam continues to develop and tensions with China continue to mount, there is a need to question state claims of traditional equality, as if patriarchy lacks roots in Vietnam.

Possible critiques

Familial Properties features impressive research, clear writing, and speaks to a range of important debates. Although Tran succeeds in showing that official laws often played out differently in practice, she could be clearer regarding the limitations of historical records. For the most part, state power correlates with records. Even if we move beyond official records to village steles, it is likely that we are still overlooking the rural majority. The book essentially tackles the hardest cases, showing that even in historical records and areas of state strength, women maintained autonomy and resisted official norms. It should be remembered, though, that where history was not recorded, women likely had even greater autonomy. A related point is that, by focusing on the state, we have little sense of how gender norms were enforced societally. Cases of adultery and perceived sexual indiscretions were more likely to have been punished immediately by non-state actors, with judicial records providing only an echo of social enforcement. Tran provides several accounts of judicial decisions that skirted official rules, cases framed in terms of persuasive women and judicial interpretation. They may also be explained by state weakness, with courts providing post-hoc rationalizations for their inability to act. Even today, many state efforts to enforce gender laws are mediated by strong societal norms, with states forces loathe to admit their weaknesses. State forces such as courts possess incentives to make it appear that social enforcement reflects their will, clouding our understanding of how the reach of state rules.

Conclusions

All told, *Familial Properties* is an impressive achievement, navigating official and lived gender systems over several centuries of Vietnamese history. Tran manages to paint a broad picture while not losing sight of variation over time, status, and place. It is essential reading for those interested in women's history, Southeast Asian history, gender in Vietnam, and Vietnamese national identity. A rare study that is both meticulous and readable, Tran is to be commended.

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to the decline of factions and the rise of party leadership. Chapter Four focuses on national electoral battles, including rural support networks, turnout rates, the LDP-Komeito alliance, and party recruitment. Chapter Five examines partner organizations, providing a window into the shifting patterns of the LDP's business and professional networks. Finally, Chapter Six examines subnational politics, including elections and the personal organizations bolstering local candidates.

One of the book's most impressive features is its data. Nakakita mixes quantitative electoral and spending data with personal interviews, internal party documents, and media reports, bringing together multiple sources to illustrate and explain LDP power. The book is replete with instructive figures and tables that illustrate, among other things, politician backgrounds, factional affiliations and strength, industry support for LDP candidates, and more. Specific individuals identified in the book, such as prefectural party bosses and senior LDP officials, provide detailed descriptions of the 'realities' of the LDP.

This book represents a deep dive into Japan's ruling party but will also be of interest to those studying party politics, campaign finance, dominant party systems, and state-society relations. One core theme is the far-reaching effects of electoral

reform. Changing Japan's electoral system in 1994 from the multi-member Single Non-Transferable Vote towards a mixed plurality-proportional electoral system has caused myriad transformations in Japanese politics and within the LDP. Electoral reform largely succeeding in its core aims of weakening factions and pork politics, also transformed the policy process, party membership, leadership styles, business ties, and more. This study is a testament to the importance of electoral systems for shaping political behavior.

Electoral and finance reforms helped bring about the decline of factional politics, paving the way for a more top-down, executive-run LDP. However, Nakakita emphasizes that the LDP's power is relative rather than absolute, with victories resulting from low voter turnout, support from various associations, a weak opposition, and the alliance with Komeito. In fact, the LDP's support base is shrinking. The LDP has adapted to maintain power, but it is hardly unassailable. As the author concludes, 'there is potential for the current political conditions that allow an 'all powerful' LDP to suffer a sudden reversal' (p. 205).

Another key theme is differentiating between the LDP's dominant recent figures, Junichiro Koizumi and Shinzo Abe. Although the former mentored the latter, they share a factional background, are third generation politicians, and have dominated the LDP,

they differ by ideology and leadership styles. Nakakita emphasizes how Koizumi promoted neoliberal reforms and courted floating voters with a media-friendly, populist message, while Abe returned to earlier LDP practices and is more conservative. In an effort to reconnect to rural voters alienated by Koizumi's reforms, Abe has captained the LDP's rightward shift, including policies refusing to allow married couples to keep separate surnames, rejecting non-citizen voting rights, and rewriting the constitution to allow for military and emergency powers. One could see this rising conservatism as an unexpected consequence of electoral reform, as combatting factionalism and pork politics has led Abe's LDP to find new ways to connect to voters and maintain power.

Not only does this book provide expert analysis of the inner party workings, it contributes towards an understanding of state-society relations, although here the emphasis is on business, professional, interest, and religious interactions with the party rather than the state. It is fascinating to see how various factions connect with non-state interests, from Koizumi challenging postal lobbies, to policy groups connected to dentists, firefighters, kindergarten teachers, truckers, and chambers of commerce. Overlapping state/society distinctions also exist subnationally, with politicians depending on personal support organizations and kinship networks. We also see changing roles for

religion, with historical LDP ties to Shinto and other interests transforming in response to the LDP's partnership with Komeito.

There are few available critiques of this masterful study. The book could do with an introduction or background chapter, bringing those less familiar with Japanese politics up to speed instead of jumping directly into factions. Readers may want more details on subnational electoral competition, especially varied local party alliances, and perhaps more on LDP foreign policy. Finally, the book has few references to scholarly theories or comparative cases. There are a few spots where glances beyond Japan might heighten its analysis, although this is probably not the author's goal in a book aimed at a Japanese audience.

All told, *The Liberal Democratic Party of Japan: The Realities of 'Power'* provides a commanding account of how the LDP has managed to maintain power in and over Japan. This will undoubtedly be required reading for students of Japanese politics, but will also be of interest to a broader audience in Comparative Politics. This is a simply excellent study that will teach a wide readership about one of Asia's most important, fascinating parties.

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